



b r i d g e

over time

Contemporary Picture of the Past

Edited by Lukasz Guzek

Gdańsk 2023





# BRIDGE OVER TIME

CONTEMPORARY  
PICTURE OF THE PAST

Edited by Łukasz GUZEK

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# PROJECT MANIFESTO

The fall of the Berlin Wall is a symbolic breaking of the Iron Curtain. It is thus a break with the post-Yalta past. The admission of the Visegrád Group four countries (V4) - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia - to the European Union is therefore their symbolic rebirth. The previous political history in the countries that had been subjected to Soviet domination after World War II was different, but similar, insofar as the social reality was similar in all totalitarian countries. As a result, art in these countries had a history that was at the same time different but similar. Contemporary art (that is, the art of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual forms that has been dominant on the art scene since the sixties of the last century), had a variety of individual manifestations, but the trend itself was similar. In the same way, it also shared a similar theoretical basis.

The shaping of art forms depending on the political and social context was likewise similar and different. Conceptualism was an artistic means that in all V4 countries was used as a political means. The dominant assumption of contemporary art creators was that Conceptual = political. The autonomy of the means of Conceptual art, with tautology as an artistic form, even if they did not contain political content, paradoxically, they were political by the mere inherent critique of the traditional definition of art and the desire to be subversive, through re-evaluation of all values. Such a synthetic approach to the past is possible from the perspective of the present. Contemporary art created today is largely Post-Conceptual. Such a continuum can also be demonstrated through research on the art of the region. But the political breakthrough of the collapse of the old

world-system in this region was so profound, shocking, and this shock, similar and different, created a distance towards the history of art in countries subsequently undergoing transformation. The past and present have been separated. But three decades have already passed since then, and most importantly, for much of this time, we have now been together in one area, in the EU.

All this indicates that there has been a new opening, a rebirth of art in these countries, an art that is similar to but different from its counterpart of the sixties – seventies – eighties. Our look today at the variety of art of that time has not only the character of objectified historical research, but also a reinterpretation and re-actualization of history in today's times. Reconstruction is a construction, re-enactment is a new action. We return to history as a new present.

The history of Conceptualism as a political art created in totalitarian countries is therefore situated in the context of the art created in these countries today. The lessons we learn from art history are ones about contemporary art in the orbit of the EU and the free world. The image of history is shaped by the present. Art history looks at today as in a mirror and sees its image. The differences and similarities of the past are significant for today. They are a bridge over time that connects the contemporary with its history.

(by Łukasz Guzek)







photo: Tomas Ruller, *Byt-ci-nebyt*, 1979

BRIDGE OVER TIME. CONTEMPORARY PICTURE  
OF THE PAST

Art Geography of Central Europe: landmarks,  
networks, sources

Conference & Films Screening

LAZNIA Centre for Contemporary Art & Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk

October 28-29, 2022

## Programme

28.10, 19:00 – Piotr Wyrzykowski, artist talk and screening at CCA LAZNIA 1

29.10, 12:00-20:00 – Józef Robakowski, screening (non-stop) at CCA LAZNIA 1

29.10, 10:00 – 17:00 – Conference at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk

A two-day conference summarizing the educational and research project *Bridge over Time. Contemporary Picture of the Past*, co-financed by the governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia under the Visegrád Grants of the International Visegrád Fund.

During the conference, the results of research conducted by national teams of scholars and curators will be presented, as well as the national Art Timelines covering the most important artistic events, and the Context Timeline covering events from the socio-political sphere, constituting the background for artistic events.

One of the aims of the conference is to develop the artistic geography of the region. that is, networks of contacts, often developed as informal exchanges. Existing archival resources and art collections will be presented to create a platform for further research.

As part of the curatorial presentation of Polish art, we will show collections of films by two Polish artists whose work commented on the socio-political context of this part of Europe: by Józef Robakowski (born 1939), a pioneer of media art and Conceptual art in Poland; and Piotr Wyrzykowski (b.1968), who as a young artist in the 1990s and early 2000s created critical art on the new socio-political realities.

### Screening 1

Józef Robakowski: *Living Gallery* (1975); *Brezhnev's Funeral (Hommage a Brezhnev)*, 1982; *Art is Power!* (1984-5); *Infermental* collection - films from Central Europe, since 1981; films documenting the cultural breakthrough taking place in Poland at the end of the 1980s.

### Screening 2

Piotr Wyrzykowski: *NATO Now! Safe Poland or no Poland at all* (1994); *There is No Body* (1995); *Copyrights* (1995); *Program 44* an internet project based on the collective creation of biographies of 44 Polish kings (1998); *Victoria Cukt's presidential campaign* (CUKT collective, 2000).

(curated by Łukasz Guzek)

## **VISEGRAD GROUP (V4)**

# **CONTEXT TIMELINE**

Social and political facts that influenced both the entire region of Central Europe and at the same time affected the domestic situation in V4 countries.

This Context Timeline proves how historical dynamics varied from country to country. And this despite - it would seem - the common history of the countries separated by the Iron Curtain from the rest of Europe and the world, with the totalitarian governments under Soviet Russia's control.





## 1945

February 4–11, Yalta Conference (on the Crimea peninsula) aimed to give the new shape of post-World War II Europe, guaranteed by the Big Three: Franklin D. Roosevelt (USA); Winston Churchill (Great Britain); Joseph Stalin (Soviet Russia). The Big Three agreed that democracy would be established in all liberated European countries by holding free elections. At the same time, the principle of setting borders in Europe in an arbitrary way, over the heads of citizens of countries, was applied. Soviet Russia violated this agreement, and as a result, totalitarian political systems in Central Europe countries had been established.

## 1947

### PL

January 19, rigged parliamentary elections handed power to the Soviet Russia controlled Polish People's Party (PPR). End of the multiparty system in Poland and beginning of the Stalinist era.

### HU

August 31, after the 'coalition era,' a short democratic period after the war, rigging parliamentary elections in Hungary handed power to MKP (Magyar Kommunista Párt = Hungarian Communist Party). Beginning of the Stalinist era in Hungary.

## 1948

### CZ/SK

February 25, Communist Coup in Czechoslovakia. KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), fully controlled by Soviet Russia, secured a majority in parliament by non-democratic and non-parliamentary means. Beginning of the Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia.

## 1953

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin died. The beginning of the de-Stalinization period in the V4 countries, a process that continued for many years and was carried out differently. However, Stalinism era has been replaced by a system of strict social control, culture and art included.

## 1955

May 14, Warsaw Pact, a collective military defense treaty between the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern Bloc countries, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary included, was established in Warsaw.

## 1956

### PL

June 28-30, workers strike in Joseph Stalin (Hipolit Cegielski) factory, demonstrations and street fights in Poznań, suppressed by Polish Army and Police. End of Stalinism era in Poland. Newly established totalitarian government used more soft methods of social control. Polish state propaganda called this period of the thaw “odnowa” = renewal, until 1970.

### HU

October-November, Hungarian Revolution bloodily suppressed by the Soviets Army. Beginning of the Kádár era in Hungary, named after János Kádár who presided over the country holding various positions, until 1988.

For detailed chronology see: Glossary of Terms.

## 1957

October 4, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the Earth's first artificial satellite, into orbit. This achievement was highly present by pro-Soviet Russia propaganda in all Central European countries. And as it was so popular, it was taken by artists as a mockery.

## 1961

- August 13, construction of the Berlin Wall. Symbolic Iron Curtain divided Europe.
- September 1-6, first conference of the non-aligned countries in Belgrade.

## 1962

### CZ

October 28, destruction (blown up) of Stalin monument at Letná in Prague. End of Stalinism era in Czechoslovakia. The monument was unveiled May 1, 1955. It was designed by the sculptor Otakar Švec who committed suicide shortly before it was unveiled.

## 1968

### CZ/SK

- March-August, Prague Spring, a short period of liberalization, democratization, and freedom of speech, under the one-party rule of KSČ. After the suppression of the Prague Spring by the armies of the Warsaw Pact, a period of restoration of totalitarian power began, called Normalization, which lasted until the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

For detailed chronology see: Glossary of Terms.

- August 22, the so-called baton law (Legal Measure of the Presidency of the Federal Assembly No. 99/1969 Coll.) entered into force, which was used for persecution against citizens opposed to the assaults of Warsaw Pact troops and situation in Czechoslovakia after the events of August 1968.

## HU

January 1, New Economy Mechanism was launched. Its aim was an economic recovery after the failure of the planned economy. In the frames of the 'conservative turn,' Kádár revoked the reforms due to the pressure of the Soviet Union in November 1972.

## 1969

### CZ/SK

January 1, establishment of the Czechoslovak Federation. Two semi-autonomous states come to existence on the territory of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic: the Czech Socialist Republic, and the Slovak Socialist Republic, each with its own one-chamber parliament (the Czech National Council and the Slovak National Council) and its own administration, despite the central government in capital Prague.

### CZ

Three torches of 1969, this year there were three cases of self-immolation in protest against the suppression of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact armies.

For details see: Glossary of Terms.

## 1970

### PL

December 14-19, deteriorating economic conditions were caused by street demonstrations of workers in Gdańsk and other cities on the Polish Baltic coast. All were bloodily suppressed. As a result, a change of power took place to a more liberal one, which in these political conditions meant openness to a consumerist lifestyle, in a more Western manner. In culture and art development of new trends was possible, while at the same time the censorship and persecution of the political opposition continued.

### CZ/SK

December 10, ÚV KSČ (Central Committee of the Communist Party) approved the document "Lessons from crisis development" in the party and society after XIII. congress of KSČ (the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). The document represented a binding norm for explaining the events surrounding the Prague Spring, the definitive end of efforts to reform the system and the onset of normalization.

## 1971

The Publishing House '68 Publishers was established by Zdena Salivarová-Škvorecká and her husband Josef Škvorecký in Toronto, Canada.

## 1972

### CZ

- May 31, inspections of library stocks in Czechoslovakia for the purpose of eliminating all publications with subversive and pro-Western political and ideological contents.
- Ludvík Vaculík established the samizdat Edition Padlock (*Petlice*) in Prague. Rostislav Valušek, Petr Mikeš and Eduard Zacha published the first samizdat edition under the title *Friends' Texts* in Olomouc, even before Vaculík.

### SK

November 2, Resolution of the II. Convention of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists, whose task was to condemn and persecute art, artists and theoreticians of progressive, modern tendencies of the sixties, perceived as Western bourgeois art of a hostile nature. After the congress, there were purges, bans on activities, exclusion from employment, ban on exhibiting and buying the works of excluded artists in state galleries, ban on the realization of works of art for architecture and public space.

### HU

1974-1988, Vojvodina (a territory with a vast Hungarian minority) granted autonomy by Yugoslavia.

## 1975

July 30–August 1, the Final Act of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) was signed in Helsinki by the representatives of 35 states, Central European countries included. The proclamations resulted in the establishment of groups which were required to actually respect human rights, like Charter '77 and Solidarity.

## 1976

### PL

September, KOR (Komitet Obrony Robotników = Workers' Defense Committee) was established as the first organized opposition, operating in post-Yalta countries. It was formed by a dissident group of intellectuals, but their aim was to provide social assistance to the persecuted workers. Cooperation between these two social circles was established, and continued throughout all that period of totalitarian rule, until 1989.

## 1977

### CZ/SK

January 6-7, the Declaration of Charter '77 was published in Prague, with Václav Havel as a leader. Its aim was to document and reveal discrimination cases, and violation by the Communist government of their own legislation. Later it turned into an international dissident network developed in post-Yalta countries, Poland and Hungary included.

### HU

- January 9, 34 Hungarian intellectuals signed a solidarity letter to Pavel Kohut, arrested spokesmen of Charter '77. This was the first organized political action of the democratic opposition in Hungary.
- March, meeting of the népi ('popular-national') writers and the forming democratic opposition in order to create an alternative aid organization that supports the 'counter-culture.'

## 1980

### PL

August 14, began the workers' strike organized by Lech Wałęsa in the Gdańsk Shipyard, and then all over the country, which resulted in the establishment of the first in the post-Yalta countries independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) on August 31 (August Agreement or Gdansk Agreement). The beginning of the longest period of free speech in the public sphere in the Central European countries under totalitarian rule, lasted until introduction of martial law on December 13, 1981.

## 1981

### PL

December 13, martial law in Poland. The Army takes control over the country. Until 1988, Solidarity was outlawed and operated illegally as an underground dissident movement led by Lech Wałęsa, but its structures were never broken up, despite persecution by the authorities, and was able to organize the strike at the Gdańsk Shipyard once again.

### HU

February, the Samizdat Boutique of László Rajk Jr. was opened: they produced samizdat publications on a weekly basis, including literature on 1956.

## 1985

### HU

March 15, opposition held independent commemorations on the anniversary of the 1848/49 Revolution as the fight for freedom feast, and was repeated in the following years.

## 1987

### HU

March 15, Imre Pozsgay's speech at the official commemoration of the 1848/49 Revolution and Freedom Fight, addressing the possibilities of political and institutional reforms.

### CZ

*Original Video Journal*, a samizdat news medium on videotapes, was founded in Prague. Until 1989 six issues were published.

## 1988

### SK

March 25, a peaceful demonstration of Catholics for religious freedom and human rights took place in Bratislava. The participants held lit candles in their hands, so the demonstration entered history as a 'candlelight demonstration' (Candle Demonstration or Bratislava Good Friday). Police aggressively dispersed the demonstration with batons and water cannons. It is considered to be one of the most important demonstrations by citizens and believers against the Communist government in the post Prague Spring Czechoslovakia.

### PL

April 21, in the conditions of a severe economic crisis, strikes of workers in Gdansk Shipyard and throughout Poland, as well as street demonstrations began again, and continued until early September, which led to the authorities' consent to direct negotiations with the Solidarność and opposition leaders, known as a Round Table talks.

### HU

- January 30, the first public gathering of the Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum), the future winner of the first free elections in 1990, was held in the Yurt Theatre (established in 1987) in Budapest.
- May 27, protests against the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Waterworks against the Austrian support of the project (the plan was authorized in 1977 by Hungary). On September 12 twenty thousand people protested against the construction of the waterworks. National and international protests continued throughout the following months. Eventually, the construction was suspended on May 13, 1989.
- June 8, The Association of Hungarian Architects was the first to protest against the plan to demolish Hungarian villages in Transylvania, Romania. On June 27 thousands protested against the same plans.
- November 13, Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Free Democrats) was founded.

## 1989

### PL

- February 6-April 5, Round Table talks in Warsaw between the opposition side led by Lech Wałęsa, and the government. The result of the negotiations was an agreement and consent of the authorities to the free, democratic parliament election and the re-legalization of the operation of the Solidarity trade union.
- June 4, first free, democratic parliamentary election in the post-Yalta countries of Central Europe after World War II took place, and were won by Solidarity, however, the government was guaranteed some seats to the Sejm (lower house), and elections to the Senate (upper house) were completely free.

### **NOVEMBER 9, FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL.**

### **THE SYMBOLIC FALL OF THE IRON CURTAIN.**

### CZ/SK

- January 15-21, Palach Week, a series of public events and demonstrations to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Jan Palach self-immolation in protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968 and normalization, brutally suppressed by the regime.
- November 17, beginning of the Velvet Revolution (termed Gentle Revolution in Slovakia after dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993). It ended in December 29 with the election of Václav Havel as the first democratically elected President in post-Yalta countries of Central Europe after World War II.

For detailed chronology see: Glossary of Terms.

### HU

- March, Hungarian Round Table Talks were established. Its aim was to provide a platform for discussion among the opposition groups and create a space for negotiations with the official authorities.
- May 8-9, János Kádár was dispensed from all of his functions. End of Kádár era.
- June 16, Reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs. The bier was set up at Hősök tere / Heroes' Square and the funeral took place at the Rákoskeresztúr cemetery.
- August 19, Pan-European Picnic, a peace demonstration on the Hungarian side of the Hungarian-Austrian border. The event, during which the Austrian-Hungarian border got open and several thousand East Germans fled to West Germany through Hungary and Austria, caused a chain reaction that eventually led to the demolition of the Berlin Wall. Hungary permanently opened its border with Austria at midnight on September 10.

- October 23, events commemorating the anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution become the beginning of peaceful pro-democratic changes in Hungary. Mátyás Szűrös announced the Republic of Hungary from the balcony of the Parliament.

## 1990

### HU

- May, first free parliamentary elections in Hungary. József Antall became the Prime Minister.
- August 4, Árpád Göncz was elected by the National Assembly the President of the Republic of Hungary, until 2000.

### PL

December 9, Lech Wałęsa became the first democratically elected President in post-World War II Poland, until 1995.

## 1991

July 1, Warsaw Pact has been formally disbanded.

## 1993

### CZ/SK

January 1, dissolution of the Czechoslovak Federative Republic into the independent Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.

## 1999

Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic officially joined NATO (Slovak Republic joined in 2004).

## 2004

The Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland became members of the European Union. Political reunification with Europe.

## 2007

The Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland became members of the Schengen Area. The abolition of border controls makes it easy to travel and build artistic contacts.



# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## Czech and Slovak Context

### **Prague Spring of 1968**

At the end of 1967, even in the leadership of the Communist Party, more discussion began about the need to liberalize society and the economy. In 1968, censorship was even abolished. We call this short period of political relaxation in Czechoslovakia, which mainly included the spring and summer months, the Prague Spring. However, the revival processes of 1968 were forcibly interrupted by the Soviet Union, which organized the military occupation of Czechoslovakia. For more than 20 years, from August 21, when the troops of the Soviet Union and other armies of the so-called Warsaw Pact entered the territory of Czechoslovakia, until June 19, 1991, it was militarily occupied and controlled by the Soviet Union. A period of so-called normalization followed.

March 4, the Presidency of the KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) decides to provisionally abolish censorship. In Czechoslovakia, there was complete freedom of the press and expression, which exceeded the limits of other socialist states and even the situation in the first Czechoslovak Republic (opinion after the historian Jan Rychlík).

August 20, around 11:00 p.m., the Warsaw Pact armies crossed the borders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and put the Prague Spring democratization process to an end; it was followed by one of the largest waves of emigration in Czechoslovak history.

September, beginning of Normalization. Restoration of censorship (a new Office for Press and Information was established for this purpose), restriction on freedom of press and freedom of assembly, plus other measures were implemented. The democratization process was frozen and the pro-Soviet regime restored.

## **Normalization** (Czech: normalizace)

Normalization is a term used in Czechoslovak history to refer to the period since the violent suppression of society's reform processes in 1968 (Prague Spring) by the Soviet Union. This period lasted until 1989, the so-called Velvet Revolution. The normalization of social and especially political conditions brought with it a number of negative and tragic phenomena. The Communists were divided into those who accepted the occupation of Czechoslovakia and its return under Soviet rule and those who did not agree with this situation. These communists were expelled from the Communist Party, together with other opponents of the Soviet invasion, they were fired from their jobs, and they were socially persecuted. Particularly active civil (and artistic) protests were punished by imprisonment, expulsion, and social exclusion. Censorship was restored, a number of interests, political and cultural associations and organizations were abolished and replaced by organizations that followed the will of the Communist Party unreservedly and also adopted the central control, program and symbols of socialism. Even in the artistic sphere. The role was strengthened, for example, by the Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists, which registered all artists. Without official membership in the union, the artist could not create, exhibit and sell his works.

Comparable to the term 'Gleichschaltung.'

### **Three Torches of 1969**

January 16, Jan Palach self-immolation in Wenceslas Square in Prague in protest at the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

February 25, Jan Zajíc, following the example of Jan Palach, burned himself to death in Wenceslas Square in Prague on the anniversary of the Communist Revolution of 1948 in Czechoslovakia.

April 4, Evžen Plocek, burned himself to death in protest at the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and became the imaginary third torch.

### **Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)**

July 30–August 1, 1975, Final Act was signed in Helsinki by the representatives of 35 states. Besides security in Europe and cooperation in the fields of economy, science, technology and the environment, it also dealt with humanitarian issues, in particular respect for human rights. According to international law the entire document was not binding and could not be enforced. Representatives of Communist countries understood the confirmation of the validity of agreements on civil and human rights to be mere proclamations without any practical consequences and tried to disparage and misinterpret them. However, the proclamations of countries vowing to observe human rights resulted in the establishment of groups which were required to actually observe them in individual countries. For example Charter 77 with Václav Havel as the head was established in Czechoslovakia (1977), and Solidarność in Poland (1980, with Lech Wałęsa).

### **Charter 77**

The *Declaration of Charter 77* was published January 6–7, 1977, with Václav Havel as a leader. Its aim was to document and reveal discrimination cases, and violation by the Communist government of their own legislation. Later it turned into an international dissident network developed in post-Yalta countries, Poland and Hungary included. The Chartists were interrogated by the State Police - house searches, bullying, police interrogations. Contacts with Polish dissidents were established. The regime feared that many people of Czechoslovakia would join Charter 77 and so it launched a massive media campaign in order to frighten people on January 12. This culminated in the massive signing of an anti-Charter in the National Theatre on January 28.

## **Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia of 1989 (termed Gentle Revolution in Slovakia after dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993)**

January 15, Palach's Week: the twentieth anniversary of the death of the student Jan Palach was marked by a demonstration on Wenceslas Square. There was a brutal police response and many demonstrators were arrested. There was a response from the international press and protests by famous personalities and international organizations.

November 17, the officially permitted student manifestation on the fifth anniversary of the death of the student Jan Opletal at Albertov in Prague turned into a spontaneous procession of people who expressed their discontent with the regime. The procession was stopped at the National Avenue in Prague by the brutal action of the State Police during which hundreds of people were injured. There was an immediate response: a protest strike by University and college students and people from the theater.

November 20-25, demonstrations were held on the Wenceslas Square, increasing pressure on the regime; demonstrations also spread to other Bohemian and Moravian towns.

November 27, a warning of general strike was held which became the climax of the Velvet Revolution.

December 23, end of the Iron Curtain: Ministers of Foreign Affairs Jiří Dienstbier and Hans-Dietrich Genscher (Federal Republic of Germany) cut the barbed wire on the borders between Czechoslovakia and Germany.

December 29, Václav Havel was elected the first post-Revolutionary President.

(by Štěpánka Bielešová)

## Hungarian Context

### Hungarian Revolution of 1956

October 6, reburial of László Rajk, György Pálffy, Tibor Szőnyi and András Szalai, executed in a conception trial in 1949 and rehabilitated in 1955. The burial became a mass demonstration against the Soviet-type dictatorship (Rákosi era). October 23, university students organized a solidarity protest for Poland which was first banned, later authorized by the Minister of Internal Affairs. Protests started around Budapest. First shootings occurred in Debrecen. The armed conflict began at the building of the Hungarian Radio in Budapest in the evening of this day and lasted until November 4 when the Soviet offensive (supported by János Kádár, formerly taking a stand on the freedom fighters' side) put an end to it.

October 24, Imre Nagy formed a coalition government. Nagy was elected the head of the Ministry Council by the Presidential Council. József Mindszenty, prime primate, (incarcerated in 1948) was released from the prison on October 31.

November 4, János Kádár (May 26, 1912–July 6, 1989) announced the formation of the counter-government. The revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution and remained a dividing topic in the decades to come as the official authorities were extremely sensitive towards initiatives that put the history and circumstances of the revolution in a different light than the official interpretation of the events. Imre Nagy, together with Pál Maléter (the Nagy government's minister of defense) and Miklós Gimes journalist were executed in June, 1958, after a closed trial. As a consequence, there was a great wave of emigration from the country. The amnesty for those imprisoned was announced only in 1963.

### Kádár Era

János Kádár, the leader (General Secretary) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and Prime Minister. He governed the country from 1956 until his retirement in 1988, the last year of state socialism in Hungary. Kádár's rule became synonymous to the 'soft dictatorship' that characterized Hungary of that period.

### Three-T System

Three-T system (tűr: to tolerate, tilt: to ban, támogat: to support) triple principle defined the Hungarian cultural policy from 1957 to the change of the regime in 1989. It is associated with the name of György Aczél, the most influential cultural politician of the Kádár era.

(by Kata Balázs, Zsóka Leposa, Róna Kopeczky, László Százados)

## Polish Context

### **Solidarność**

August 14, 1980, the beginning of workers' strike organized by Lech Wałęsa in the Gdańsk Shipyard in Poland, and then all over the country, which resulted in the establishment of the first independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) on August 31 (August Agreement or Gdansk Agreement). A period of liberalization and freedom of speech which ends with the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981. It was the longest period of freedom of speech in the public sphere in the Soviet Bloc countries under totalitarian rule.

See:

Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution. Solidarity*. First published 1983.

David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*. First published 1990.



# ART TIMELINE(S)





Art Timeline  
Art facts



## 1947

- The international exhibition of Surrealism, *Le surréalisme en 1947*, was held in the Maeght Gallery in Paris. It was visited by the upcoming generation of Czech artists (Mikuláš Medek, Zbyněk Sekal, Zdeněk Paler and others) during their trip with the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. The exhibition was repeated in a reduced form in the Topič's Salon in Prague at the end of this year.
- Surrealist Group RA was founded and held their first and only collective exhibition. These events marked revival and continuation of the extremely strong and influential tradition of Czech Surrealism in the new socio-political conditions after World War II.

## 1949

Vladimír Boudník published the "Manifesto of Explosionalism." He presented numerous actions (pre-happenings) in the fifties on the streets of Prague, until his suicide in 1968. With his street events in the years 1949–1956, Boudník became a kind of Czech pioneer of happenings. Boudník demonstrated the "mighty power" of art on peeling walls. They were shows for passers-by.

## 1954

Šmidrove club (or the *Šmidras* group) was founded by Jan Koblasa, Bedřich Dlouhý, Karel Nepraš, and started to organize post dada-surrealists, unofficial events, and organized *Malmuzherciády exhibition* non-art project.

## 1960

First two un-official exhibitions titled *Confrontation I* and *II* had been organized. *I*: Zdenek Beran, Vladimír Boudník, Cestmír Janošek, Jan Koblasa, Antonín Málek, Jiří Valenta, Aleš Veselý, Antonín Tomalík; *II*: V. Křížek, Zbyšek Sion, Karel Kuklík and Jirí Putta) were held in Jiří Valenta's studio in March, and in Aleš Veselý's studio in October of the same year. Such unofficial exhibitions were organized throughout the period of post-World War II Czechoslovakia.

## 1963

Křižovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu = Crusaders' School of Pure Humor Without Jokes (The Crusaders School in short) had been formed and named, which means institutionalized, because the group used to meet since 1958 in the restaurant U Křižovníků = At Crusader, Old Town of Prague, until 1974. The group had loose composition, and not only the artists participated, rather it was a social group of friends (called The Order). The leaders were Karel Nepraš and Jan Steklík. The group was highly inspired by Jaroslav

Hašek, both his literature, and biography in order to continue the Dada and Surrealist approach of blurring art and life.

## 1962-1963

First street actions (happenings) in Czechoslovakia by Milan Knížák. He often called his (or group) actions a 'demonstrations' in reference to political activities

## 1964

- The Aktuální umění = Actual Art, a social group of friends was founded and animated by Milan Knížák in Prague, together with Jan Mach, Vít Mach, Sonia Švecová, Jan Trtílek and Robert Wittmann. From 1966 acting as The Aktual. The group brought together not only artists but also musicians and poets. The group organized and performed street actions, concerts, Mail art exchange, and issued samizdat *Actual Art*. Both Knížák's individual and group actions formed The Actual Movement, until 1968. Then Knížák went to the USA and came back in 1970.
- *Výstava D = D Exhibition* in The New Hall in Prague showed a great variety of post-war abstraction (Jiří Balcar, Vladimír Boudník, Josef Istler, Cestmír Janošek, Jan Koblasa, Mikuláš Medek, Karel Nepraš, Robert Piesen, Zbyněk Sekal, Jiří Valenta, Aleš Veselý). Veselý exhibited his object *The Chair Usurper* which was awarded the Critics' Prize at the 4th Biennial of Young Artists in Paris.

## 1965

- Jindřich Chalupecký appointed director of the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague, until 1970. It was the period of the greatest importance of this gallery for the development of contemporary art in Czechoslovakia. Chalupecký was an influential art critic, he linked Czechoslovak artists with Fluxus, and introduced Marcel Duchamp to the art public by organizing his exhibition in 1969, and publishing samizdats on Marcel Duchamp art. The art gallery has existed under this address since 1916, until today. Since 1959, it has been named after Czech modernist artist Václav Špála.
- Milan Knížák was appointed by George Maciunas the Director Fluxus East.
- Allan Ginsberg visited Prague, and was appointed King of Mayales (a yearly students celebration) which proved that the beatnik generation culture was highly influential in Czechoslovakia of that time.

## 1966

- October, Milan Knížák organised in Prague first Fluxus concert in Czechoslovakia, with participation of Ben Vautier, Jeff Berner, Alison Knowles, Serge Oldenbourg, and Dick Higgins.
- First happenings by Eugen Briekcius in public spaces in Prague: *Achilles a želva* = Achilles and the Tortoise (1966) - a reconstruction of Zeno's aphorism of Achilles and the Tortoise at Prague Castle in front of the Queen Anne summerhouse; *Pivni zátiší*= Beer still life (1967) – action with beer, Kampa, Prague; *Díkůvzdání*= Thanksgiving (1967) – action with bread at the Great Fürstenberk Garden, Prague; *Neprava svatba*= Fake wedding (1968) – a false wedding at Town Hall, Square of Havlíček, Prague; *Linky po Praze*= Lines around Prague (1970) – a large piece of clothes stretched over various places in Prague.

## 1975

- Jindřich Chaloupecký published samizdat *Marcel Duchamp and the Fate of Modern Art*.
- Petr Štembera and Tom Marioni performed together a piece *Joining* in Prague.
- Around the mid-seventies the Czech body-artists (Petr Štembera, Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch) began to organize *performance soirées* for a small circle of invited viewers, in a various secret places in Prague, until the end of the seventies.

## 1976

February 21, the second festival of the un-official culture was held in Bojanovice as a delayed wedding party for Juliana Stritzková and Ivan Jirous “Magor,” who was an artistic director of The Plastic People of the Universe band, founded in 1968. All musicians, and other participants ended up in custody. The trial of the band members sparked a great sympathy among non-conformist Czechs, and a petition was written protesting against this act of human rights violation. This gave impetus to the formulation of the Declaration of Charter ‘77 issued a year later. Jirous was arrested several times, and was released from prison only on November 25, 1989, as the last political prisoner in Eastern Bloc countries. The Plastic People of the Universe played rock inspired by Frank Zappa, but their concert took the form of dada-like music performances, and their lyrics were based on anarchic poetry of protest. They were very socially influential as an un-official cultural institution, it was Jirous himself who coined the term ‘second culture.’ His samizdat *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival*, 1975, became a programmatic statement of the Czech un-official culture.

## 1977

First Conceptual and performative use of TV monitor in Czech art by Vladimír Ambroz, *TV-look* and *TV-piece*, presented in Brno (documented on photographs). His 1980 *Mediaman*, TV media performance in Brno is recorded on video was lost.

## 1979

- Jindřich Štreit, a photographer, founded a private gallery in Sovinec, a village north-east of Brno, until 1989. It was a place for plein-air, outdoor activity, Land art and place related works, performances and music concerts.
- Milan Kozelka and Václav Stratil start to organize meetings at Temple street, Old Town of Prague.

## 1980

Fine art Symposium in Malechov commune in a private house, existed 1979–1981, give rise to the exhibitions in public spaces: Mala Strana Courtyards (1981), Old Town Courtyards (1982), Tennis Courts (1982), Hop Garden in Mutějovice (1983). All of them meet with censorship and Police interventions.

## 1982

Jindřich Chalupecký published samizdat *A Fate of an Artist in the Modern Age: Duchampian Meditations*.

## 1983

- First video works by Tomáš Ruller; *Smashing My Sculpture & Burning My Drawings*; interactive video-installation *Live Loop*; first multimedia-performance *Be-Tween*, in collaboration with My a co. group & Via Lucis optophonic ensemble (1984 censored, in 1985 criminalized).
- Galerie H = H Gallery was established by Hůla brothers, Jiří and Zdenek, in their family house in Kostelec nad Černými Lesy near Prague, until 1988. Since 1989 operates as an archive, now as the Fine Art Archive association, and database abArt, located in Prague, specialized on Czech publications and collecting books, exhibition catalogs, invitations cards, journals, photographs, illustrations and any type of printed matters.

## 1984

*Confrontations of Contemporary Artists* of youngest generation was held in Jiří David's studio in Prague as the first of sixth editions organized until 1987, always in different places: in Kladno, 1985; Prague-Smíchov and in Svárov, 1986; Prague-Vysočany, 1987.

## 1988

- Jindřich Chaloupecký published samizdat *New Art in Bohemia*.
- Tomáš Ruller performed his piece titled *8.8.88* as a gesture of freedom against the censorship of his exhibition, and to commemorate The Three Torches, a person who committed self-immolation acts in protest against suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. The artist set his clothes as a final stage of his performance. The action was recorded by *Original Video Journal*, a samizdat on videotapes.

## 1989

*Open Situation - European Project* international performance festival curated by Tomáš Ruller in Prague, under the umbrella of Mir Caravane European theatre tour. Black Market (Nieslony, Klassen, Van Poppel, Vaara, Fritz, Piotrowski, and Ruller) hosted Stuart Brisley, Alastair MacLennan, Monty Cantsin & Christa Goddess.

## 1990

- January 8, Milan Knížák became the rector (chancellor) of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, until 1997.
- May 27, the Jindřich Chaloupecký Award for young Czech fine artists aged less than 35 was established by Václav Havel, Jiří Kolář and Theodor Pištěk.

## 1991

On the night of the April 27/28, David Černý and his friends painted pink the Monument to Soviet Tank Crews on the Štefánikovo Square, Prague-Smíchov.

## 1993

January 1, the Gallery of Fine Arts in Olomouc was renamed as the Olomouc Museum of Art and started operations on Denisova Street. It was established as a museum of Central European Art, the purpose of which is to collect and present contemporary art of the region.

## **1994**

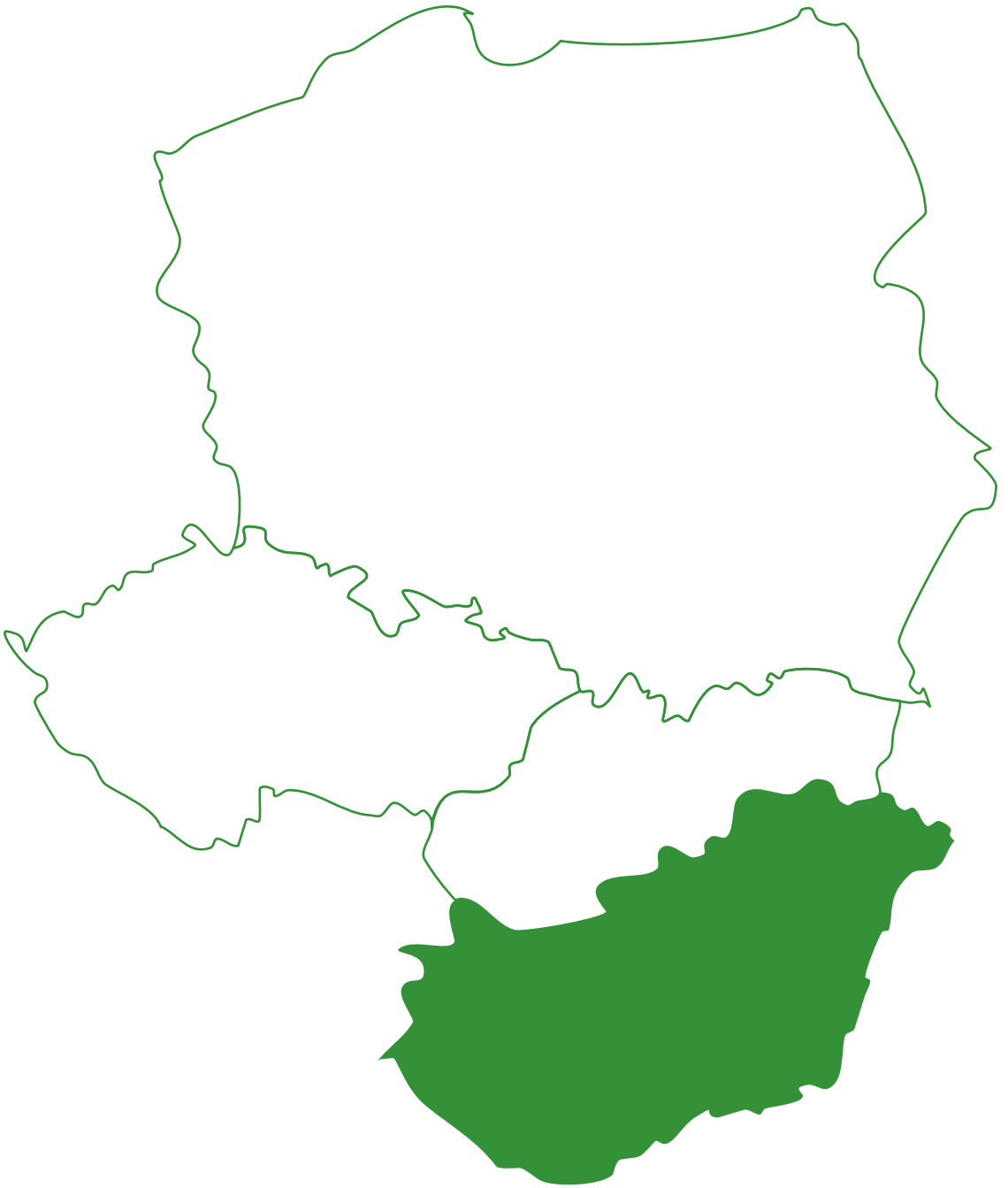
- January 1, Rudolfinum Gallery opened.
- Malamut Action Art Festival was founded in Ostrava by Jiří Surůvka and Petr Lysáček. Until 1999 it was held every year. After a few years break, since 2007 it has resumed as a biennial, and is organized until today. Un-official art of the eighties goes public.

(compiled by Štěpánka Bielešová and Ladislav Daněk; consultation Tomáš Ruller)



HU

Art Timeline  
Art facts



## 1945

October 13, European School (Európai Iskola) was founded by Pál Gegesi Kiss professor of medicine, Lajos Kassák artist, poet and editor, Ernő Kállai art historian and critique, Árpád Mezei art historian, editor and psychologist, Imre Pán writer, collector, editor and lecturer. The group intended to represent the progressive (mainly rooted in Fauvism, Expressionism, Constructivism and Surrealism) artistic and intellectual tendencies in the name of European values and humanism. Besides organizing exhibitions, the group aimed to synchronize their activity with the contemporary Western tendencies (like their close relationship with Belgian artist Corneille thus influencing the future CoBrA group), released theoretical publications and organised lectures (among the lecturers we might find the philosopher Béla Hamvas and the writer Miklós Szentkuthy). They cultivated the memory of their chosen predecessors, like Gyula Derkovits (1894-1934), Imre Ámos (1907-1944, killed in the Holocaust), Lajos Vajda (1908-1941). In 1946 the representatives of non-figurative tendencies seceded from the group and founded the Group of Abstract Artists under the leadership of Ernő Kállai, acquiring an exhibition space named Gallery of the Four Quarters of the Globe (Galéria a Négy Világtájhoz). Due to the growing political pressure, the group suspended their activities in 1948 but the spirit of European School remained and provided inspiration for generations of artists throughout the decades of the totalitarian system.

## 1949

Foundation of the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists. It was rearranged in 1959. It functioned as the official body of cultural policy, the only social and professional organization in visual arts.

## 1956

October 26, *Unguarded money* action, Budapest. Upon the proposal by Miklós Erdély, the Hungarian Writers' Union placed six boxes in the streets of Budapest with the call: "The purity of our revolution allows us to collect money for the families of our martyrs in this way."

## 1957

April 20–June 16, *Spring Exhibition*, Múcsarnok. The first exhibition since 1949 that also featured abstract paintings. The exhibited material also included works by artists from the European School.

## 1959

Foundation of the *Balázs Béla Studio*, a studio of experimental film.

## 1958-1976

Salons at Pál Petrigalla's apartment in Budapest, a meeting place at Petrigalla's apartment for underground culture (lectures, exhibitions, music), centered around Petrigalla's music collection.

## 1958-1970

Meetings at dr. László Végh's apartment, concentrating on contemporary experimental / avant-garde music. Végh also reported on these events as an agent of the Unit III/III until 1962.

## 1960

Foundation of the Club of Young Artists (existed until 1998) by the Hungarian Young Communist League and maintained by the Budapest Municipal Council.

## 1965-1996

Exhibition series *Hungarian Art of the 20th Century* (A huszadik század magyar művészete), curated/organised by Márta Kovalovszky and Péter Kovács at King (St.) Stephen Museum, Székesfehérvár (16 editions). The museum in Székesfehérvár became crucial for (re)presenting and processing peripheral art phenomena and/or progressive art tendencies.

## 1966

- April 16-May 8, *Studio'66*, an exhibition of the Young Artists' Studio, organised at Ernst Museum without external jury (i.e. censorship), accompanied with serious debates. 'Progressive tendencies' were exhibited in a separate room.
- June 25, first happening in Hungary titled *The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)*, a collaboration between Gábor Altorjai, Miklós Erdély and Tamás Szentjóbby at István Szenes' cellar at Hegyalja u. 20/b. Budapest.
- December 27, second happening in Hungary, *Sunday Before Christmas 1969 (Prae-Antimovite Happening)*, concept by Gábor Altorjai, Miklós Erdély's cellar at 6/b Virágárok Street, Budapest.

## 1967

- July 20–August 10, *Workshop '67* (Műhely '67) in Debrecen. The first large-scale exhibition covering progressive tendencies in photography.
- First edition of the Stone Sculpture Symposium in Villány (from 1970 as an international event).
- Sculpture Symposium at the Székesfehérvár Light Iron Works.

## 1968

- January 18, Tamás Szentjóby's *Action Concert*, University Theatre, Budapest.
- May 1, *UFO* happening at Szentendre. Participants: Roger Bentichou, István Dárday, Antal Dull, Miklós Erdély, Katalin Ladik, Györgyi Szalai, Tamás Szentjóby, Miklós Urbán.
- Bonyhád Enamel Art Camp was founded.
- December 12–20, Opening of the *Iparterv I* exhibition, banned within a few days (informally it could still be visited afterwards). Organised by Péter Sinkovits, avoiding the Lectorate and the jury, at Iparterv (Hall of Iparterv State Architectural Office) in Budapest. The *Iparterv I-II* exhibitions became paradigmatic events that defined a generation. Instead of presenting single tendencies in neo-avant-garde art, Iparterv exhibitions consisted of various movements from Informel / Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, Hard Edge. *Iparterv I* was preceded by the exhibition organised at the Pál Vásárhelyi College of the Budapest Technical University in February 12-25, 1968 (*The older and younger generations of painters*: Imre Bak, Tibor Csiky, Tamás Hencze, Endre Tót, Tihamér Gyarmathy, Dezső Korniss, Béla Veszelszky, organised by Dezső Korniss).

## 1969

- First edition of the Siklós International Experimental Ceramics Symposium.
- October, Péter Halász and Anna Koós organised the Kassák Studio theatre group at Kassák Cultural House. Following the period between 1973 and 1976 working as an Apartment Theatre in a flat at Dohány Street in Budapest. They were forced to flee Hungary in 1977. The group moved to New York taking the name Squat Theatre and soon became one of the most progressive collectives in the international world of theater.
- October 2-20, *Szüirenon* exhibition, Kassák Cultural Centre, Budapest. The title is a variation of „sur et non” by Attila Csáji. It refers to art that merges Surrealism and non-figurative painting. *Szüirenon* was a major exhibition of the era that complements the achievements of *Iparterv I-II*. Organiser: Attila Csáji.

- October 24, opening of *Iparterv II* organised by Péter Sinkovits at the Hall of Iparterv State Architectural Office, this time involving the Lectorate. *Iparterv II* presented Conceptual tendencies as well.

## 1970

- April 24, *Mozgás'70* (Motion'70) exhibition on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Pécs Ballet at Janus Pannonius Museum in Pécs. Participants: Gábor Attalai, Imre Bak, Gyula Bocz, Tibor Csiky, István Haraszty, Tamás Hencze, Ilona Keserü, Dezső Korniss, Ferenc Lantos, István Nádler, Gyula Pauer. The exhibition was banned but the exhibited works were purchased by the museum, thus creating the base for its contemporary collection.
- June 28, opening of the balatonboglár Chapel Studio. György Galántai rented the unused and secularised Baroque chapel building as a studio in 1968 that became an informal centre and meeting place for avant-garde art (exhibitions, lectures, concerts) during the summers. Eventually it got closed in August 1973 due to the pressure by the authorities, initiated and strengthened by the press. The events of the Chapel Studio serve as references that define the first and second generation of neo-avant-garde including theater, literature, music. Some international/transregional events, among many others: August 6-13, 1972 exhibition of Bosch+Bosch group from Yugoslavia; August 26-27, 1972 *Meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists* and an exhibition with the participation of 23 artists, organised by László Beke; March 23-May 15, 1973 *Tükör/Mirror/Spiegel/miroir* exhibition, pieces by 35 artists. Organised by László Beke. Reconstructed for the opening of Artpool Art Research Centre in 1992.
- October 3-5, Gyula Pauer's *Pseudo* demonstration and *Pseudo* film (by János Gulyás) at József Attila Cultural Centre.
- December 14-17, *R Exhibition* at the Budapest Technical University 'R' Club that intended to merge the Szürenon and the Iparterv exhibitions' participants and achievements. Organised by Attila Csáji, catalogue by László Beke. It lacked the permission of the Lectorate, causing a scandal, but the exhibition could remain open.

## 1971

- April, *Pécs Workshop* (Pécsi Műhely) was formed in Pécs from the Pécs Artists Studio, a group of young artists/former students of Ferenc Lantos. Members: Ferenc Ficzek, Károly Halász (Károly Hopp-Halász), Károly Kismányoky, Sándor Pinczehelyi, Sándor Szjártó.
- August 4, László Beke's call *Work = The Documentation of the Imagination / Idea*. In response to this call 31 Hungarian artists sent their works to Beke. The project significantly contributed to the spread of Hungarian Conceptual and Mail art.

## 1972

- Vajda Lajos Studio was founded, one of the most important self-taught, alternative art groups of the seventies and eighties. After the first *Open-Air Exhibitions* organised in Szentendre (1968-1969) and the scandalous *Nalaja* happening in Szentendre in 1970 that ended up with police intervention and temporary imprisonment of István efZámbó, the group's Dadaist spirit merged with the intellectual heritage of the Szentendre Art Colony's avant-garde artists, especially Lajos Vajda. Founding members: László feLugossy, István efZámbó, Gábor Matyófalvi, György Holdas, János Aknay. It was granted a Cellar Gallery in 1973 that has been serving as an important venue of progressive tendencies ever since. The Studio lived its heyday in the eighties when the new wave band, A.E. Bizottság (Albert Einstein Committee), formed in Szentendre by several members and friends of the Studio. The Studio, already incorporating several generations, presented a radically open approach and covered different tendencies, from neo-dada, Fluxus-like and semi-Conceptual (performance and action, painting, installation and assemblage) approaches to surrealist and non-figurative/abstract forms and new media art.
- June, Klaus Groh's book *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (DuMont, Cologne) is published, containing works sent by Hungarian artists (Gábor Attalai, Imre Bak, Miklós Erdély, Tibor Gáyor, György Jovánovics, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, János Major, László Méhes, Dóra Maurer, Gyula Pauer, Attila Pálfalusi, Géza Pernecky, Tamás Szentjóby, Endre Tót).
- July 30, *Hungarian SCHMUCK*, the Hungarian issue of the international avant-garde periodical is published by BEAU GESTE PRESS with 23 artists contribution.

## 1973

January/February, László Najmányi and Kovács Studio happenings at Derkovits Culture House in Budapest. They organised various actions and happenings in the following years.

## 1974

- April, *Festival de la Vanguardia Hungara* exhibition, CAYC, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Then, in December, *Hungria '74* exhibition of Conceptual and Mail art works was organised there, curated by Jorge Glusberg, with a catalogue (folder) by László Beke and Gábor Attalai.
- First edition of the Dunaújváros Steel Sculptor Workshop and Symposium.

## 1975

- First edition of the Nagyatád Wood Sculpture Symposium.
- First edition of the Textile Art Workshop in Velem.
- Re-organisation of the Makó Graphic Art Colony to become the main venue for experimental graphics in the years to come.
- March, Cafe Rózsa/Rose (Rózsa Presszó) Circle's first events at Cafe Rose, Budapest. The name Rose Circle refers to a generation of artists who studied at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Art in the first half of the seventies and young and even older artists who joined them (among others: Dénes Bogdány, Orsolya Drozdik, György Fazekas, György Galántai, András Halász, Zsigmond Károlyi, Károly Kelemen, Mariann Kiss, András Koncz, László Nagyvári, Péter Sarkadi, Ernő Tolvaly). They participated in events (actions, happenings) organised at the Cafe Rose and other spaces such as the International Student Club, MOM Cultural Centre, Bercsényi Dormitory Club, Ganz Mávag Cultural Centre, and Jókai Culture House in Budaörs. The events took place in 1975-76, influenced by Fluxus.
- September 1975-1977, *Creativity Exercises (Movement design and implementation actions)*, Ganz-Mávag Cultural Centre, Józsefváros Artists' Circle, Budapest, led by Miklós Erdély and Dóra Maurer (assistant: György Galántai). A series of events started in October on various representatives of different tendencies of contemporary art. In December 1977 the *Creativity Exercises* were finished by the Cultural House's director. Erdély continued this activities at Víziváros Gallery as FAFEJ until June 1978.

## 1976

- First edition of the Győr Art Colony - Rába Works.
- October 24, 1976-January 31, 1977, *Exposition – Photo/Art* (Expozíció – Fotó/Művészet), Hatvany Lajos Múzeum, Hatvan. It included historical avant-garde photography and avant-garde photography of the seventies. Organised by László Beke and Dóra Maurer. It was followed by a series of solo exhibitions dedicated to progressive artists' work.

## 1977

- Symposium at Tisza Chemical Plant
- February 4-11, Orsolya Drozdik: *The Nude – the Model* (Az akt – a modell), with the opening actions of Károly Halász, Zsigmond Károlyi, Károly Kelemen, Miklós Erdély, László Beke, Young Artists' Club Budapest.



## 1978

- April 2–May 28, *Textile After Textil* (Textil textil után), Gallery 40, Eger. The same gallery presented experimental textile as well as a show of Imre Bak's and Dóra Maurer's Mail art collection, in August of the same year.
- June 2–July 5, *10 Years of Our Symposia Movement* (10 éves a szimpozion mozgalmunk), Józsefváros Gallery.
- November, Miklós Erdély founded the INDIGO (Interdiszciplináris Gondolkodás / Interdisciplinary Thinking) course, a new forum of creative exercises at Marczibányi Youth House, Budapest. INDIGO organised numerous exhibitions, events, actions, and created films in the following years.

## 1979

- March 25, Artpool was founded by György Galántai, Júlia Klaniczay. Artpool originally functioned exclusively through using postal services, then organised various programmes, projects at different venues. As a result of the projects and intense exchange with international collections, artists, art professionals, publishers etc. Artpool Archives and collections were formed. Today Artpool is part of the Central European Research Institute for Art History, Museum of Fine Arts Budapest.
- May, *Documentum* (Dokumentum) initiated by Antal Jokesz, involved also János Szerencsés, Gábor Kerekes, János Vető. Series of exhibitions and publications 1979-1983 to provide a platform for contemporary photography.
- October, György Galántai's call for participation in the assembling titled *Textile – Without Textile* (with support of András Bán and Péter Fitz as theoreticians), relating to the exhibition under the same title in the Young Artists' Club, organised by András Bán. 52 artists send works to the folder circulated in 300 copies.
- 1979-1982, Fölőspéldány csoport, consisting of representatives of contemporary literature (poets, critics, writers: Károly Csató, Balázs Györe, János Kőbányai, Judit Kemenczky, Ákos Szilágyi, Endre Szkárosi, Ferenc Temesi, Péter Turcsány) and fine artists (El Kazovsky as founding member) often performing together with a punk band Beatrice.

## 1980

- January 17, Szolnok-based, radical and politically engaged oppositional Inconnu group's (comprised of young artists Péter Bokros, Tamás Molnár, Róbert Pálinkás) action at Young Artists' Club titled *Examining the EGO in a Confined Space* (Az EGO vizsgálata zárt térben). It was followed by many other events by Inconnu. Inconnu's name derives from a postal

expression 'addressee unknown.' In radical Mail art practice, the method was used to avoid censorship. The sender put a fake address in the place of the addressee on the envelope, and put the name and address of the (Inconnu) actual addressee as the sender, thus the letter was eventually mailed to the right person after the fake address was considered 'unknown' by postal services.

- February 29, Ákos Birkás, György Galántai, Károly Kelemen, Zsuzsa Simon suggested the concept of a gallery working on collective basis to the director of the Art Fund. The gallery's concept was preceded by Zsuzsa Simon's experiments to establish a Zsuzsa Simon Office/gallery and work as a Western-type art manager. Although not according to the original idea, the gallery was formed at Kelemen's apartment named *Rabinec Common Atelier* (Rabinec Közös Műterem, 1982), later changed to *Rabinext Stúdió* (1983). The venue is of crucial importance for the Hungarian Post-avant-garde tendencies, such as New wave, New Painting. Exhibitions: *Zuzu (Lóránt Méhes)-Vető (Vető János)* exhibition 1982; *Ákos Birkás' New Works* 1983; *Zsigmond Károlyi: Tangram* exhibition 1983; *Károly Kelemen's Actual Works* 1983; *Rabinext Studio at Vajda Lajos Studio* in Szentendre 1983)
- June 6, *Tendencies I*, the first of the (Tendenciák 1-6), first of the exhibition series consisting of 6 shows organised at the Óbuda Gallery in Budapest (series continued in 1981). These exhibitions of crucial importance provided a survey on the different aspects art in the seventies, each of them was organised by a different curator. 1. *New Art in 1970* 2. *Secondary Realism* 3. *Geometric and Structural Tendencies* 4. *Fiction and Objectivity* 5. *Individual Ways* 6. *Hard and Soft. Postconceptual Trends*.
- Gábor Bódy, a filmmaker, and his wife, historian Veronika Baksa-Soós (Vera/Veruschka Bódy), conceived an idea of the *Infermental* project, the first international magazine distributed on videocassette. A declaration of cooperation with Polish filmmakers was signed by Gábor Bódy, Dóra Maurer, and Józef Robakowski, Ryszard Waśko, Paweł Kwiek and Małgorzata Potocka on March 19, 1981. Each *Infermental* issue was compiled and edited in a different location, the first in Berlin in 1982 and the last in Skopje in 1991. Following the death of Gábor Bódy (1985), Vera Baksa-Soós/Bódy carried on coordinating the project. The complete magazine archive consists of 10 issues + 1 special issue (altogether about 70 hours, and more than 1500 artists from 36 countries).

## 1981

- July 21–August 20, *ART+POST (Art and Post)*, Artpool's first Hungarian Mail art exhibition, Újpesti Mini Galéria in Budapest, run by artist and XERTOX group member Róbert Świenkiewicz between 1980-1982.

- December 1-16, First *New Sensibility* (Új Szenzibilitás I.) exhibition, Fészek Club Gallery, Budapest. The exhibition was followed by six further *New Sensibility* shows until 1987 as well as various related events in Hungary and at international locations. The exhibitions were curated by Loránd Hegyi, and reflected Hegyi's concept on different forms of Postmodernism in Hungary, mostly New Painting (covering both figurative and geometrical tendencies) but also Installation art.

## 1982

- April 6-25, *World Art Post* international artist stamp exhibition, Fészek Gallery, with a catalogue. A film (*Stamp Film*) was created in 1983.
- May 9-30, *Human Experiments* (Emberkísérletek), Pesterzsébeti Museum, Budapest. It was planned as an international Mail art exhibition and as XERTOX Third Meditation Exercise. The exhibition was banned despite the jury's permission but eventually it was presented at Bercsényi 28-30 between October 19 and November 1. XERTOX group consisted of Jenő Lévy, Imre Regős, Róbert Świerkiewicz, and was active between 1982 and 1992. Their 'meditation exercises' were built on meditation acts between simple actions.

## 1983

- January, 1983–1985, *AL* (Actual/Alternative/Artpool/Letter), issues 1-11, photocopy, in 3-400 copies, editioned samizdat art magazine with supplements published about the ongoing Hungarian and foreign underground culture.
- February 3-27, *New Sensibility II* (Új Szenzibilitás II.), Óbuda Cellar Gallery, Budapest.
- May 1, Liget Gallery was opened in Budapest. Liget became a prominent platform of underground, alternative tendencies and international cooperations, especially related to experimental photography and Installation art. Gallery director: Tibor Várnagy, from 2022: Veronika Molnár.

## 1984

- January 27, *Hungary Can Be Yours / International Hungary* (Magyarország a tiéd lehet/Nemzetközi Magyarország), Young Artists' Club, Budapest. The exhibition was banned (it was reconstructed December 9-21, 1989). The issue 52 of the international Mail art magazine *Commonpress*, titled *Hungary*, printed in 1989, was the exhibition catalogue.
- August 24–September 30, *Wet Paint: New Wave in Hungarian Painting* (Frissen festve: a magyar festészet új hulláma), Ernst Museum, Budapest.
- November 9-14, *Plánium 84* art festival at Almássy Center Budapest.

## 1985

- Establishment of The Soros Foundation Fine Arts Documentation Center at Múcsarnok Budapest, as a cooperation between the Múcsarnok and The Soros Foundation Hungary (since 2018 based in Berlin). It participated in the realisation of exhibitions and publishing catalogues as well as purchasing counter culture art during the last years of Kádár era, and functioned as a resource centre offering information on twentieth century Hungarian artists to students, scholars, collectors and dealers from Hungary and abroad.
- February 26–March 1, Substitute Thirsters' (Hejettes Szomlyazók) first exhibition in Budapest (after their exhibition in Kisörpuszta in 1984). The group was founded in 1984 by István Elek (Kada), Balázs Fekete, Attila Nagy, Péter Kardos (until 1985), Tibor Várnagy (later joined by Balázs Beöthy, Attila Danka, Rolland Pereszlényi) and was functioning until 1992. The group became the internationally most significant Hungarian underground art group of the second half of the eighties.
- March 4, Performance art enters Múcsarnok, the most prominent official venue: *Echo* (Visszhang), performance by János Szirtes, contributors: Wolfgang Ernst, Tibor Szemző, six violin players from the Rajkó Ensemble, Múcsarnok, Budapest; November 27, 1986, *Peter and the Wolf* (Péter és a farkas), performance by András Böröcz-László László Révész with László Garaczi's introduction, and the participation of Endre Kukorelly, Gábor Roskó.
- September 13–November 3, *New Sensibility III* (Új Szenzibilitás III.), Budapest Gallery in Lajos Street.
- October 18–November 10, *Drei Generationen Ungarischer Künstler* exhibition, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz (exhibited also in Budapest at Múcsarnok, December 12, 1985–January 12, 1986).

## 1986

- February 27–May 31, *Eclecticism' 85* (Eklektika '85), Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. Organised by Lóránd Hegyi.
- May 3, 1986–April 1, 1987, *Plato's Cave* (Platón barlangja), joint project by Substitute Thirsters (Hejettes Szomlyazók) and Exchange Series International Philological Art Forward School (Cseresorozat Nemzetközi Filozofikussági Művészetelőreiskola). 10–11 October: Invisible Art festival (Láthatatlan művészet fesztivál). Organised by Talán Sebeő.
- September 5–October 4, *Building/Sculpture/Object* (Épület/plasztika/tárgy). Exhibition of post-modern architects and scene designers Gábor Bachman, Attila Kovács, Tibor Szalai, László Rajk Jr. Dorottya Street Gallery, Budapest.

- September 21–May 31, *In Quotation Marks – A New Tendency in Contemporary Hungarian Art* (Idézőjelben - A kortárs magyar képzőművészet egy újabb vonulata), Csók István Gallery, Székesfehérvár.
- November 28–December 28, *Digitart – Computer Art Exhibition* (Digitart - Számítógépművészeti kiállítás), Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

## 1987

- March 13–April 5, *New Sensibility IV* (Új Szenzibilitás IV.), Pécs Gallery, Pécs, with an extensive bilingual catalogue. Organised and concept by Loránd Hegyi, Sándor Pinczehelyi.
- May 29–September 25, *Stamp Images* exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, as part of the Contemporary art in Private Collections series, curated by Judit Geskó, catalog by Géza Perneckzy.
- June 2–July 1, *Magical Works* (Mágikus Művek), with almost 100 artists, Budapest Gallery in Lajos Street, Budapest. Organised by Katalin Keserü. performance at the opening by János Szirtes / New Modern Acrobatics.
- August 20–23, *DAWN* - Hungarian performances at documenta 8, Kassel, at *La Fête Permanente* performance section curated by Elisabeth Jappe at Bistro New York (originally János Szirtes and the era's prominent performance/painter duo, András Böröcz-László Révész were invited). Szirtes performed with his group New Modern Acrobatics with László feLugossy, István efZámbó, Tibor Szemző. Böröcz-Révész took Gábor Bora and Gábor Roskó as narrator and as musical contributor, while Áron Gábor and János Sugár performed before the official program.
- November 1–17, *First Exhibition* by Zsuzsi Ujj at Liget Gallery. Contributors: Gasner Ufo, Vetó Kina, István (Digó) Nagy, Liget Gallery.

## 1988

- June 10–11, *Aid Festival for Transylvania*, Young Artists' Club, Budapest, concert and action, show: efZámbó Happy Dead Band, Gábor Tóth (performance).
- June 17–19, Studio ERTÉ (founded in 1987 in Czechoslovakia, founding members: József R. Juhász, Ottó Mészáros, Ilona Németh, Attila Simon) Festival, Nové Zámky/Érsekújvár. Experimental art festival, concept by József R. Juhász. In 1990–1991 it was organised as the International *Festival of Alternative Art*, from 1992 it was organised as *Transart Communication*.
- July 28–September 11, *Living Textile 1968–1978–1988. A Selection from Contemporary Hungarian Works of Textile Art* (Eleven Textil 1968–1978–1988. Válogatás a modern Magyar textilművészeti alkotásokból), Múcsarnok, Budapest.

## 1989

- June 1, Újlak group exhibition, Hungaria Bath, Budapest. Újlak group became the most defining group of the nineties.
- June 5–6, Inconnu erects 301 wooden headstones (typical and traditional grave-markers from Transylvania) at the Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery in memory of the anonymous victims of the repressions after the 1956 revolution, laying in the cemetery's parcel 301.
- September 25–October 15, *Different View. Experiments in the Photography of the Last Twenty Years in Hungary* (Más-kép. Experimentális fotográfia az elmúlt két évtizedben Magyarországon), Ernst Museum, Budapest. Organised by Ágnes Gyetvai.
- September 30, opening of Knoll Gallery in Budapest (second location after Vienna) with the exhibition of works by Joseph Kosuth.

For more details see:

Artpool Archive: <https://artpool.hu/kontextus/project.html>.

*An Attempt at Chronology of Hungarian Avant-garde Art between 1966-1980* (Dóra Maurer: *Künstler aus Ungarn, Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, 1980*): <http://www.c3.hu/collection/koncept/frame.html>.

Parallel Chronologies: <https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/chronologies/>.

(compiled by Kata Balázs, approved by Zsóka Leposa, Róna Kopeczky, László Százados)



Art Timeline  
Art facts





## 1948/9

1st Exhibition of Modern Art in Krakow, opened on December 19, 1948 and closed earlier by the political decision of the authorities on January 18, 1949. The first post-war manifestation of contemporary art. At this exhibition, avant-garde art, a continuation of pre-war avant-garde trends, was presented as an opposition to realism and naturalism.

## 1949

### Six years of Socialist Realism in Poland

February 12, 1949, beginning of Socialist Realism in Poland. Artists' Conference in Nieborów, organized by the Ministry of Culture and Art, with the participation of the Deputy Minister, Włodzimierz Sokorski, who has direct political supervision over artists. Finally, Socialist Realism as a binding doctrine in art and culture in Poland was decreed in June this year, at the National Congress of Delegates of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP) in Katowice.

The National Exhibition of Young Visual Arts titled *Against War - Against Fascism* at the Arsenal in Warsaw, hence commonly known as *Arsenale*, opened on July 21, 1955, is considered to be the end of the period of Socialist Realism in Poland. The exhibition was held as part of the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students.

## 1957

The Krzysztofory Gallery, the seat of the Kraków Group and Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot2 theater and the first artist-run institution in Poland, was founded in the basement of the Krzysztofory Palace in Kraków. Establishment of the Kraków Group marked the return of artists to public activity after the period of Stalinism.

## 1965

First happenings by Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, Cricotage and Linia podziału (The Dividing Line, in Warsaw, and then Kraków. A shift in the definition of contemporary art towards ephemeral forms and the resulting new possibilities for the social functioning of art.

## 1966

The Foksal Gallery was founded in Foksal Street in Warsaw. It focused largely on building international relations and played an important role as a link with the international art world above the boundary of the Iron Curtain.

## 1968

- First actions by Jerzy Bereś, *Prediction I and II*, at the Foksal Gallery, repeated at the Krzysztofory Gallery. He called his live artworks 'Manifestations.'
- First meeting of artist-run galleries and the first manifestation of the new artist-run initiative (ARI) movement as an unofficial art institution. Eight galleries and five salons of debutants participated. The OdNowa Gallery in Poznań operated in a students' club from 1964 to 1969.

## 1970

- The Symposium Wrocław '70. A large-scale event with a huge impact on Polish contemporary art, particularly in terms of the establishment of Conceptual art as an art trend. Over fifty artists and twelve critics from Poland participated.
- The Permafo Gallery and group were founded in Wrocław at an artists' club and operated until the imposition of martial law in 1981. The first Conceptual gallery and an art project at the same time focused on photography as a new art media.
- Warsztat Formy Filmowej (WFF) (Film Form Workshop (FFW)) was founded in Łódź and operated in the years 1970-1977. It was established by the students of the Cinematography Department of the Lodz Film School (PWSFTviT in Łódź) with Józef Robakowski as the leader of the group. Next to Permafo, FFW introduced Conceptual art based on new media, such as experimental film and photography, in Poland.
- The Tak Gallery (the Yes Gallery) was founded by Leszek Przyjemski (at the beginning together with Anastazy Wiśniewski). An early and the most radical example of a gallery as a work of Conceptual art.

## 1972

- The NET initiative by Jarosław Kozłowski (artist) and Andrzej Kostołowski (art critic) was founded. It based its operation on the Mail-art method, i.e., sending, both in Poland and abroad, a letter-manifesto entitled NET. NET project integrated the ARI activity in Poland and transformed it into a movement (network), turning it into a recognised Conceptual art practice.
- Galleries-art projects were founded: the Pi Gallery in Kraków (by Maria Anna Potocka in her private apartment), the Address Gallery in Łódź (by Ewa Partum, first in an artists' club and next in her private apartment), the 80×140 Gallery in Łódź (by Jerzy Treliński together

with Andrzej Pierzgalski in an artists' club), which was the most radical one, operating on a board of the indicated size. Andrzej Pierzgalski's A4 Gallery of the size of a sheet of paper was nested in it.

- Zbigniew Warpechowski created his first Performance art pieces based on the principles of Conceptualism.

## 1973

*Przegląd dokumentacji Galerii Niezależnych (Independent Galleries' Documentation Review)* at the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw (at the University of Warsaw students' club). Nineteen galleries took part.

## 1974

Ewa Partum performed a piece entitled *Zmiana (Change)* in her Address Gallery in Łódź. It involved a professional make-up artist aging half of her face. The first artwork declared feminist in contemporary Polish art.

## 1975

*Umarła klasa (Dead Class)* by Tadeusz Kantor was staged.

## 1976

- Jan Świdziński's contextual art manifesto 'Art as Contextual Art' was published (in English) by the Remont Gallery which operated in the students' club of the Warsaw University of Technology. An exhibition under the title *Contextual Art* was organized at the St. Petri Gallery run by Jean Sellem in Lund, Sweden. The follow-up was a conference on contextual art at the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) in Toronto where Świdziński met Joseph Kosuth, who presented the concept of 'anthropologized art.' Joseph Kosuth's idea of Conceptual art had a huge influence on the new definition of contemporary art in Poland.

## 1977

- An international conference entitled *Art Activity in the Context of Reality* was organized by Jan Świdziński at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw. Jorge Glusberg was among the invited guests. Under the influence of South American art (as well as Herve Fisher's sociological art), contextual art took on a more socio-political, critical character.
- *Działania lokalne (Local activities)* was the first contextual art project realized in the countryside, in the Kurpie region in Poland, by Jan Świdziński together with the group from the artist-run Recent Art Gallery from Wrocław.

- The *CDN* art festival in Warsaw was held in an urban space (under the bridge over the Vistula River). Twenty-two galleries and six groups were invited to participate.

## 1978

- *IAM* ('International Artists' Meeting' or 'I am'), an international Performance art festival and the first major presentation of this art in Poland was held at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw (forty-eight artists from abroad and twenty-six from Poland participated). The event demonstrated the establishment of the powerful un-official art institution and Performance art became a leading practice that defined contemporary art and was strongly linked to Conceptual art.
- The *Body and Performance* international festival of Performance art was held at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin. The festival was smaller than *IAM* but confirmed the leading position of performance art on the Polish contemporary art scene.
- The Exchange Gallery was founded by Józef Robakowski and Małgorzata Potocka in their private apartment in Łódź. The gallery's activity was based on extensive international contacts that enabled the co-creation of the *Infermental* project (works distributed on VHS videotapes). It also operated as an archive and library.

## 1979

Ewa Partum performed her second piece entitled *Zmiana (Change)* accompanied by the slogan 'My Problem is a Problem of a Woman' at the Art Forum Gallery in Łódź. This time a professional make-up artist aged half of her body. It was the first public nude live performance by a woman in Polish art.

## 1981

Three events summarized the decade of Conceptual and Performance art and marked the highest impact moment of the unofficial art institution in Poland which operated internationally based on exclusively private contacts.

- *70 - 80. Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej (70-80. New Phenomena in Polish Art)*, organised by Józef Robakowski and Witosław Czerwonka, took place at the BWA Gallery in Sopot. Thirty-five galleries from Poland were invited. The peak development moment of the Conceptual gallery movement.
- The first edition of *Konstrukcja w procesie (Construction in Process)* was held in Łódź. Fifty-four artists from all over the world participated. The international section was curated by Ryszard Waśko and the Polish one by Antoni Mikołajczyk. A documentary film was made by Józef

Robakowski. It was the largest event of the ARI type organized by the FFW milieu, which proved the power of the unofficial art institution and its broad international contacts.

- *IX Spotkania krakowskie (9th Kraków Meetings)* was an annual event of local importance that in that year became a manifestation of contemporary art. It was curated by the artist Maria Pinińska-Bereś and the art critic Andrzej Kostołowski (forty artists participated).

## 1983

- The Dziekanka Gallery in Warsaw, located in a student dormitory, functioned within the ARI gallery movement from 1972. From 1979 to 1987, it was run jointly by Tomasz Sikorski and Jerzy Onuch. From 1983 onwards, the Dziekanka Gallery played a fundamental role in the key development period of a new expression trend in Poland that used Post-Conceptual art forms of installations, objects, and actions, both painterly and non-painterly ones.
- In June, the Strych Gallery (the Attic Gallery) was established in Łódź. It was the first artist-run place after the break caused by the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981. It operated until 1985 during the most severe phase of the military rule in Poland as an art center of Conceptual and new media art, and Action art practices.

## 1984

The Konger group was founded in Kraków (Artur Tajber, Władysław Kaźmierczak, Marcin Krzyżanowski, and Marian Figiel). There were three Konger groups, two in 1984, and one in 1985. The performance-based Post-Conceptual art trend gained a new impact in the new generation.

## 1985

- The Black Market, an international Performance art movement, was established. It was initially based on Tomáš Ruller's (CZ) and Zygmunt Piotrowski's (PL) idea of joining East and West (1983). Next, Boris Nieslony (DE) and Jurgen Fritz (DE) joined them at the Expanded Theatre symposium at the Maximal Art Gallery in Poznań, founded by Grzegorz Dziamski. The Black Market was a multi-national network of performers working together in the name of freedom of art that crossed the Iron Curtain, as well as state and cultural borders.
- 1st Biennial of New Art in Zielona Góra at the BWA Gallery. Over seventy artists from Poland participated. A new generation of artists appeared, merging a Post-Conceptual form with new expression painterly artworks. It was the first large-scale presentation of art in a public institution after the activity break caused by the imposition of martial law.

- In the aftermath of the Biennial, the po Gallery, nested in the BWA Gallery, was founded (Wojciech Kozłowski and Leszek Krutulski). The gallery programme was very mixed and mostly contained various installations and performances forms, painterly new expression style included.
- The Wyspa Gallery (the Island Gallery) was founded in Gdańsk by Grzegorz Klamana, an artist and academic professor. Initially, it was an affiliated gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (until 2002), next it moved to other locations in the defunct Gdańsk Shipyard (until 2016), which then became a home for many artist-run initiatives.

## 1987

2nd Biennial of New Art in Zielona Góra at the BWA Gallery. Participants were selected by artist-run galleries operating at that time. Twelve galleries from Poland participated. It marked the revival of the gallery movement in the new generation.

## 1989

- *Lochy Manhattanu (The Dungeons of Manhattan)*, subtitled 'exhibition installation,' organized by Józef Robakowski, was held in the garages under the high-rise apartment complex in the center of Łódź. Forty-two artists participated. Many different forms of Installation art were produced demonstrating the Post-Conceptual practice as dominant in Poland at that time. It was the last collective exhibition organized by an unofficial art institution.
- The WRO Festival was founded by Piotr Krajewski and Violetta Krajewska in Wrocław. WRO is an acronym from Wizualne Realizacje Okołomuzyczne (Music-Related Visual Art Realisations). It was an international new media festival dedicated to video, interactive installations, digital art, and art and technology-based projects.

## 1990

Tadeusz Kantor died.

## 1991

- *Real Time – Story Telling* curated by Jan Świdziński and Witosław Czerwonka was held in Sopot, at the BWA Gallery. Approximately fifty artists participated. It was the first large-scale international Performance art festival in the post-1989 breakthrough Poland. It marked the beginning of the Performance art festivals boom of the nineties.

## 1993

- The International Performance art festival *Zamek Wyobraźni (The Castle of Imagination)* was established and operated until 2006. It was curated by Władysław Kaźmierczak, a performer, who made the festival a part of the international network of festivals of Performance art.
- The international art festival *Fort Sztuki (The Fort of Art)* was established in Kraków and operated until 2005. Its originator and founder was Artur Tajber, a performer. Various forms of site-specific art were developed.

## 1999

The *Interakcje (Interactions)* International Action Art Festival was founded in Piotrków Trybunalski. It is organised until this day. Its originators and curators were Ryszard Piegza (Paris) and Jan Świdziński, and its directors Piotr Gajda and Gordian Piec.

## 2008

- A new building of Muzeum Sztuki (the Art Museum) (ms2) in Łódź was opened in 1931 on the initiative of the avant-garde artists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński. It housed the a.r. group's collection of post-cubist, Constructivist and Neoplasticism works. Muzeum Sztuki (ms) is the first contemporary art museum in the world.
- Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej (MSN) (the Museum of Modern Art) in Warsaw was first opened in a temporary building. The new building is still under construction (2022). Previously, contemporary art was collected by Muzeum Narodowe (the National Museum) in Warsaw and the collection is still there.
- The Centre of Contemporary Art (COCA) with a collection of contemporary art was opened in Toruń.

## 2011

- Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej (MOCAK) (The Museum of Contemporary Art) in Kraków was opened. Previously, contemporary art was collected by Muzeum Narodowe (the National Museum) in Kraków, and the collection is still there.
- Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław (MWW) (Wrocław Contemporary Museum) was opened in Wrocław. Previously, contemporary art was collected by Muzeum Narodowe (the National Museum) in Wrocław, and the collection is still there.

## 2012

Jerzy Bereś died.

## 2014

- Jan Świdziński died.
- Cricoteka, the museum and archive of Tadeusz Kantor, was opened in Kraków.

## 2017

- The Archive of the Exchange Gallery was donated to the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN).
- The Archive of the Kraków Group was donated to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków (MOCAK).

## 2021

Nowe Muzeum Sztuki w Gdańsku (New Art Museum) (NOMUS) opened in Gdansk.

## 2022

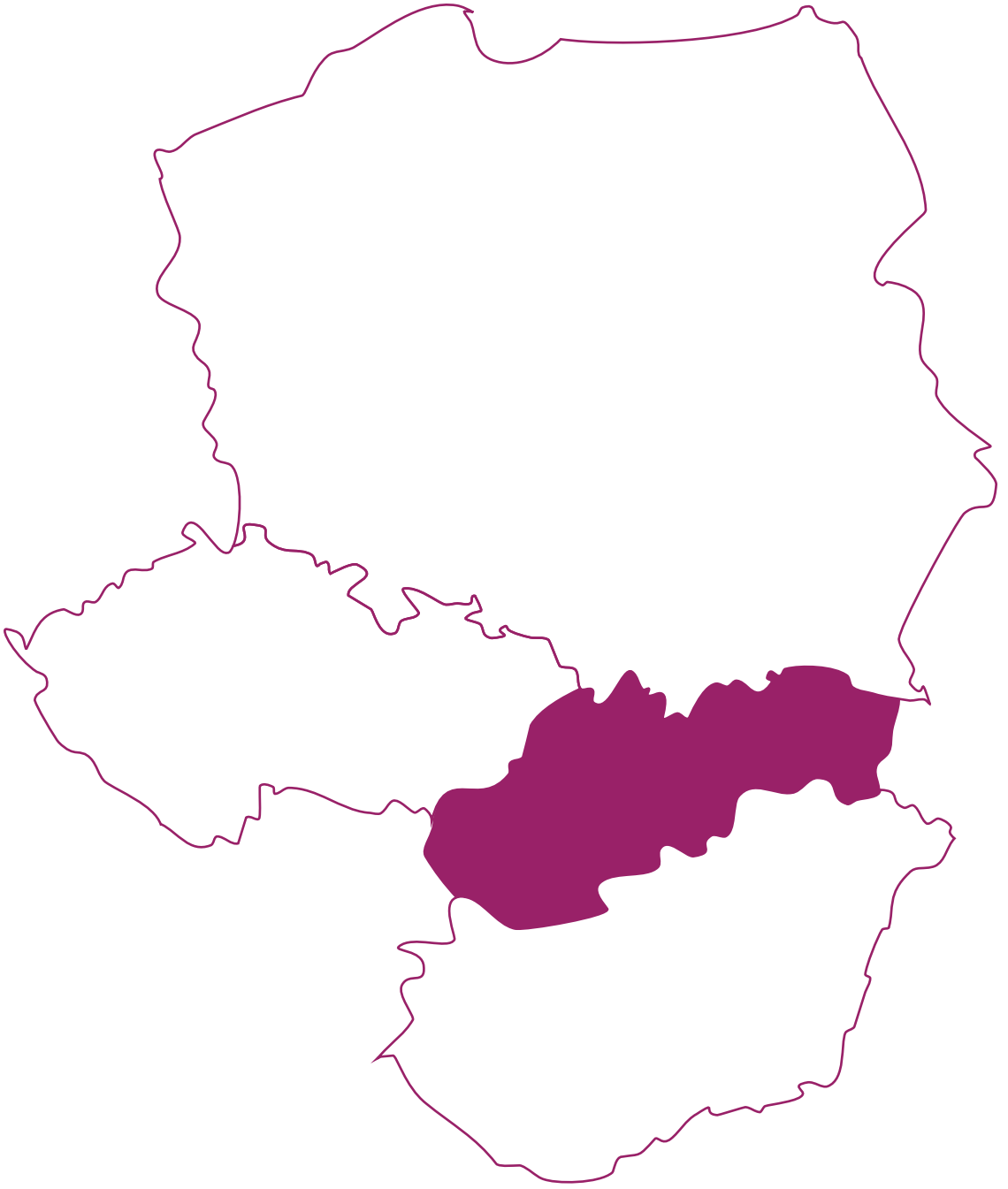
The Archive of the *Construction in Process* was donated to the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN).

(compiled by Łukasz Guzek)



SK

Art Timeline  
Art facts



## 1948

July 1, the Slovak National Council decided to establish the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) in Bratislava. The first exhibition was the *Exhibition of old masters paintings from the collections of SNG* (1949).

## 1956

Foundation of the journal *Výtvarný život* (Art Life) by the Association of Slovak Fine Artists and the Association of Slovak Architects, which was published in Slovakia until 1995.

## 1957

After some release in 1956, censorship was sharpened again. December 19-20, there was a meeting of the Association of Slovak Writers in Bratislava, which signed up for the 'ideologicality of literature,' which was assessed as a great success by the management of the KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). A similar position was adopted at its meeting on June 9-11, 1959 by the extraordinary Congress of Socialist Culture (opinion after the historian Jan Rychlík).

## 1957

- In Bratislava, the Galéria Mladých (Gallery of Young) was established, later renamed the Cyprian Majerník Gallery, presenting the work of a young generation of fine artists. The gallery in the city center was managed by the Slovak Central Committee of the Socialist Union of Youth in Bratislava (SÚV SZM).
- December 1, the first public presentation of the Mikuláš Galanda Group in the exhibition room of the Regional Forest Administration in Žilina marked an emergence of a young incoming generation of artists who rejected the dogmas of Socialist Realism by returning to the principles of modern art and the domestic pre-war avant-garde tradition (Mikuláš Galanda, Ľudovít Fulla, Miloš Alexander Bazovský and Cyprian Majerník).

## 1961

- Establishment of an informal association of artists called Confrontations, devoted to structural abstraction and Informel. Initially, they presented their works at the non-public group exhibitions in studios and apartments, later in the official galleries (Rudolf Fila, Marián Čunderlík, Eduard Ovčáček, Miloš Urbásek, Jozef Jankovič, Jaroslav Kočiš, Pavol Maňka, Andrej Rudavský, and others).

- The first manifest of Milan Dobeš was published in the journal *Výtvarná práce* (Art Work), in which he captured his main program principles of geometric, light and kinetic abstract art: “The basic means of expression for me is light and movement. To continuously monitor light and movement in time and the emerging emotional artistic experiences arbitrarily repeat creates the possibility of another creative means – space-time... I am now working on the designs of the environment – dwelling (environment), where the perception of the viewer is attacked by the whole interior, provoking the atmosphere and the required tension in it.“

## 1963

November, Ladislav Mňačko's book *Oneskorené reportáže* (Delayed Reports) was published in a huge expense. The author mapped out some fabricated cases at a lower level in the fifties, as well as efforts to rehabilitate the disabled. The book is composed of eleven short novels, each of which is a story about how state power, represented by party officials, was able to enter people's lives and often destroy them completely. It belongs to the most important prosaic works in Slovak literature and in 1963 in a sense it opened a new stage of Slovak literature. The publishing house of political literature made two prints immediately after the first edition. The total circulation of the book was 103,420 copies.

## 1965

- March, Vladimír Popovič carried out the action *Launching the Boat* in Petržalka district by the Danube river, as the end of his solo exhibition in the Galéria Mladých (Gallery of Young) in Bratislava, for a small circle of friends and without wider publicity: “Participants launched (according to his description and photographs) into the stream of Danube a large enlargement of the paper boat.” (after art historian Radislav Matuščík).
- Peter Bartoš realized action *Handing out*, semi-optional for a circle of friends. The author called the presenters to select from his academic papers from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava (on Gorazdova Street), thus breaking with the academy, tradition and painting.
- Alex Mlynárčík, Stano Filko and art historian Zita Kostrová prepared the *Manifesto HAPPSOC*, signed on May 1, 1965. It was created as a theoretical component for the first of the series of Conceptual projects *Happsoc I* and *Happsoc II* by artists Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčík. It belongs to the key projects of conceptual art in Slovakia, based on the appropriation of the found reality (of capital Bratislava), planned for seven days from May 1 (Labor Day) to May 9 (anniversary of the

liberation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in 1945). *Happsoc I* pointed to Bratislava in the form of a text announcement (7 days of the fact of Bratislava), real and fictitious statistics on the realities and inhabitants of the city (1 castle, 1 Danube, 142 090 street lamps, 128 729 television antennas, 6 cemeteries, 138 936 women, 128 727 men, 49 991 dogs etc.). For the first time in the history of Slovak art, it was a conscious renunciation of artistic materialization, the project was realized in the form of an invitation calling on the audience to participate mentally (after art historian, critic and curator Jana Geržová).

- The 'zero year' of so-called pre-symposium, International Sculpture Symposium in Vyšné Ružbachy, in which sculptors from all over the world worked with travertine. The symposiums took place in the travertine quarry and were carried out during the summer months until the nineties. The initiative followed similar symposia founded and led by the Austrian sculptor Karl Prantl, and he also participated in the first, introductory year in Vyšné Ružbachy.

## 1967

- The 'zero year' of the International Symposium in Metal steel plant in Košice, organized in cooperation with eastern Slovak ironworks. The ambition of the project was to place modern sculptures in nature and urban spaces, inviting important artists from all over the world. The last year took place in 1973.
- Since 1967, tours under the name Socha Piešťanských Parkov (The Sculptures of Piešťany Parks) have been held regularly during the summer months. The beginning of a strong tradition of presentations of sculptural art in natural and urban surroundings, meant a radical 'step out' of the sculpture from the interior of the galleries to the exterior, the spa town of Piešťany, with its vast park and water areas of the Spa Island, provided the sculptures with an ideal space, one of the initiators of the idea of Piešťany plein-air exhibitions was the sculptor Alexander Trizuljak.

## 1968

Július Koller together with Peter Bartoš created the concept of Anti-gallery in the interpretation of the fast-repair stockings shop on Klobučnícka Street in Bratislava, in which between advertising and goods they exhibited their paintings. Koller's anti-paintings significantly ironize the work with the object and with painting of paintings-apartment accessories. The Anti-gallery only existed until 1969, when its initiators were forced to close this 'exhibition space.'

## 1969

June, *Manifest of Interpretation* in fine art was created by Alex Mlynárčik and Miloš Urbásek, which states: "Interpretation in fine art is a new creative dimension. It opens up other spaces as fertile starting points from the so-called authentic gestures, which we have so far anxiously adhered to. It is a creative realization of a project or realization of an existing work of art. The interpretation is based on the form and ideological nature of the origin ..."

## 1970

- February, *I. Snow Festival*, Alex Mlynárčik, Milan Adamčiak, Róbert Cyprich and Miloš Urbásek held the festival as the first demonstration of artistic interpretation on the occasion of the World Ski Championships in the High Tatras – artists performed individual and group Land-Art interpretations of works by Pieter Bruegel st., Erik Dittmann, Claes Oldenburg, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Peter Brüning, Sanejouand, Miloš Urbásek, Dias, Nagasawa, Tobas and others
- *Polymusical Space I. Sculpture, object, light, music* in Piešťany, in 1969 a newly conceived idea of the tour of the *Statue of Piešťany Parks* was designed by Lubor Kára, organizer of important presentations with international participants (*Danuvius*, Bratislava, 1968; *Statue of Piešťany Parks*, Piešťany, 1969). The exhibition presented contemporary tendencies as a synthesis of various art disciplines, not only of visual arts but of all media, music, film, theater and literature included. Legendary site-specific installations were created there, many of them as temporary, closely linked to the place of its making. Furthermore, objects, more traditional sculpture works, but also various types of Action art like happening, performance, sign-based concept. The exhibition embraced and accepted current trends in a democratic and pluralistic way, but at the same time it was the last free art exhibition. The show presented ca sixty works by forty artists (for example Alex Mlynárčik, Július Koller, Stano Filko, Jana Želibská, Juraj Bartusz, Vladimír Popovič and others).
- November 19, *I. Open Studio* of Rudolf Sikora on Tehelná street 32 in Bratislava. The semi-public meeting of fine artists, initiated by the youngest generation of artists, recent graduates or even students, started to see the limited possibilities of free expression, lack of opportunities and spaces for exhibiting, meeting and open communication. The idea originated among artists and friends, Rudolf Sikora and Villam Jakubík, in cooperation with other invited artists both established and complete newcomers, prepared a group exhibition in a small house in the former workers' quarter. The number of participating authors has grown to nineteen by gradually reaching out to the organizers: Milan Adamčiak, Peter Bartoš, Václav Cigler,

Róbert Cyprich, Milan Dobeš, Villam Jakubík, Július Koller, Vladimír Kordoš, Ivan Kříž-Vyrubiš, Otis Laubert, Juraj Meliš, Alex Mlynárčik, Marián Mudroch, Jana Želibská, Rudolf Sikora, Ivan Štěpán, Dezider Tóth, Miloš Urbásek and Igor Gazdík. The works of art of the authors, in some cases also multiple, were created by a collective as well as individual approach, counting on the participation of the audience and with the physical temporality, which ended with the handing out, donation, call for entry and cooperation. There was a distinct criticism of the traditional artifact, on a small area they presented a whole range of forms of new, alternative art – music and poetry, action forms, Body art, site specific installations, spatial interventions, object art, light art, using non-permanent materials and objects, applying also principles of accumulation, play and cooperation. The exhibition lasted two days, the next day the organizers were questioned by the State Security (ŠTB).

## 1971

June 12, Alex Mlynárčik conceived and organized in cooperation with the extensive collective a spectacular event *If All Trains of the World / Day of Joy* in Zakamenné. The event was attended by: Milan Adamčiak, Erik Dietmann, Milan Dobeš, Viliam Jakubík, Vladimír Kordoš, A. Miralda, Marián Mudroch, H. Nagasawa, Lev Nussberg, D. Selzová, Jana Želibská, Ch. Tobas and Miloš Urbásek.

## 1973–1974

The creation of the *White Space in the White Space* project by the trio: Stano Filko, Ján Zavorský and Miloš Laky. The project was accompanied by text manifestos and spatial installations: “We subscribe to a free ‘pure sensitivity,’ which is absolute and is the only option of ‘pure sensitive art.’” According to art theorist Aurel Hrabušický, as their method, the authors determine “pure sensibility,” by which they “create an infinite emptiness” and thus created a “white intangible space in a white infinite space.”

## 1979

- Action *Week of Fictional Culture*, Ján Budaj and the Temporary Society of Intensive Survival distributed billboards in several places in Bratislava (a hanging textile advertisements and paper posters) for non-existent events or concerts of bands that performance in the age of socialism was impossible (for example exhibition of Salvadore Dalí, or René Magritte, concert of Bob Dylan, or ABBA and others).
- From 1979 to 1986, the *Bratislava Artefact Shift Championship* was organized regularly by Dezider Tóth in the apartments and studios

of the participants of the Championship. The status of an unofficially organized event included the conditions of a nine-month thematic shift, lasting from March 8 (International Women's Day) to December 6 (Santa Claus day). Each participant should have created a 'shift' (paraphrase, interpretation, application, approximation, citation, etc.) of any work from the history of art, containing the specified theme to which the shift was bound, the assumptions allowed variability and heterogeneity of artistic proceeding: 1979 – Sensuality; 1980 – Touch; 1981 – Doubling; 1982 – Mystery, Myster; 1983 – Connection; 1984 – Myth; 1985 –Transformation (after art historian Ján Kralovič).

## 1980

Július Koller founded a gallery-idea, Galéria Ganku (*Ganek Gallery*). The *Ganek* (porch) is the name of a natural mountain formation in the High Tatras, where he organized non-existing exhibitions. This gallery was part of his projects on non-existent phenomena such as UFOs or futurology, the cosmos, and thus he practiced non-existent art (or existing as a document of this idea). It was the use of the assumptions of Conceptual art as well as Land art. At the same time, it was a political commentary on the situation in the country, where practicing forms of contemporary art was impossible.

## 1981–1982

Július Koller, Radislav Matuščík and Peter Meluzin initiated the informal actions by The Terrain group, focused on specific problems of the realizations and analysis of events in the fields, in nature, which derived from the need to communicate about the limitations of development of Action art on the Slovak un-official artscene. The last event was the *Burial of The Terrain* on February 16, 1985, which was performed by Peter Meluzin and the collective. Excerpt from the program of the group: “The Terrain is a suggestion that you take your action, the realization of which assumes and uses the free landscape, nature and human intervention in it, within a defined period of time in space; The terrain is a request respecting the principles and goals of your creation and therefore offering only a common space and time for individual realization of any type of event or for direct inspiration by specifying the region and the season...” In addition, apart from the founding members, actively participated in The Terrain: Lubomír Ďurček, Dezider Tóth, Michal Kern, Jana Želibská, Vladimír Kordoš, Róbert Cyprich and others.

## 1987

October, Studio Erté was founded in Nové Zámky as an association dealing with the organization of art events, mostly from the area of Performance art;



organizes festivals, exhibitions, symposia, internet conferences, concerts of contemporary music, and publishes catalogs, books and multimedia editions on art. Founded by Jozsef R. Juhász and Ilona Németh, Ottó Mészáros, Attila Simon.

## 1988

June 17-19, Transart Communication Festival of Experimental Art and Literature, first edition was held in Csemadok House, Nové Zámky, curated by Jozsef R. Juhász. The festival had a great impact on art in this part of Europe as a place of international meetings for artists from all over the world and was a sign of a new opening after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Thirty editions took place until 2018. However, the tradition of performance still continues at the Kassak Centre in Nové Zámky (*Performance Box 2020*).

## 1990

The magazine *Profile* of contemporary fine art was founded and still is the oldest specialized professional periodical in the field of fine arts in Slovakia. It focuses on analysis of current topics of fine art practices, but above all theories and criticism of contemporary fine art with overlaps to visual culture, which are mediated by the views of domestic and other experts, as well as translations of selected texts of foreign specialists. The editor-in-chief is Jana Geržová.

## 1991

The first exhibition in Slovakia presenting Czech and Slovak avant-garde and post-avant-garde trends: Action art, Body art and Land art at the Považská Art Gallery in Žilina under the name *Umění akce*, curator: Vlasta Čiháková Noshiro. Among the Slovak authors presented works by Milan Adamčiak, Peter Bartoš, Juraj Bartusz, Ján Budaj, Róbert Cyprich, Ľubomír Ďurček, Stano Filko, Vladimír Havrilla, Michal Kern, Július Koller, Vladimír Kordoš, Matej Krén, Radislav Matuščík, Peter Meluzin, Alex Mlynárčík, Marián Mudroch, Artprospekt P.O.P group, Peter Rónai, Rudolf Sikora, Ľubo Stacho, Dezider Tóth and Jana Želibská. Exhibition was realized in cooperation with Mánes Association of Fine Artists in Prague.

## 2001

The exhibition *Action Art 1965-1989* at the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, in the curatorial concept of Zora Rusinová, prepared a comprehensive mapping and presentation of Action art, accompanied by an extensive catalog with rich figurative documentation. The basis of the exhibition were photographs (enlarged reproductions, new prints)

and other visual and textual recordings of action works, supplemented by authentic or author reconstructed props and objects. First such an overview of the Action art in post-Yalta countries presenting the importance of this art form for the un-official artscene.

(compiled by Vladimíra Büngerová)

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TOWARDS THE  
CONTEMPORARY.  
DYNAMICS OF  
ART TRENDS  
IN VISEGRÁD  
COUNTRIES (V4)

# INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITOR

The four countries of the Visegrád Group (V4) - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia - constitute the political core of the Central European region. This is so not only due to their geographical location but also because of their important role in the region: both as formerly part of the cosmopolitan Habsburg Monarchy and, in the post-Yalta times, as part of the Soviet bloc in Europe divided by the Iron Curtain. Both pre-war avant-garde art and post-war contemporary art in their advanced forms developed in the four countries. Therefore, historical research into Central European contemporary art begins there, in the V4 countries. One of the aims of this publication is to create a basis for studies on the history of art in Central Europe in the post-Yalta period, understood as a whole. The existing research is too selective and based on too narrow a factual base to make a synthesis of the art of the region possible.

At the same time, contemporary art in each of the V4 countries has its own characteristic art forms and dynamics of development. The local art histories are already quite well researched, as evidenced by the extensive bibliography that accompanies this publication. Pointing out the differences enables comparison and thus a comprehensive approach to the art of the V4 region. The key element linking the national histories is Conceptual art: the way to it, its developed form, and its consequences. Along with Conceptual art, Action art was practiced. The ephemeral nature of these forms of art determined their *par excellence* political importance in the totalitarian countries. Also, it was the assumptions of Conceptual art that made it possible to present art in a site-specific context, i. e. other than a regular gallery room. The articles included in the publication elaborate on the activities of the galleries and other exhibition venues that built the un-official art scene in opposition to the official art promoted by the state authorities.

The publication contains a summarised history of contemporary art in the V4 countries concerning the period from the time after World War II to the political breakthrough of 1989. The historical description is based on the facts around which a narrative about the history of art can be constructed. The method of triangulating the field of art history makes it possible to map the key points and network them. These triangulation points are constituted by the most radical forms and events examined in the included analyses, and which are sometimes, interestingly, absent from the canon of art history. This way of presentation serves to illustrate the relations between the national histories and thus enable further comparative studies leading to a synthesis of the art history of the region. The Art Timeline(s), i. e., the chronology of the art of the four countries, and the Context Timeline, i. e., the chronology of political events in the V4 countries which form the background for the events in art, are helpful in these studies. In addition, the Glossary of Terms provides detailed definitions of the key events in the countries' histories.

We intend this publication to be a factual and methodological starting point for anyone who wants to learn about the foundations of contemporary art in the region. It is addressed to professionals, researchers, as well as critics and cultural journalists. And, last but not least, students, because the aim of the publication is also to constitute a Handbook for education and didactics in the field of contemporary art. In the published articles, a lot of attention is paid to the description

and grassroots analysis of the activities of organisers and curators, which helps understand the specificity of the art in the region functioning under strict social control.

The chapter on research results is composed according to the countries sections, presented in alphabetical order. The two-part article about Czech art, in the first part describes un-official art activities, and a special contribution here is a study of the activities in Sovinec, the significance of which stems from the joint work of artists from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, also carried out on the eve of the division of Czechoslovakia into two countries. The second part of the presented material focus on the photographic documentation of pioneering performances, often performed for the camera, thus combining the use of new media with a form of Conceptual art (“Part 1: Independent Cultural Centres in the Former Czechoslovakia in the Seventies and Eighties. The Sovinec Case; Part 2: Czech Concept Action Art”).

The section on Hungarian art consists of three articles. The two articles at the beginning of this section deal with the background of the functioning of art in post-revolutionary Hungarian realities. The first of them is situated in the field of the sociology of art and concerns artistic groups and their exhibitions (“The Ethics of Abstraction. Un-official Avant-Garde Artist Groups Between 1945 and 1989 in Hungary”), while the second discusses the role of the very influential community of artists and architects (“Channeling Ideas: Institutional Background of Semi-official Art in Hungary of the Sixties and Seventies”). The third article presents the results of research on the symposium movement, i. e., the artistic workshops organised in large factories, where artists developed contemporary art forms. Apparently, the Hungarian way to contemporary forms of art - Conceptualism, media art, installation, or action - led through abstract painting, mainly in the geometric style, the role of which turns out to be particularly significant compared to the processes taking place in the art of the other countries (“Venues, Publicity, Experimentation and Symposia. Notes on the Interconnectivity of Neo-Avant-Garde Tendencies and the Symposium Movement in Hungary”).

The section on Polish art consists of two articles. The first one provides a description in chronological order of the development of contemporary art from the sixties, peaking in the seventies, to its functioning under martial law in the eighties. The role of the gallery movement, an un-official institution network composed of declared-as-gallery social and art activities, which highly stimulated the development of contemporary art, is emphasised here. The role of the gallery movement in Poland corresponds to the role of the symposium movement in Hungary (“The Development of Contemporary Art in Poland in Post-Yalta Conditions”). The other article in this section, complementary to

the art history review, describes works of art more and less openly gay in nature, which then belonged to a deep underground, but have set the stage for contemporary equality narratives (“Some Notes on the Queer Story of Art Under Communism in Central Eastern Europe”).

The section on art in Slovakia focuses on the un-official exhibitions taking place during the Czechoslovak period, which provided artists with opportunities to develop Conceptual and related art forms. The first article focuses on the presentation and detailed description of selected landmark art events (“Together, but Separately? Group Exhibitions in Slovakia Between 1968 and 1989”), while the second one places various exhibitions and festivals, official, semi-official or unofficial in nature, in a socio-political context (“Exhibition as a Form of Cultural and Artistic Resistance”). The third article deals exclusively with land art, which played a special role in Slovakia and, at the same time, allows for comparisons with similar practices in the other countries, as going outdoors, into the landscape, outside the city, opened up opportunities for greater creative freedom for artists everywhere (“Forms of Land Art of the Sixties to Eighties in Conceptual and Action Art in Slovakia”). The whole set of articles relates to the functioning of contemporary art in Bratislava and elsewhere, but in the territory of what was then Czechoslovakia and now is Slovakia. The section is an important contribution to the construction of national art history in the newly established Slovak state.

The overview provides an insight into the core of contemporary art in Central Europe through the history of art in the V4 countries. The art created in these countries in the post-Yalta period could benefit from the rich tradition of the pre-war avant-garde. The development of art in the period of the dominance of Conceptual art was part of a global trend which in the discussed countries was based on its own artistic and social ground. This underlines the legitimacy of the ‘horizontal’ method used in Piotr Piotrowski’s research. At the same time, a deep insight into art and the perception of the continuity of its history makes its other methodological assumptions irrelevant, namely, concerning ‘colonisation’ or ‘self-colonisation,’ as then the essential factor, the ‘other’ (and the ‘close-other,’ which was supposed to be a compromise solution), disappears. ‘Horizontalism’ and ‘colonialism’ are contradictory and methodologically mutually exclusive. Contemporary art in the V4 countries, based on the principles of the Conceptual ‘Copernican’ revolution, has contributed to the global history of art. Its individual character resulted from the adaptation of art to the socio-political conditions of a totalitarian state in national variations, which was the cause of both similarities and differences between them.







# Štěpánka BIELESZOVÁ and Ladislav DANĚK

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## INTRODUCTION

After 1948, the official artistic trend known as Socialist Realism, which was strongly pushed by the Party, started to prevail in the Czech environment. It was heavily inspired by the propagandistic style of art of the Soviet Stalinist era. For example, Protokol IX. řádného sjezdu komunistické strany Československa (*Report of the 9th Ordinary Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*), Prague, 1949, p. 362, reads: “Currently, the criterion is the relation towards the ruling working people, the relation towards the workers, the relation towards socialism.” Anything else with a touch of experiment or personal opinion was labelled as shallow and formalistic or relics of bourgeois cosmopolitanism.

The period during which many individuals failed morally and collaborated with the totalitarian regime, out of fear or for their own personal gain, was also reflected in contemporary literature. *The Joke*, by the world-renowned novelist Milan Kundera (b.1929), is often referred to as one of the greatest novels of the century by reviewers. It deals critically with the period of the so-called Stalinism of the fifties in what was then Czechoslovakia. This is how, among others, the French writer Louis Aragon (1897-1982) referred to this novel.

As a result of political pressures, the Czech art scene became divided into official, semi-official, and un-official art. It means that there were artists who were openly tendentious, others who attempted to combine the creative methods of modernism with Socialist Realism and, last but not least, artists who rejected any form of cooperation with the official regime. Art was subjected to strict censorship, and artists were forced to engage in politics in favour of the newly built socialist state. A monument to Stalin was unveiled in Prague on May 1, 1955. Its author, Otakar Švec (1892-1955), a modernist and futurist, committed suicide shortly before its unveiling.

# part 1

CZECH (AND SLOVAK)  
ART IN THE CONTEXT  
OF NORMALISATION DURING  
THE SEVENTIES AND  
EIGHTIES  
(THE SOVINEC CASE)

After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, Czechoslovakia, as well as other countries within the Eastern Bloc, experienced a certain relaxation in society. The Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald (1896-1953) died shortly after Stalin, which also contributed to this relaxation atmosphere in the country. The term 'everyday poetry' appeared in the Czech literary environment as early as in the mid-fifties. The term itself was related to the programme of the Czech literary group Květen (May), founded in 1955. This new imaginative perception of everyday reality was in sharp contrast to the official schematic and politically contaminated art. This approach was popular in photography, for example. The photographic group DOFO, founded as early as 1958, put the unusual method of representation of reality directly into their artistic programme. In the field of photography, the broader term 'fine-art photography' was becoming increasingly synonymous with 'creative photography,' which means photography that is very subjective, transforming the image of reality with a distinctive view and artistic and experimental techniques. To some extent, this trend can be compared to the category of 'subjective photography.' The fact that the basic quality of Czechoslovak art had not been completely 'normalised' during the fifties was also confirmed by the multi-genre presentation of Czechoslovak artists at the EXPO '58 World Exhibition in Brussels. The Czechoslovak pavilion was awarded the Gold Star and the exhibits were awarded 56 grand prizes and 36 gold medals.

Outside the official mainstream, in the privacy of their studios, individuals tried hard to keep up with European trends through personal connections. The main motifs of their work were shaped by the social reality of political trials, judicial murders, confiscation of property, and the horrifying attempt to de-intellectualise society (Klimešová 2010; Klimešová 2020, 260-265). In addition to solitaires creating outside official artistic structures, several trends emerged in the un-official domain of fine arts in the fifties; they were characterised by generation overlap and differed both in form and opinion. These artists included, for example, Vladimír Fuka (1926–1977 New York); Ivan Sobotka (1927–2008); Věra Nováková (b. 1928); Alén Diviš (1900–1956); Zdeněk Palcr (1927–1996); Zbyněk Sekal (1923–1998 Vienna).

The older generation of artists was further developing the trends of the pre-war avant-garde. Surrealist methods and practices proved to be still fruitful. In the late forties, the younger generation, which was partly inspired by classical European modernism, was still using surrealist

creative methods, such as collages by Zbyněk Sekal, Jiří Toman, Libor Fára (Klimešová 2010, 71). At the end of the fifties, a modified version of expressive and structural abstraction emerged in what was then Czechoslovakia. In contrast to its Western European variant, this one was strongly influenced by the oppressive social atmosphere. Mikuláš Medek (1926–1974) was a personality who distinctively transformed surrealist methods with the newly emerging material abstraction in his work. In general, even the older avant-garde movements, not only the newly emerging Western European tendencies, were still being strongly condemned as formalist, elitist, and incomprehensible to the working people. It was non-figurative abstract art that was disparaged the most. Other artists distinctively experimented with materials and dark colours, implemented haptic elements and raw materials, and reflected the brutal treatment of human beings at the time, for example, Jan Koblasa (b.1932) and Aleš Veselý (b.1935). In addition to Medek, Vladimír Boudník (1924–1968) played a similarly significant role in this context. He was a self-taught artist, working as a turner in a factory, who won his reputation as a creator of original active and structural graphic techniques, printed with the use of raw waste material. His first exhibition abroad was held at the Krzywe Koło Gallery in Warsaw in 1962. Jan Kotík's exhibition in 1957 also played an important role as it was classified as the first official exhibition of non-figurative art after many years of exhibitions in the spirit of Socialist Realism (Czechoslovak Writers' Gallery in Prague, opened on March 1, 1957). In 1960, on the initiative of the sculptor Jan Koblasa (1932–2017), unofficial exhibitions and the meetings of artists *Confrontations I and II* were held in the studio of Jiří Valenta (1936–1991) and subsequently in the studio of Aleš Veselý (1935–2015). Among others, Čestmír Janošek (1935–2019), Zdeněk Beran (1937–2014), and Boudník participated in the exhibition. The *Confrontation I and II* meetings also influenced the Bratislava art scene. Exhibitions of the same name were also held in Warsaw. The year 1960 was a turning point both in Poland and Czechoslovakia as processes aimed at the liberation of artistic expression were initiated in both these countries. The format of a non-public exhibition, based only on friendly relationships and personal trust, continued in Czech art until the end of the eighties.

At the first two *Confrontations*, a number of artists presented their expressive raw works with an existential subtext, which was in direct contradiction to what the official propaganda was inculcating. Artists discovered the power of non-artistic materials (sand, textiles, wire, fragments of other materials); classical painting and sculpting methods were replaced by a combination of disparate elements, burning, engraving, and paint pouring. The dominant colours were brown, grey, and shades of black. Although these works were negatively labelled as

highly formalistic and lacking in content by official reviewers at the time, they often had highly intellectual and spiritual contents. *Confrontation I* took place in the studio of Jiří Valenta (b.1936) in Prague on March 16, 1960. He invited his classmates from the Academy of Fine Arts, including Jan Koblasa, Aleš Veselý, Zdeněk Beran, and Antonín Málek, to his studio. These artists were looking for an artistic starting point and a new, vigorous expression that would most accurately reflect the tense social situation. Many of the young artists were either friends with or admirers of the work of the surrealist Mikuláš Medek and Boudník - graphic artist. They were also becoming indirectly familiar with Dubuffet's work, which was associated with Outsider Art (aka Art Brut). They learned theoretical information on existentialism from the theoreticians Václav Černý and Jindřich Chaloupecký in the Czechoslovak environment. *Confrontations II* took place in Aleš Veselý's studio in October 1960. The exhibitors included: Stanislav Benc, Vladimír Boudník, Čestmír Janošek, Jan Koblasa, Václav Křížek, Karel Kuklík, Antonín Málek, Jiří Putta, Zbyšek Sion, Antonín Tomalík, Jiří Valenta, and Aleš Veselý. Both exhibitions, *Confrontation I* and *II*, captured the process of the transformation of figurative art forms into the Informel. The most radical practitioners of Czech Informel art and of a generation that strongly opposed official art and negative life experience included Zdeněk Beran, Antonín Tomalík, Antonín Malek, Jiří Valenta, and Čestmír Janošek. Both the Prague *Confrontations* also resonated on the Slovak art scene, thanks to Eduard Ovčáček (b.1938) and Miloš Urbásek (1932-1988), who were students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. The *Confrontations* in Bratislava were held privately in the studio of Jozef Jankovič (1937-2017) and in other private apartments in 1961, 1962, and 1963.

The occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 was followed by a massive wave of emigration. The country entered the era of 'real socialism,' which significantly affected the whole society and, of course, influenced the cultural sphere for the next twenty years, until 1989. The situation in society came to be referred to as 'normalisation,' which, in the history of Czechoslovakia, covers the entire period from the violent suppression of the reformist processes in the society by the Soviet Union. This period lasted until the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989. The 'normalisation' of the social and especially political situation was accompanied by a number of negative and tragic phenomena. The communists were then divided into those who accepted the occupation of Czechoslovakia and its return to being under Soviet guardianship and those who disagreed with the situation. The latter were expelled from the Communist Party, and, like other opponents of the Soviet invasion, lost their jobs and were socially persecuted. Particularly active civil (and artistic) protests were punished by imprisonment, forced emigration,



and social disability. Censorship was restored and a number of interest, political, and cultural associations and organisations were disbanded. Long-term social pressure and references to the art and progressive activities of the sixties triggered another wave of un-official activities and spontaneous exhibitions outside official galleries. Semi-legal exhibitions and lectures were becoming increasingly popular in Prague. They were held, for example, at the Theatre in Nerudovka, which became one of the first independent galleries to present contemporary art, including 'forbidden' artists. The Theatre in Nerudovka and the Prague Centre for Monument and Nature Conservation allowed young artists to organise another unofficial exhibition called *Lesser Town Courtyards* (May 12-24, 1981). The event built on similar activities, such as *Sculpture and the City* in Liberec (1969), *Sculpture Meetings* in Vojanovy Sady (1974), and the meetings in Malechov (1980, 1981). The outstanding fact was that art was moved from galleries and some works were created directly for specific spaces of the city. The participants in the *Lesser Town Courtyards* exhibition included Eva Fuková, Kurt Gebauer, Magdalena Jetelová, Ivan Kafka, Svatopluk Klimeš, Aleš Lamr, Pavla Michálková, Jiří Mrázek, Naděžda Rawová, Tomáš Ruller, Jiří Sozanský, Čestmír Suška, and Olbram Zoubek. It is also worth mentioning the exhibition and curatorial activities of Jaromír Zemina at the Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry of the Czech Academy of Science in the seventies and eighties, as well as Marcela Pánková's activities at the Central Cultural House of Railwaymen in Prague.

Ludvík Hlaváček described the oppressive atmosphere of the eighties at the Academy of Fine Arts as follows:

The spiritual atmosphere at the Academy was depressing during those years. There was nothing but prohibition and restriction of natural activities on the part of the teachers; any initiatives were received with suspicion and usually forbidden, and any creative attempts were suppressed. Complacent professors, mostly party officials, were annoyed by the presence of students at the college and felt endangered by their activities. And yet, events inspired by a vague memory of the late 1960s were still held at the college (Hlaváček 1996, 145-152).

The new generation of artists, especially students of the academy, were increasingly resistant to the 'aesthetic formalism and socially sterile individualism' of the older generation. At the time, students resonated with impulses of current trends such as German neo-expressionism and the Italian Transavantgarde. A series of private exhibitions was held on the initiative of a few students, again under the name *Confrontation*. They

were held on the initiative of Jiří David and Stanislav Diviš, consecutively between 1984 and 1987. The first two *Confrontation* exhibitions took place in the studios of the painters Jiří David and Petr Petr in Prague. The third one was held in Magdalena Rajnišová's house in Kladno, the fourth one in Bohuslav Metelka's studio in Prague again, the fifth one in the ruins of Milan Perič's farmhouse in Svárov u Kladna, and the sixth one again in Prague. Nearly eighty artists took part in the last exhibition.

Independent culture also sought refuge outside the main centre, away from the surveillance of the state security police. In Kostelec nad Černými lesy, for example, the unofficial cultural centre Gallery H was established in the eighties thanks to the brothers Zdeněk and Jiří Hůla. There was also the House of Culture in Orlová, where Ivo Janoušek (b.1938), curator of the National Technical Museum in Prague, organised unofficial exhibitions, the Půda Gallery in Český Těšín, headed by the painter Bohunka Olešová (b.1951), etc. The illegal artistic symposia *Plasy* (1981) and *Mutěnice* (1983) were also held outside Prague (Slavická 1995, 1996).

Activities carried out in the small and isolated village of Sovinec stand out in terms of their contents and importance. During the seventies and eighties, the village became an important centre of Czech and Slovak unofficial culture. The educator, photographer, curator, and dispatcher of the state farm Jindřich Štreit (b.1946) founded a small gallery in the closed school. The gallery systematically focused on experimental and conceptual artists who could hardly present their works in official galleries. Many of these events took place under the surveillance of the state security police and were seen as a socio-political confrontation with the ruling totalitarian regime. The scope and systematic nature of the cultural activities organised by Štreit in Sovinec can be marginally compared, for example, to the activities of György Galántai in the chapel in Balatonboglár, Hungary, in the seventies, as well as the Open Studios organised by Slovak conceptualists and performers in Bratislava.

Štreit organised sixty solo and joint exhibitions at Sovinec between 1974 and 1989, and continued to organise cultural events and exhibitions even after 1990. He quit in 1997 because of his heavy workload. The exhibitions were accompanied by music and theatre performances, as well as meetings with artists and art theorists.

After the year 1982, during which he was imprisoned for defamation of the Republic and the head of state in connection with his involvement in *The Meeting* exhibition in Prague, Štreit exhibited only to a limited extent in small alternative premises. The exhibition *Meetings on Tennis Courts - Sparta '82* was to some extent a substitute for the initially banned event *Old Town Courtyards* (1982, cancelled), which was to follow up on the event *Lesser Town Courtyards* (1981), mentioned above. The

exhibition *Meetings* lasted only forty minutes instead of the originally planned eighteen days. It was banned on the spot by the security police, exhibits were destroyed, and artists were interrogated and some even prosecuted (Štreit's recollections). Sometime, around the mid-eighties, he met the Slovak photographer Lubo Stacho (b.1953), who had been running a 'living room' gallery for his friends from among artists in his prefab apartment in Bratislava since 1983. The gallery presented works by the Czech photographers Bohdan Holomíček (b.1943) and Jan Saudek (b.1935), the graphic artist Alena Kučerová (b.1935), and the conceptual artist Július Koller (1939-2007). Stacho also offered Štreit the chance to exhibit some of his photographs in the gallery, which were unknown in Slovakia. Consequently, Štreit's exhibition took place in Stach's apartment in 1985. Stacho and Štreit have remained in touch as friends ever since. Slovak artists also began to exhibit at Sovinec, often in confrontation with their Czech counterparts.

In 1986 the Slovak graphic artist Albín Brunovský (1935-1997) exhibited here. In 1987 it was the Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora (b. 1946) and a year later Jozef Jankovič (1937-2017). In 1989 he presented his drawings, objects and spatial installations by Slovak conceptual artist Dezidér Tót (b.1947). Earlier this year, Slovak sculptor Jozef Jankovič exhibited with Czech graphic artists Alena Kučerová (b.1935) and Ondřej Michálek (b.1947). In 1990, several Slovak artists exhibited in Sovinec. In April, they were the graphic artist Daniel Fischer (b.1950) and Marek Huba. In September, the sculptor Juraj Meliš (1942-2016) and the painter Rudolf Fila (1932-2015) presented themselves. And in 1991, the Slovak artist Marián Mudroch (1945-2019) ) with the Czech sculptors Karel Pauzer (b. 1936) and Hana Purkrábková (1936-2019).

And in 1991, unfortunately only a year before the breakup of Czechoslovakia, Štreit managed to organize a large Czech-Slovak and French exhibition (*Česko slovensko francouzská výstava*, Sovinec, September 14, 1991), with the partial participation of French artists. In the forties, oflag, a prison camp for French officers, operated in Sovinec. The participation of the French artists in the exhibition were honorable. Slovak authors Juraj Bartusz (b.1933), Otis Laubert (b.1946) Juraj Meliš were represented in a confrontation with Czech authors such as Václav Bláha (b.1949), Alena Kučerová, Stanislav Kolíbal (b.1925), Karel Malich (1924-2019 ), Vladimír Kopecký (b.1931), Karel Nepraš (1932-2002) and others. For a long time, this exhibition became the last significant joint activity of Czech and Slovak artists. After 1992, both countries became independent, and the resulting Czech Republic and Slovakia began to move further and further apart. The last events of the Czech-Slovak exhibition concept were the exhibitions of Klára (b. 1948) and Milan Bočkay (b. 1946) in 1992. Furthermore, the exhibition of the

Slovak conceptual artist Otis Laubert with the Czech painter Zdenek Kučera (1935-2016) in 1993. The last confrontation exhibition took place between the Slovak Igor Minárik (b.1948) and the Czechs Michal Gabriel (b.1960) and Petr Veselý in 1994.

Today, years later, we can claim that Štreit's vision of Czechoslovak confrontation exhibitions was very progressive. Moreover, until 1989, the movement of persons across the border and their gatherings were closely monitored by state security. Štreit and artists from both sides of the border, from the Czech and Slovak sides, took great risks. Nevertheless, friendly and artistic meetings took place here, as evidenced by the preserved photo documentation. The current generation of curators could easily build on the concept of comparative exhibitions of artists from the former Czechoslovakia. Paradoxically, in the era of loosely interpreted term Central Europe, curators are not very interested in comparative analysis and joint presentation of what used to be one cultural scene. Hopefully this time will come.

**illustrations<sup>©</sup>**



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3

1. Daniel Fischer, *Transformation II*, paper, 535x373 mm, private collection
2. Milan Bočkay, *P. Glocko: I'm Not Afraid Of Holidays*, 1988, pencil, sepia, paper, 250x182 mm, private collection
3. Juraj Bartusz, *White painting*, 2014, acrylic, canvas, 70x100 cm, private collection



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2

1. Václav Bláha, *Crossing*, 1989, mixed media, 106x142,5 cm, private collection

2. Klára Bočkayová, *The Last Supper*, 1980, ink, acrylic, canvas, 585x775 mm, private collection



Jiří David, *INRI*, 1987, oil, canvas; 160×135 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc





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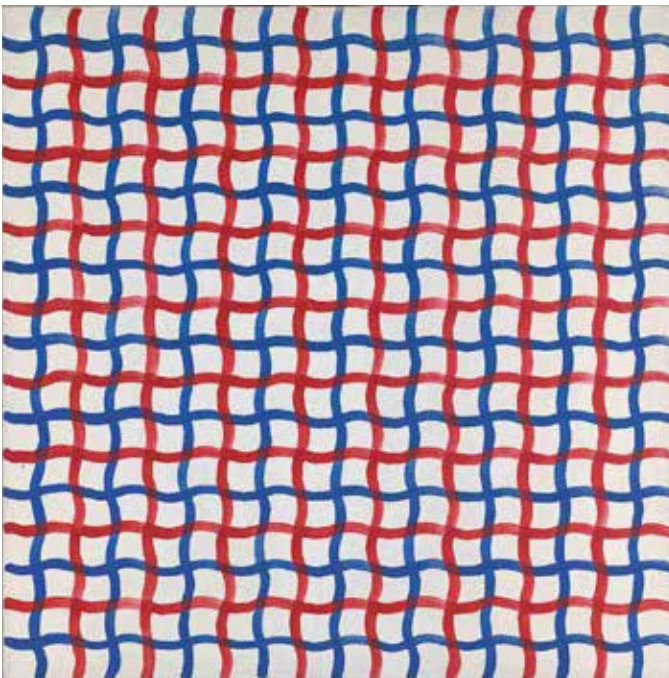


3

1. Stanislav Diviš, *Untitled*, 1987, acrylic on paper, 940x670 mm, private collection
2. Rudolf Fila, *The Eye Takes*, 2005, acrylic, canvas, 50x50 cm, private collection
3. Jan Hajn, *Doormats*, from the still life cycle, 1960, black and white photo, paper, Muzeum umění Olomouc



1



2



1. Jan Koblasa, *Labyrinth of the World*,  
1958, bronze, 49.5×49.5×7.5 cm,  
Muzeum umění Olomouc

2. Julius Koller, *Untitled*, 1992, acrylic,  
canvas, 90×90x cm, private collection

3. Julius Koller, *Untitled*, 1993, acrylic,  
wood, textile, 220×91 cm, private  
collection

3



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2

1. Vladimír Kopecký, *Painting*,  
1995, acrylic, chipboard,  
105x105 cm, private collection
2. Jan Kotík, *The King's Head*,  
1959, oil, canvas, 130x97 cm,  
Muzeum umění Olomouc



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3. Juraj Meliš, *Idea*, 1990, nails, wire, paint, h. 30 cm, private collection



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4. Igor Minárik, *Untitled*, 1995, mixed media, 70x45 cm, private collection



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2

1. Marián Mudroch, from the series *Convergence*, 1976, offset, serigraphy, acrylic, paper, 480x484 mm, private collection

2. Karel Nepraš, *Untitled (Head)*, 1980s, metal, laminate, paint, 34.5x20 cm, private collection



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4



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3. Hana Purkrábková, *Untitled*, 1980s, fireclay, 70x40 cmx36 cm, private collection
4. Sikora Rudolf, from the cycle *The Anthropic Principle - Constellation of the Hand*, 1986, 330x220, private collection
5. Dezider Toth, *Visual aids No 4*, 1976, serigrafie, papír, 491x491 mm; 467x467 mm, private collection





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2



3

1. Ivan Sobotka, *Human corpses*, 1954, oil on canvas, 66×48 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

2. Vladimír Fuka, *Seated clown III*, 1950–1952, tempera, handmade paper, 54×45 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

3. Aleš Veselý, *Image-object*, 1960–1964, combined technique; 75×62×24 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc



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4. Věra Nováková, *Job*, 1954, oil, cardboard; 102×71,5 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

5. Otis Laubert, *Comments on commercial textiles* (from the Tapestry cycle), 1988, assemblage, combined technique, cardboard; 127×67×7 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

6. Eduard Ovčáček, *Sdělení 3E (Černý)*, 1964, propalovaná koláž, papír, sololit 125×94 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc



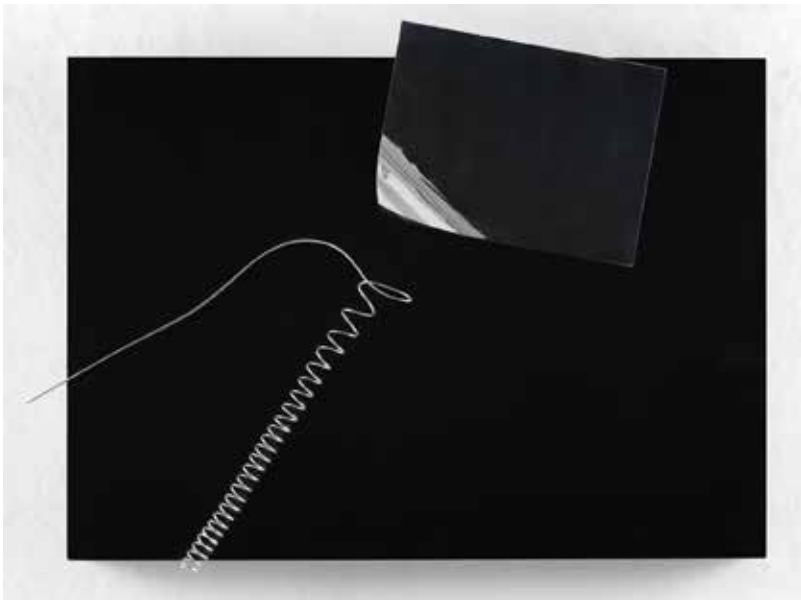
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1. Jozef Jankovič, *Head 2*, 1984, paper, 590x500 mm, private collection

2. Alena Kučerová, *Minerve*, 1968, structural author's graphics, paper, 900x594 mm; 760x520 mm, private collection



3



4



5

3. Karel Malich, *Silver Corridor*, 1970, combined technique, 99 x 134 x 15,5 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

4. Mikuláš Medek, *Red Saint (Holy Soldier III)*, 1967, oil, enamel, canvas, 162×115 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

5. Miloš Urbásek, *Theme K*, 1966, latex, canvas, 95×95 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc



1



2

1. Aleš Veselý, *Picture-Object*, 1960–1964, combined technique, canvas, 75×62×24 cm

2. Stanislav Kolíbal, *Fall I*, 1967, stainless steel, h. 268 cm, Muzeum umění Olomouc



# part 2

***DEMONSTRATION  
FOR ALL SENSES.  
DOCUMENTATION  
OF ACTION ART FROM  
THE COLLECTION  
OF THE OLOMOUC  
MUSEUM OF ART  
(A CASE STUDY ON THE  
SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE  
IN CZECH VISUAL ARTS  
FROM THE SIXTIES TO  
THE EIGHTIES)***

'Everyday poetry,' the imaginative and poetic interpretation of reality alone did not suffice. Besides the existing lyrical interpretation, artists were more and more inspired by the impulses of contemporary artistic trends which were coming sparsely and unsystematically from Western Europe. However, these trends were increasingly difficult to follow as a result of political censorship. Artists experimented with gestural interventions, rasters, and imprints of material structures. Urban folklore Pop art and letter elements made their way into artistic compositions. The surrealist method involving ready-made or found objects was revived. The metaphorical recording of reality became more sophisticated, complex, and layered. In general, we can say that Czech art was still being influenced by the avant-garde tendencies of the interwar period, such as civilism, Futurism, and Constructivism. However, abstract and imaginative practices became predominant. They were strongly inspired by the Czech painting tradition of Informel and Abstract Expressionism, fattened by the malleable and associative methods of Surrealism and corrected by the optics of existentialism and social uncertainty.

The schizophrenia of the times, which polarised the lives of individuals and society into the notions of public = official and un-official = private, generated an interesting paradox: in a society in which the 'lack of social freedom and great creative freedom' were intertwined, examples of the so-called 'expanded notion of the work of art' began to appear from the late sixties onwards (Valoch 1997, 18). This compound term depicts a relatively broad and very original trend of artistic expressions of artists who, under the pressure of social or political circumstances or, in contrast, voluntarily, abandoned their artistic work in terms of traditional media and crossed the previously restricting boundaries in painting, sculpture, and drawing. Thus, the 'concept' appeared on the un-official art scene. New, radical methods of Conceptual art, where the dominant output was often just a pure idea, a thought, or information, were often shared in a temporally and locally limited action, photo documentation, film, project, or even in the form of correspondence or Mail art. Photography and film footage acquired a new role in this context: many artists used them to express and capture their intentions more accurately. They were easy to disseminate and appealed immediately to those who viewed them, which was none the less important. Traditional studios and galleries were replaced by urban or natural settings and the term Land Art began to appear in the Czech art. Body art was also accepted in a similar way.



The creative medium was the artist's body, which presented an artistic concept, often on the brink of physical and existential durability. The form of execution and implementation of the artist's project was subordinated to the gravity of the contents. In Czech society, which was constrained by censorship, the ability to communicate or mobilise became a new accentuated quality of an artwork. Thus, (not only) in Czech art, the late sixties and the entire seventies saw radical artistic expressions that went beyond the boundaries of classical art media, and very often aimed at dematerialisation of the artwork. The newly created artworks were temporary, disappearing in time, projects, often unimplemented, and yet they were often final artworks intended for the viewer's reflection (Project art). Action art and its specific manifestations became the most progressive vehicle of socially significant themes that responded to the totalitarian regime.

Milan Knížák (b.1940) was one of the most important practitioners on the Czech action scene. He became known primarily for his provocative form of communication. Already in the early sixties, he proclaimed himself an organiser of, and the main actor in, unofficial demonstrative actions in public spaces. He performed some of them along with his friends (the *Actual Art* group). Those documented were, for example, the actions carried out in the New World gallery in Prague (*Demonstration for All the Senses*, 1964). Knížák drafted authorial captions for the resulting photographic recordings of the actions and included them in his declarations and manifestos. His actions, which had a fundamental and emancipatory influence on the Czech underground community at the time, also caught the attention of members of the international movement Fluxus. It was the art critic and theoretician Jindřich Chaloupecký who brought Knížák's activities to the attention of Georgie Maciunas, a founding member of Fluxus, as early as 1965. Maciunas invited Knížák to the United States, but Knížák was only able to travel there in 1968.

At the turn of the seventies, Zorka Ságlová (1942-2003) moved her activities to the open landscape. Along with her brother Martin Jirous (1944-2011), musicians from The Primitives Group and Plastic People of the Universe,<sup>1</sup> and a circle of artists from the Crusaders' School,<sup>2</sup> she created the spatial and artistic concept of the Land art action *Laying the Nappies at Sodoměř*, which was successfully implemented in 1970. Already in 1969, her crucial presentation *Hay - Straw* took place at the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague. As part of the Conceptual art exhibition *Somewhere Something*, she covered one part of the gallery with bales of straw and alfalfa and the other with hay. As a result of the active participation of visitors, the material was rearranged and new material and colour structures were created (yellow, green, brown). The provocative exhibition *Somewhere Something* was prepared by Běla and Jiří Kolář

and the Ságls (Zorka and her husband). In retrospect, the exhibition has been considered pioneering in terms of promoting conceptual expression. Ságlová was very successful at combining Land art with playful elements. Her group actions were primarily well-thought-out games in natural settings, designed for a variety of active collaborators. Playfulness, wit, and humour were typical features of the entire output of Jan Steklík (1938-2017). For example, with his happening *White Stripes in the Forest*, he and a group of his friends responded visually to the natural environment, which was no longer a unique phenomenon in Czech art at that time. Jiří Valoch (b.1946) and Miloslav Sonny Halas (1946-2008), among others, carried out similar activities with the aim of creating a temporary structure of an artwork, intertwined with limited spatial and temporal relationships.

Olaf Hanel (b.1943) performed actions in the form of rituals. He used subsets of natural elements, performed his actions in remote rural settings, and with the help of his friends (often members of the Crusaders' School) attempted to integrate his gestures, actions, and objects into the landscape (*Tribute to Bright Stars*, 1971) in the spirit of the then emerging Conceptualism. His actions with coloured soap bubbles, of which a limited number of impressions on paper have been preserved, represent an extraordinary material contribution to Action art. From the mid-sixties onwards, Eugen Brikcius (b.1942) organised happenings in which he typically used the principles of Dadaism and the theatre of the absurd, combined with elements of nonsense and playful poetry. This is also evidenced by the title of one of his actions, *Still Life with Beer* (making a composition of aesthetically perfected pints of beer in an urban setting), which he carried out in Prague's Kampa in 1967. His next happening (*Looking at the Platonic Idea of the Image, Ended as a Live Chess Endgame*, 1967), held at the Václav Špála Gallery, also had the form of a prank party. Another of his Land art actions, *The Sundial* (1970), which he performed along with friends, was extraordinary both in terms of its concept and implementation. The artist's inspiration to create the artwork was formed earlier: during his stay in a pre-trial detention cell in which he was being held for another artistic action. The cell was situated in a lowered basement and had a high window. Therefore, the sun's rays were pouring into the cell and shadows were moving on the opposite wall. This is where the concept of *The Sundial* was born.

The special relationship between poetry and Land art was also evidenced by the later activities of Karel Adamus (b.1943). In 1973, he performed his solo action *Tribute to Footprints II* on the bottom of a drained lake (September 7, 1973, Třinec - Lyžbice u Olzy, district of Jahodná 'Popílek,' today Kaliště). The photographic documentation captures the process of making a line of footsteps and creating a poetic

story, a peripatetic poem, about a lonely journey through the landscape. For Jiří Valoch (b.1946) the basic means of expression was a poem, more precisely a very sophisticated form inspired by the Japanese poetic form of the haiku, where the artwork was reduced to a single word or a phrase. Through his actions, he consistently headed towards a radical concept of action as pure information. Marian Palla's (b.1953) action which he carried out during his military service was an extreme version of concrete poetry. He photographed several objects (a chair, a drum, a cable, etc.) on a roll of film in complete darkness and used the same method to capture abstract concepts (love, self, etc.). He then sent the film by mail (Mail art) for the attention of the photographer Marie Kratochvílová, who made positive blow-ups from it. This resulted in a series of identical black areas, each bearing a different title and the serial number of its creation. This lyrical-informational line of actions in the countryside could have been preceded by the records of private non-intervening actions by Karel Miler (b.1940; *Touch*, 1975; *Garbage*, 1975), which contributed to the formulation of Czech Action art in urban spaces (Srp 1997). For Miler, performances were a way out of the often confining possibilities of verbal expression. In his early works of the sixties, he focused on visual poetry, which he increasingly reduced and brought to urban exteriors. He was mainly interested in the relationships between selected elements, which he marked with his artistic gesture in a very short period of time.

During the seventies, other forms of conceptual expression were slowly making their way to this country from Western Europe. Manifestations of Body art began to appear in the Czech environment. Petr Štembera (b.1945) and Jan Mlčoch (b.1953) were among the most important representatives in their time. Štembera carried out very radical activities that verged on physical danger. His actions incorporated natural elements and extreme weather conditions (*Carrying the Stones*, 1971). In rural settings, Štembera either accentuated the already existing state of the natural environment, or enhanced it with a gesture. Later, he eliminated the material underlay that was readily available during his stays in the landscape and focused entirely on body art and the creative and communicative possibilities of his own Body. For him the body became a carrier of information, which he often demonstrated in physically demanding and existentially onerous performances. Around the mid-seventies, he started to give performances before audiences who expanded them with their reactions arising from their experience with the social and political situation.

Mlčoch's actions can also be seen as an extreme manifestation of Body art. During his action *Hanging - The Big Sleep* in 1974, for example, he was hanging by his hands and feet from silk ropes, blindfolded and with his ears plugged in an abandoned attic space. The main message

of the action was to draw attention to the humiliating approach of the government and political apparatus towards the individual, who often felt like an anonymous entity in the normalised society and without the chance to see, hear, and feel the actual reality.

Dalibor Chatrný's (b.1925) experiments with magnets and metal filings (*Magnet in the Mouth; Hand with a Magnet*, 1973) were also a specific version of Body art. The output of these experiments was a temporary sculpture on the artist's body. Body parts, mouth and arms, were chosen as symbols. Their functionality, altered by the artist, subliminally referred to powerlessness and the impossibility of free expression in a totalitarian society.

Jiří Kovanda (b.1953) began to perform his distinctive solo actions in the late seventies. Even though he currently ranks among our most renowned living artists abroad, he began as an outsider with inconspicuous actions in public spaces before a few invited spectators (thanks to them, the photo documentation has been preserved until the present day). The form and content of his actions were a spontaneous response to specific situations happening on the street; they involved the immediate interpretation and content transformation of found objects. Kovanda laid an emphasis on the communicative nature of the action, less so on the recording of intimate and temporary installations, for example *The Contact*, 1976 (Jeřábková 2010, 200, 203, 226).

In the eighties, another generation of action artists entered the Czech art scene (Birgus 2005, 247). This period encompasses the works of Tomáš Ruller (b.1957), Vladimír Havlík (b.1958), and the aforementioned Miloslav Sonny Halas, who loosely responded to the extreme individual achievements of their predecessors or, on the contrary, distinguished themselves from their work. Ruller's action *To Be or Not to Be*, 1979, was not only an attempt to return to pre-Christian religion, but particularly an attempt to expand the ability to understand reality directly (not intellectually). Even though his personal performances were seemingly humorous, Havlík opened up very serious themes that related to the censored normalisation society (*Score for the Face*, 1980; *Confrontation: Pain of a Tree and Pain of a Man*, 1981). A number of photographs of Halas's group actions have been preserved. In them, he often combined environmental and contemporary social themes, such as compulsory military service, as well as restricted movement and isolation from the totalitarian government. The photographs document the material outputs from the actions that no longer exist (a canvas covered with gravitational painting, an installation made of chairs from the happening *View to Another Country*, a wind direction measuring station, etc.).

Sonny Halas's artistic approach is directed to another group of artists. Unlike those who were purely action-oriented and focused primarily on the demonstration of authentic information and reduced the aesthetic aspect to a minimum, these only 'paid a short visit' to Action art. These artists, often sculptors, wanted to leave the studio for another, freer space. However, at the same time, they could not completely break free from the formal constraints of the traditional medium. They often oscillated between the personal concept and form. The interventions in the open air by the sculptor Hugo Demartini (1931-2010) were chronologically close to Milan Knížák's actions, for example; however, their intention was completely different. His Land art works from the late sixties had a very private and contemplative nature. At that time, the artist began to use the element of chance in his sculptural work. In addition to the interventions of his objects in the open landscape (*Actions in the Landscape*, 1968), he also created immediate and temporary structures from wooden poles by throwing them up in the air (*Demonstration in Space*, 1968, repeated in the gallery space on the occasion of his exhibition *Hugo Demartini. Action and transformation of geometric composition*, Topič Salon, Prague, July 5-4, 2008). Eva Kmentová (1928-1980) followed the same creative as, among others, the Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanovicz (1930-2017). Kmentová used impressions and plaster casts of her feet that were made during a private performance in her studio. They were briefly exhibited in the form of a one-day action as part of a happening that guided visitors through the public space of the Prague gallery under the title *Footprints* (Špála Gallery, Prague, March 17, 1970), photographed by Karel Kuklík (b.1937). There were also artists who did not embody their concepts in any definitive or durable material. Václav Cigler (b.1929), for example, took a very radical approach. He created a series of visual proposals for the remodelling of the landscape (*Landscape Returned to Nature*, 1965). He never intended to put his visions into practice; the projects themselves were meant to activate the viewer's mind. In the eighties, the sculptor Jan Ambrůz (b.1956) used a similar method. Also in this case, many of his concepts were never translated into a material medium as the artist's only intention was to provide instructions for the viewer.

All of these approaches were then very influential for Post-conceptual and Post-Action art after 1990. From the beginning of the nineties, the original phenomenon of Action art was increasingly popular among the younger generation. However, it took a different form, including the use of new technology and new forms of communication with the audience. In addition to the continuing interest in taut physicality and exploration of the limits of blasphemy, which we know from Václav Stratil's (b.1950) provocative actions of the early nineties, there appeared a new theme of the exploration of identity by Dita Pepe, as well as that

of gender issues by Lenka Klodová (b.1969). The spontaneity of former actions was often replaced by props and staging (Milena Dopitová, b.1963), combined with the desire to tell a story (Michal Pěchouček, b.1973). Barbora Klímová and František Kowolowski (b.1967) responded directly and artistically to the contemporary progressiveness of the Action art of the sixties and eighties, which younger artists often perceived as an antiquated form of art. Klímová brought the performances of five Czech performers from the seventies and eighties into the present under the title *Replaced*. Kowolowski primarily built on Jiří Kovanda's public-contact actions, by which he aimed to arouse others to take an active and creative approach to everyday reality in the public space.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the term 'Action art' only became generally used in the Czech environment at the beginning of this millennium thanks to the art historian Pavlína Morganová, who published a book of the same title about Czech Action art (Morganová 2014). In this book, she deals with the essence of all artistic 'action' activities such as happenings, Body art, performance, action in the landscape, intervention in the landscape, and many others. The emergence of a variety of artistic activities outside the galleries was mainly due to the contemporary popularity of Pop art in the USA and Western Europe. Pop Art unprecedentedly kick-started the art market and what is now referred to as the art business in the United States in the sixties. Some artists were disgusted by this development and wanted to return art to its original, or even magical, function. Therefore, artists left the galleries for alternative spaces, for the landscape. Action art has played a very important socially critical role in the Czech art environment. Actions were pioneered by the aforementioned Milan Knížák, whose now-famous action *A Walk in the New World (Demonstration for All the Senses)* was carried out as early as in 1964. Knížák, a member of the international group Fluxus, stayed in the United States from 1968 to 1970. Besides giving lectures at universities, he also carried out several actions there. He then initiated a number of actions at home, in communist Czechoslovakia.

This case study is based on the material available in the Olomouc collection of Action art. The collection started to form within the photographic fund in 1996 during the preparation of the project *Between Tradition and Experiment*, which included the works of progressive and conceptual artists on the Czech scene (but also partially in exile) until 1989 (Valoch 1997). The collection of action photography includes approximately three hundred items and is the third largest of its kind in the Czech Republic. Besides this one, it is only the Moravian Gallery in Brno and the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague that consistently deal with this segment. The collection also contains exceptional evidence of early collective and individual actions. The element of a dynamic

game, a free and joyful action, expanded the field of artistic avant-garde activities as early as in the forties. It was mainly the surrealistic ‘rampages’ by Václav Zykmond and his friends from the *Ra Group* (Rousová 2011, 254). Jiří Toman (1924-1972) carried out his private photographic games with the natural elements from the end of the fifties.

As artists themselves pointed out at the time of their creation, photographs were only a means of documentation for them and they usually did not consider them artistic. However, this is no longer the case today. The once revolutionary art that used to mock the art business has now become both a commodity and a valuable witness of the social and artistic atmosphere of its time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bands that played psychedelic rock. Their music was mainly inspired by the New York band *The Velvet Underground* and they became famous for their wild happenings on the stage. The bands were politically engaged and, thus, persecuted by the secret police. For more details see: <http://plastic-people.cz/historie-skupiny/1968-1970/>.

<sup>2</sup> Crusaders' School of Pure Humour without Jokes (established in 1968) was a loose association of artists whose games and attitudes flouted all sorts of taboos, ideas, conventions and disrupted the boundaries between everyday events. The non-political activities of the Crusaders' School thus responded to the condition of society. For the Crusaders and their friends, collective actions were a reliable defence against political persecution.

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Jan Mlčoch, *Zavěšení – Velký spánek* (Hanging – The Big Sleep), 1974  
Praha, 5 October 1974 (artist's statement):  
"I had myself hung by my arms and legs from silk ropes in a huge loft space. My eyes were covered with a black cloth and my ears plugged with wax plugs."



Eva Kmentová, photo by Karel Kuklík, *Foot Prints*, one-day exhibition at the Špála Gallery, 17 March 1970 (description by Polana Bregantová, 2018):  
“At the end of 1963 she acquired a studio in Žižkov which she called Doupě (The Den). She started to imprint body parts, pebbles, and pieces of wood into clay. She exhibited the casting of her feet at the Špála Gallery in Prague on 17 March 1970, as part of a one-day exhibition which she called *Foot Prints*.”



Petr Štembera, *Three Elements (Radiator, Glass, Putty, Body)*, Prague, 30 July 1977  
(artist's statement):  
"The action was to end (and did end) when one of the three elements (glass, glass putty, and my body) which were held tightly together got partially damaged or completely destroyed by the heat emitted from the radiator."

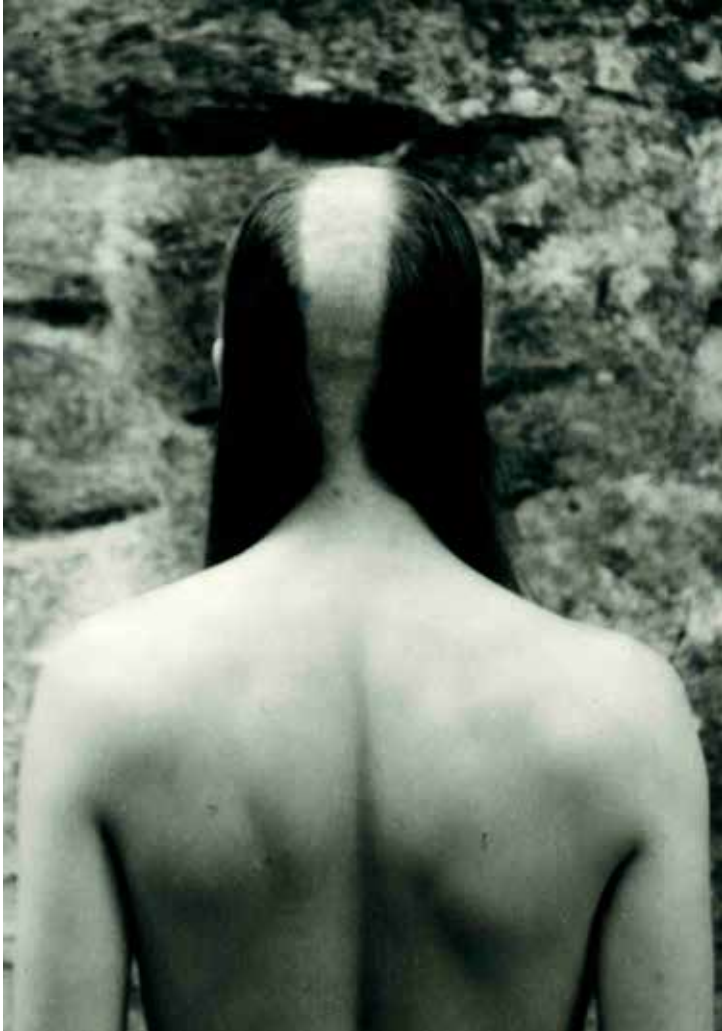


Zorka Ságlová, photo by Jan SágI, *Laying of Nappies at Sudoměř*, 1970.  
Sudoměř, a meadow about 10 kilometres east of Strakonice, South Bohemian Region, where the Battle of Sudoměř between Jan Žižka's Hussites and the royal army took place in 1420.  
Artist's statement: "On the site of the battlefield, we spread about 700 square-shaped pieces of white cloth on the grass in the shape of a large triangle and left them there."

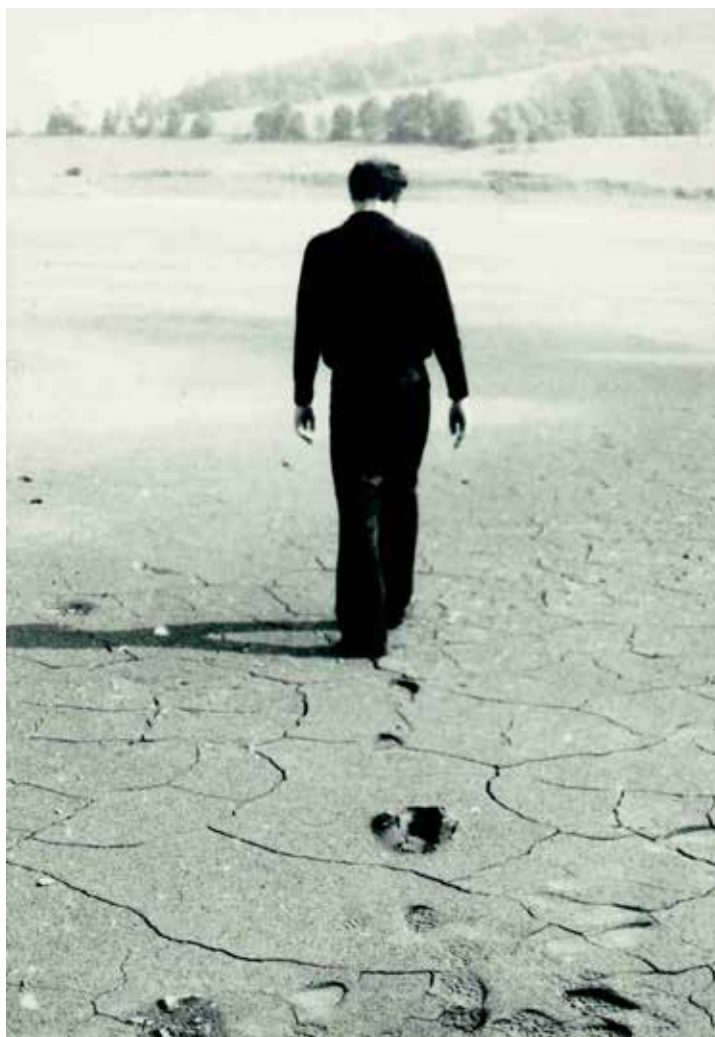


Hugo Demartini, photo by Jaroslav Franta, *Demonstration in Space*, 1968  
(description by Radim Kopáč, 2013):

“He stepped out of the studio into the landscape in the late 1960s. Under the open sky, he indulged in the complete opposite of his previous work. Under the umbrella of Land art, Action art, and Conceptualism, he experimented with chance, among other things, also in the sense of the popular game Mikado.”



Tomáš Ruller, *To Be or Not to Be*, 1979 (description by Igor Zhoř, 1992):  
“He is coming out of a cave in the Moravian Karst, clean-shaven (a sign of voluntary sacrifice) and with one half of his body painted white and the other black (symbolic unification of opposites). During the action, he paints and observes elementary geometric patterns (contemplation exercise), lights a fire (contact with the elements), and bathes in a stream (cleansing, saying goodbye to the past). This is not just a return to religion; this is an attempt to expand cognitive processes, an immediate, extra-rational penetration to what lies behind the phenomena. There is an effort to acquire a fuller and more diversified consciousness of life, including obscure, half-hidden, and mysterious things. This is about knowledge and its relativity; what we see is just the tips of icebergs rising above the surface of consciousness.”



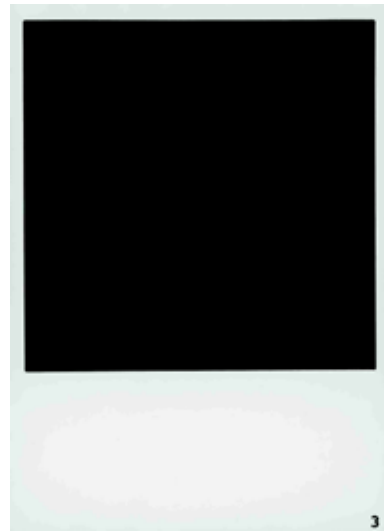
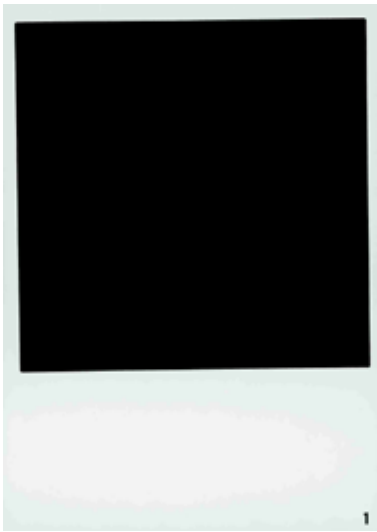
Karel Adamus, *Tribute to Footsteps I*, record of the action, 7 September 1973, Třinec-Lyžbice u Olzy (description by Monika Doležalová, 2010):

“In the action *Tribute to Footsteps II* (1973), Karel Adamus walked on the bottom of a drained lake. Thus, he left his bootprints on the ground surface, which is reminiscent of the coloured letters he had previously left behind by walking in his visual poetry. The photographs evoke the feeling of anxiousness of an individual who is lost in the world; however, they also evoke the feeling of freedom which grows stronger as the actor moves further away in space.”



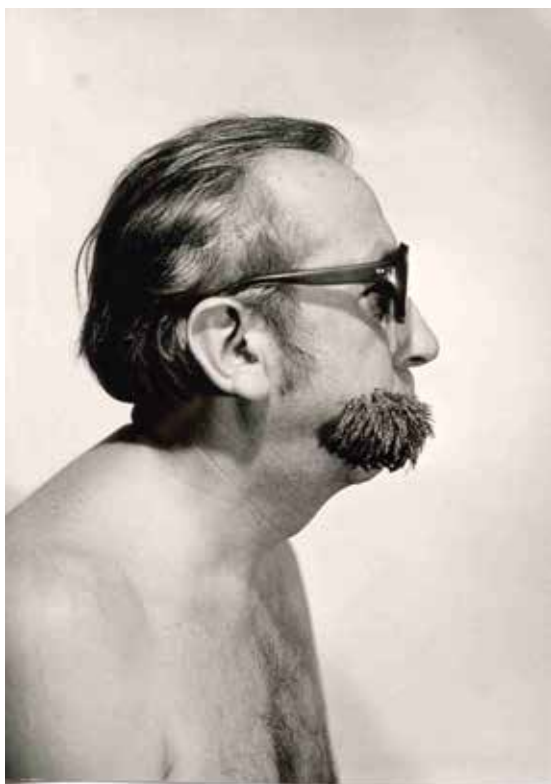


Jiří Valoch, *Untitled (Memory)*, first half of the 1970s (description after <https://fotografmagazine.cz/magazine/obraz-a-text/profil/jiri-valoch/>):  
“Valoch’s world is a reflection of language, including its figurative, semantic, and relational connections. He is primarily interested in working in a multifaceted way, using the language of geometry, visual and conceptual poetry, graphic music, sound poetry, conceptual and post-conceptual photography, installations (textual and interventional), actions, and interventions in nature. These forms of expression emerged, became widely used in art, and upset the existing artistic categories mainly after 1945.”



Marian Palla, photo by Marie Kratochvílová, *Drums; Love*, 1977 (description by Štěpánka Bielešová, 2022):

“During his compulsory basic military service, Palla took several shots in total darkness to capture both the objects and his feelings. He mailed the negative film to his friend, Marie Kratochvílová, with instructions on how to process the images into their final form.”



Dalibor Chatrný, photo by Marie Kratochvílová, *Actions with a Magnet*, 1973  
(description after <http://huntkastner.com/artists/dalibor-chatrny/curriculum-vitae/>):  
“...he began to make photographs in which he experimented with magnets and iron filings (*Magnet in the Mouth*, 1973) in order to document his radical research into the organic behaviour of technical materials and their possible symbiosis with various parts of the human body.”



Jiří Kovanda, photo by Pavel Tuč, 19 November 1976, Prague, Václavské náměstí  
(description by Jiří Ševčík):

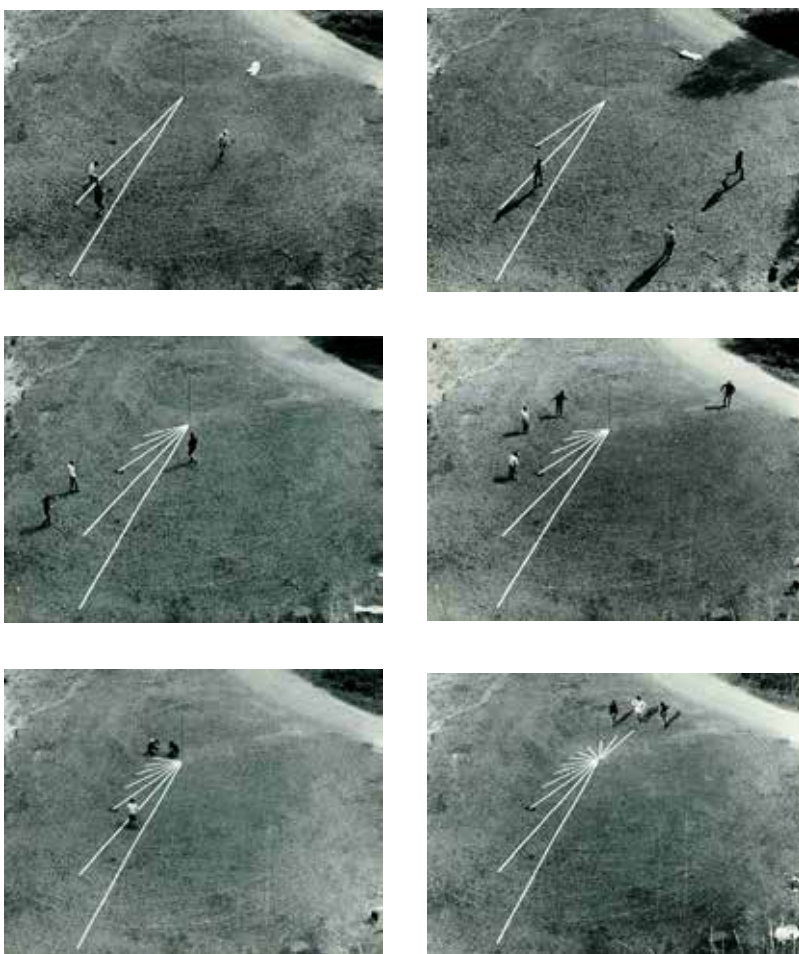
“Jiří Kovanda’s minimalist actions and interventions in the 1970s were often so subtle that they were almost imperceptible. There is a certain feel of romanticism in his artistic gestures that could have been stimulating during the depressing 1970s as it contrasted with many traumatic and politically motivated performances.”



Milan Knížák, *Demonstration for All Senses*, 1964

Milan Knížák, *Aktual*, 1968 (description by Jiří Valoch, 1994):

“At that time, however, the term performance was just beginning to catch on in our country; people often talked about Body art and actions”... The artist’s physical presence was also important for actions that were dramatic in nature; extreme situations could then be thematised and the artist’s physical capabilities used “to the full possible extent”. The artist’s presence was also essential for actions and interventions that previously had the form of ritualised activity or a ritual effect. In Milan Knížák’s work, the ritualistic nature and the resulting connection with other cultural environments manifested itself directly in the concept of the artist as a shaman, in a number of related objects, but also in the highly ritualised way of dressing and interventions into one’s own or someone else’s body.”



Eugen Brikcius, *Sundial*, 1970, (description by Štěpánka Bielešzová, 2019):  
“He performed the Land art action *Sundial* in cooperation with his friends Helena Wilson and the director Rudolf Němec in 1970 near the town of Roztoky. The artist was inspired to create the work earlier: during his detention in a cell in Konviktská Street in Prague in which he was being held for another artistic action in June 1967. The cell was situated in a basement and had a high window. The sun’s rays shone into the cell through the window and its shadow was moving on the opposite wall. This was how the concept of the *Sundial* came to life.”



Vladimír Havlík, photo by Radek Horáček, *Score for a Face*, 1980, (artist's statement, 2007):

"I painted five horizontal lines on my face with black ink which together formed a score. I was changing the appearance of the score by mimic movements."



Miloslav Sonny Halas, *Colour Trace of Gravity*, 1971, (description by Jiří Valoch, 1994):

“Miloslav Sonny Halas, a solo artist from Brno, brought humour to Action art: he responded paradoxically to the political circumstances (*View to the West* - with two chairs installed on a hill near the border) and natural facts (in his gravitational series, he anchored trees, buildings, etc. just in case the earth were to lose gravity); however, he also used these phenomena as sources of purely visual experiences.”





Václav Stratil, *Monastic Patient*, 1991–1994 photo performance,  
black and white photography, 1230×1080 mm, Muzeum umění Olomouc

In an extensive cycle the *Monastic Patient*, Stratil's constant preoccupation with play with his own photographed image is rooted. What is more, it is his first use of public photo lab. In black and white pictures he parades disguised with props. He creates raw images of spiritual uproot, physical asceticism and contemplation, spuriously mocked by humor and unobliterating fact that this is all performance.  
<http://intermedia.ffa.vutbr.cz/reholni-pacient>



Lenka Klodová, *Život s handicapem*, colour photograph, 303×458 mm, Museum of Art Olomouc

"Klodová ...znázorňuje ženu, sebe samu, jako ideální stvoření, v praktickém životě zcela nepoužitelné. S ploutví se nedá chodit, bez rukou prádlo nepověsíme."

"Klodová ...depicts a woman, herself, as an ideal creature, completely useless in practical life. You can't walk with fins, you can't hang clothes without hands."

Kateřina Černá, "Žena hlavu nepotřebuje." (A woman does not need a head), *Art Antiques*, 10/2008. <https://www.artantiques.cz/zena-hlavu-nepotrebuje>





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THE ETHICS  
OF ABSTRACTION –  
UN-OFFICIAL  
AVANT-GARDE  
ARTIST GROUPS  
IN HUNGARY  
BETWEEN  
1945 AND 1989

This article examines the specific status and importance of abstract art in Hungary through the context, activity, and impact of the Hungarian avant-garde artist groups mainly focused on the medium of painting between 1945 and 1989. Compared to some neighbouring countries such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, or Poland, abstract art in Hungary had a precarious position and was subjected to strict censorship, especially in the fifties and sixties. Through the analysis of their theoretical and stylistic antecedents going back to the European School (1945-1948) and the Group of Abstract Artists (1946-1948), the activity of the Zugló Circle (1958-1968), and its resonance in the new painterly wave of the eighties known as the New Sensibility (1981-1988), the article aims to highlight the manner in which abstract art translated into an ethical position that faced the official cultural politics and aesthetical ideology of Socialist Realism. The axis marked out by the groups' respective visual and theoretical approaches reveals a similar endeavour: the will to reconnect with Hungarian abstract, avant-garde, constructivist, visual traditions, and their intellectual heritage, while also attempting to re-channel Hungarian – un-official – contemporary art in the discourse and trend of international abstraction.

Although the chronological framework considered in this paper spans almost forty-five years, the aesthetical implications of abstraction as opposed to Socialist Realism are outlined more precisely in three shorter periods. Between 1945 and 1956, i.e., from the end of World War II to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, aesthetical ideological debates and power games opposing abstraction and realism in painting were of pivotal importance for the art scene. In the years from 1956 to 1969, marking the interval between the Hungarian Revolution and the Conceptual Turn of the seventies, abstraction experienced a renewal in the painterly activity of artists' groups and exhibition collectives such as the Zugló Circle, the Iparterv Generation, or the Pécs Workshop, among others. After the conceptual seventies, the comeback of painting that unfolded internationally also defined the artistic agenda in Hungary, especially within the series of exhibitions entitled the New Sensibility (1981-1987), some participants of which chose to return to the unresolved abstract formal questions from the sixties, rather than to open to the new prevailing figuration.

## 1945-1956: Aesthetical, Theoretical, and Ideological Debates Between Abstraction and Realism in Painting from the War to the Revolution

Between 1945 and 1948, a brief period of artistic freedom flourished in Hungary through the activity of the European School (1945-1948) and the Group of Abstract Artists (1946-1948), as well as thanks to the theories of new abstraction formulated by Béla Hamvas (1897-1968) thinker, philosopher, and writer who pointed out how mankind lost the original sense of being, and Ernő Kállai (1890-1954) art historian, art writer, and critic whose writings on avant-garde movements were published in Lajos Kassák's review *MA*. The European School, founded by Imre Pán, Árpád Mezei, Pál Kiss, Ernő Kállai, and Lajos Kassák, aimed to create an international spirit modelled on the School of Paris (*École de Paris*), a loose community of particularly non-French artists who worked in Paris between 1900 and 1940, influenced by Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism without strictly belonging to any avant-garde movement.

The Group of Abstract Artists formed simultaneously with the European School, but gradually distanced itself gathering abstract non-figurative artists. Its main theoretician was Ernő Kállai who also founded the Gallery to the World's Four Quarters, where six exhibitions of non-figurative art took place over six months, between February and June 1947. According to Kállai, the legitimacy of abstraction resides in that abstract works represent true, hidden, microscopic, or macroscopic forms of nature and are, therefore, as important as natural sciences. In the exhibition entitled *The New Worldview (Új világkép, 1947)*, details of natural forms – such as a sea snail, the inner structure of a cabbage, or a close-up on crystals – were juxtaposed with the abstract paintings of Dezső Korniss, Tihamér Gyarmathy, and Ferenc Martyn, among others, with the intention to illustrate this theory.

Despite the years of artistic freedom, the definition of realism as an art form addressing people gradually unfolded. While realism positioned itself against avant-garde abstract art, considered by the socialist regime as bourgeois, decadent, and elitist, the debate between realism and abstraction pivoted around the following three major theories and texts: *The Hidden Face of Nature (A természet rejtett arca, 1947)* by Ernő Kállai drew a parallel between natural sciences and abstraction, emphasising an obvious relation between art and technology (Botar 1983); *Revolution in Art: Abstraction and Surrealism in Hungary (Forradalom a művészetben:*

*absztrakció és szürrealizmus Magyarországon*, 1947) by the philosopher Béla Hamvas and the art historian Katalin Kemény, which unveiled a mystical approach of art and envisioned Surrealism and abstraction as channels allowing the collective experience of humanity, as in the art of archaic times; finally, in *Hungarian Theories of Abstract Art* (1947), the philosopher and aesthetical ideologist György Lukács officially attacked and condemned the positions of Ernő Kállai, Béla Hamvas, and Katalin Kemény, herewith banning them from the artistic discourse for the years to come (Lukács 1947, 715–727).

As a result of that debate, a clear and systematic restructuring of cultural life based on the Soviet model took place between 1948 and 1956, and a well-oiled introduction of Socialist Realism occurred through a series of exhibitions and events defining the ideological direction of art: *Exhibition of Communist Artists (Kommunista képzőművészek kiállítása*, 1948), *Towards Communal Art (A közösségi művészet felé*, 1948), *Soviet Painting (Szovjet festőművészet*, 1949), and *First Exhibition of Hungarian Fine Arts (Első Magyar Képzőművészeti Kiállítás*, 1950), as well as the erection of Stalin's statue in Budapest in 1951 by Sándor Mikus following a competition between invited artists, and determined the direction of the art scene until 1956. After Stalin's death in 1953, the post-Stalinist era unfolding between 1953 and 1956, and the dramatic crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by the Soviet army in 1956, a new wind blew in abstract painting again.

The trauma of the Soviet repression of 1956 found expression in numerous fields, abstract art included. One of its most notable examples is Lajos Kassák's and Imre Pán's volume of historical importance entitled *Isms, the History of Modern Artistic Movements (Izmusok - A modern művészeti irányok története*, 1956). The authors' intention was to demonstrate to the Hungarian public, generally reluctant to accept modernism, that the avant-garde movements left a meaningful heritage and inerasable traces in Hungarian culture, basing their argumentation on documentation, analysis, and chronology. The volume was deemed to be a 'literary politics problem' and could only be published a decade and a half later in an abridged, censored version. Another event that attempted to prove that artistic production was thriving despite the domination of Socialist Realism was the *Spring Exhibition (Tavaszi Tárlat*, 1957) organised at Műcsarnok (The Budapest Hall of Art). In the so-called 'abstract room,' labelled so with a critical undertone, Tihamér Gyarmathy's cosmic composition, a geometric non-figurative painting by Ferenc Martyn and Dezső Korniss, a Fauve-like landscape by Jenő Gadányi, as well as organic abstract sculptures by Ibolya Lossonczy and Lajos Barta, were presented. Although the jury of the exhibition comprised the abstract artist Tihamér Gyarmathy, the catalogue clearly



stated that despite giving space to abstract and non-figurative artworks unseen by the public for a long time due to administrative reasons, it did not agree with such visual methods.

The visitors can see works that, for long years, remained hidden from them for administrative reasons. The public can ascertain that the new cultural policy boldly gave space to our artists without petty concerns, renouncing the false appearance of the unity of fine arts. Of course, this doesn't mean we agree with everything. We make no secret of the fact that we primarily support realist endeavours - these artists who reflect on our emerging socialist social order in the most professional way and at the highest level of their art (Makrisz 1957, 4-5).

In 1961, the debate opposing modernism to realism was revived in an article by art historian Lajos Németh entitled *Notes on the Situation of our Fine Arts (Megjegyzések képzőművészetünk helyzetéről)*, in which he claimed the importance of modern art movements. The text, published in the review *Új Írás*, generated an eponymous debate (known as the *Új írás debate*) that continued for more than a year on the pages of the review, in which Lajos Németh confronted his progressive views with the ones of the defendants of the official cultural politics and Socialist Realism, Nóra Aradi (1924-2001) and Péter Rényi (1920-2002). Aradi lost her position to György Aczél, the principal ideologist of Hungarian cultural politics (see: Glossary of Terms, “Three T system” entry). Another outcome of this debate was that Aradi, as did Németh, declared the legitimacy of abstraction in a built environment. Moreover, the importance and impact of the debate did not lie only in its direct content. It allowed, through the figure of Németh, one of the few art historians who still dared to raise their voices in favour of current trends in art and the gradual emancipation of the young Hungarian art scene, young theoreticians and art critics to become aware of the real questions that artists were asking themselves and that officials were quick to deny, attack, refute, and sanction.

## 1956-1969: The Renewal of Abstract Painting Between the Revolution and the Conceptual Turn – the Abstract Activity of the Zugló Circle, the Iparterv Generation, and the Pécs Workshop

The Zugló Circle, formed in 1958, was composed of young abstract painters and sculptors, some of whom were self-taught, while others pursued academic studies. They did not formulate any manifesto or written programme but had a clearly expressed objective to catch up with both international art movements and the artistic and intellectual heritage of the Hungarian avant-garde. Working in a self-taught way, this informal community comprised the artists Imre Bak, Tibor Csiky, Sándor Csutoros, Pál Deim, János Fajó, Tamás Hencze, Endre Hortobágyi, István Nádler, and Sándor Molnár, senior member, initiator, and the driving force of the group. Their working method as well as their artistic intention relied respectively on three main pillars: gathering information, analysing it, and putting it in practice on the one hand; reconnecting with the first generation avant-garde artists such as Lajos Kassák and Dezső Korniss on the other; and, finally, compensating for the lack of information they had suffered during their studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, and to re-channel their artistic production in the international circulation.

For young artists, the European School served as an intellectual model through the figure of the philosopher Béla Hamvas, whom Sándor Molnár knew personally and who regularly attended young artists' meetings. The first artistic impulse directing their practice was French lyrical abstraction, especially paintings by Jean Bazaine, Alfred Manessier, and Maurice Estève. Considering their participation in the historic exhibition *Twenty Young Painters of French Tradition (Vingt jeunes peintres de tradition française, 1941)*, which was the first manifestation of the young French avant-garde that openly opposed Nazi ideology and its labelling of modern art as 'degenerate,' this artistic and ethical affiliation had a substantial political dimension. The French orientation was also strengthened by the French Institute in Budapest that hosted underground circles and progressive events that would have been banned or censored in official Hungarian venues.

In 1963, a group composed of young artists in their last university year organised at the KISZ Klub (Club of the Union of Communist Youth) of the Fine Arts Academy in Budapest an exhibition of their most recent works that showed the results of their secret research on abstraction and contemporary figuration. The private event ended in an unexpected scandal, the show was closed immediately due to its "determined formal

intention,” as István Nádler stated (Nagy 1986, 25), and the students almost expelled from university. This closed out any possibility for the young artists to exhibit at official venues for years to come. Subsequently, still motivated by the aim to make up for the delay in art caused by the official aesthetical ideology, the Zugló Circle turned towards German and American abstract geometric art, especially hard edge and shaped canvas. Considering the Hungarian constructivist traditions, those geometric influences found their way into their practice more naturally than organic or lyrical abstraction. Reconnection with Hungarian folk art was also a characteristic trait of this period thanks to philosopher Béla Hamvas' tautological thought, especially regarding archaic cultures. It was through the lens of geometry and its symbolic, mythical value that Imre Bak and István Nádler crystallised different motifs of Hungarian folk art, as well as its logical and semiotic structures.

Beyond Shaped Canvas and Hard Edge, Op art also made its appearance in some artists' production which allows mentioning the pivotal role of Victor Vasarely in the Hungarian cultural politics. Not only did his visual influence leave a deep mark on young artists, such as Tamás Hencze or, later, on the Pécs Workshop (1968-1980) composed of Ferenc Ficzek, Károly Hopp-Halász, Károly Kismányoky, Sándor Pinczehelyi and Kálmán Szijártó, together with Lajos Szelényi and the art historian Tamás Aknai at the very beginning, but also his cultural diplomatic role in Paris through the Galerie Denise René had a tangible impact in Budapest and Pécs. Vasarely's concrete cultural diplomatic influence unfolded in 1966 which was a decisive year for the Hungarian art scene. Between the *Spring Exhibition* in 1957 and 1966, no exhibition could open without a jury reviewing artworks and regularly censoring them. Lajos Kassák himself was not granted a visa by the Hungarian authorities to travel to Paris for his solo exhibition at the Galerie Denise René in 1961, initiated by Victor Vasarely. In 1965, his solo exhibition organised by his disciple János Fajó in Budapest was immediately closed by the Fine Arts Lectorate. Vasarely, a devoted admirer of Lajos Kassák, was very much conscious of his crucial position for the Hungarian cultural authorities. Accordingly, he declared that he would not contribute to the development of the French-Hungarian cultural diplomatic relations in any manner any further, if there were no artistic freedom in Hungary, if Lajos Kassák were not allowed to exhibit, and if a Kassák museum were not created.

As early as the beginning of 1966, certain members of the Zugló Circle such as Imre Bak, Pál Deim, Endre Hortobágyi, Sándor Molnár, and István Nádler, among others, attempted to re-establish the relationship with the official cultural politics. They organised an exhibition close to the Budapest airport, on the premises of the Communist Youth. The event entitled *Road - New Endeavours 1966 (Út - Új törekvések 1966)*

had a clearly defined goal to present their new artistic productions but was censored by the jury of the Fine Arts Lectorate that formed at the last minute. Nevertheless, the importance of this event was not left unnoticed. As the art historian Gábor Pap wrote: „*Út '66* (...) is of pioneering importance as it attempts to provide information about the barely known orientation of actual art, even if shortly and in the given frame” (Pap 1966).

The event also paved the way for the historical exhibition *Stúdió '66*, organised a short time later at the Ernst Museum. *Stúdió '66*, which symbolically commemorated the ten years of the Hungarian Revolution, was the first exhibition to have opened without the approval of a jury since the *Spring Exhibition* of 1957, presenting abstract artworks in several rooms. Although *Stúdió '67*, on the other hand, was censored before its opening, both events paved the way for the two *Iparterv* exhibitions of 1968 and 1969, mistakenly considered to be the great outburst of the neo-avant-garde generation.

The *Iparterv* exhibition of 1968, organised by the young art historian Péter Sinkovits in the building of the eponymous architectural company, gathered very diverse stylistic attempts to present international artistic trends – from hard edge painting through Pop art to Fluxus – and revealed a creative *élan* motivated and influenced by documenta IV in Kassel happening earlier that year. Eleven young artists took part in the first edition, namely Krisztián Frey, György Jovánovics, Ilona Keserü, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, Ludmil Siskov, Endre Tót, as well as the Zugló Circle members: Imre Bak, Tamás Hencze, Sándor Molnár, and István Nádler. In Péter Sinkovits' words: “The exhibition (...) signals tendencies which are connected to the best avant-garde trends all over the world. They attempt to undertake the task of keeping pace (...) They are *tied* to tendencies labelled by collective expressions like Pop art, Informel, new abstract, illusionist abstraction, or abstract impressionism” (Sinkovits 1980).

Indeed, press articles highlighted the importance of the event in the cultural political context of the time, but the artists' reflections on the international trends attracted criticism: “Op art, art Informel, new abstraction, abstract impressionism were all represented at the exhibition, both produced by epigones and the ones who introduced individual invention into them” (Németh 1969).

The first *Iparterv* event was succeeded by *Szürenon*, an exhibition organised in 1969 by the artist Attila Csáji at the Lajos Kassák House of Culture in Budapest. The title of the show referred to the French ‘sur et non,’ elevation and negation as the modality for independent visual research, but also to Surrealism and its refusal, as well as to non-figuration. The exhibition, featuring the works by Gyula Bocz, Attila Csáji, Sándor

Csutoros, István Haraszty, László Haris, István Ilyés, Gábor Karáson, Ferenc Lantos, Oszkár Papp, Gyula Pauer, Péter Prutkay, Péter Türk, and Pál Veress, was inaugurated by László Beke. Shortly after the opening of *Szürenon*, the second *Iparterv* exhibition, presenting four more artists, András Baranyay, János Major, László Méhes, and Tamás Szentjóby, addressed new tendencies. The neo-avant-garde artists introduced at the first and second *Iparterv* exhibitions formed no homogeneous group, however – the shows equally represented the latest trends both in abstract and figurative art. In 1969 and 1970, the Hungarian avant-garde composed of the *Iparterv* and *Szürenon* groups was able to exhibit in Poland, in Poznań and Szczecin, but was banned in Hungary. A year later, in 1970, the *R* exhibition presented the works by twenty-six painters, sculptors, and graphic designers remained available for three days, from December 14-17, 1970. (László Beke authored the foreword to the catalogue <https://artpool.hu/kontextus/eset/e701214.html>). The event was not authorised by the official bodies, but István Solymár, the then deputy director of the Hungarian National Gallery, agreed to inaugurate the exhibition. Thanks to his benevolent intervention, the exhibition acquired a certain legitimacy and gave hope for a relaxation – even temporary – regarding the official cultural policy. The young artists whose development included the phases of supernaturalism and Pop art, and who at that time turned to photorealism (László Lakner, László Méhes, and György Jovánovics), the painters of the Zugló Circle who turned towards Minimal art (Imre Bak, István Nádler, Tamás Hencze), and others who chose even more progressive paths, establishing a relationship between the work and the recipient (Tamás Szentjóby), and confronting the traditional genres, interpretations, or techniques, and even denying the notion of art (Miklós Erdély), all took part in the exhibition alongside the *Szürenon* group, even though the latter represented other artistic priorities. The exceptional character of this exhibition resided not only in a simultaneous presentation of Hungarian trends, but also in the fact, so far unthinkable, that an event of such a scale could be organised both on an artist's personal initiative – in this case Attila Csáji's – and without the inclusion of official art.

## 1980-1989: The Comeback of Painting after Conceptual Art and Its Unresolved Formal Questions from the Sixties – the Hungarian New Sensibility Between *Zeitgeist* and Introspection

After the conceptual decade of the seventies, 1980 marked a general return to painting on the Hungarian art scene inspired by international events, such as the *Heftige Malerei* exhibition at Haus AM Waldsee in Berlin, or the consecration of Italian *Transavanguardia* by Achille Bonito Oliva at the Venice Biennale. These exhibitions were followed by *A New Spirit in Painting* (Royal Academy, London, 1981) and *Zeitgeist* (Bauhaus, Weimar, 1982). Both exhibitions advocated figuration, manual technique, the pleasure of making a painting at the time of its creation that were lost in Conceptual art.

Ákos Birkás, one of the main protagonists of the conceptual scene of the seventies, started to paint in 1980, while István Nádler operated a gestural turn inspired by contemporary music. In 1980, a reinterpreted *Iparterv* exhibition was organised by the art historian Lóránd Hegyi together with Péter Sinkovits and László Beke, with the participation of the same artists as in the first edition, presenting their new works. At the end of the seventies, the recognition of the avant-garde's failure occurred in parallel with the rediscovery of painterly gesturality and its existential dimension. In 1981, one year before Ákos Birkás' speeches given at the Rabinec Gallery in which he analysed the reasons for the Hungarian avant-garde's failure, Miklós Erdély, another central protagonist of the progressive art scene, declared in his *Optimistic Conference* that: "[Concept art] is a dismal period, (...) outdated because it excessively gave up the direct, total sensorial effect to which art has always reached in its communication. Art is looking again for visual and sensorial effects" (Beke 1985, 143-149). The Rabinec Common Studio (Rabinec Közös Műterem), also known as Rabinext, operated for a short time, from 1982 to 1983, and was founded by Zsuzsa Simon, Ákos Birkás, Károly Kelemen, and András Koncz, with other members joining later. Its activity was influenced by the new painting trends (New Sensibility, radical eclecticism, etc.) that appeared in the early eighties, the prominence of figuration, as well as its expression, and personal contents. Its intention was to recognize the exhaustion of the Hungarian constructivist avant-garde and replace it with modern trends and works that better reflected individuality. Erdély himself renounced the ascetism of Conceptual art and began to make paintings with bitumen and drawings with indigo in 1980. In 1982, Birkás arrived at the same conclusion as Erdély, but also pointed out the

gap between the actual disappearance of the avant-garde in Hungary and the awareness of this fact in the artistic circles. He also explained the contextual difference between the Western and Hungarian avant-garde:

In the West, avant-garde ceased to be because its demands were fulfilled. Here – I don't want to say in Eastern Europe – it ceased to be because its demands were not fulfilled. Because they were fulfilled – worldwide, in the West – the demanding attitude, the attitude of the avant-garde itself lost its meaning. Considering that, here, they were not even fulfilled to a minimal level, the attitude of the avant-garde did not develop and was not challenged. It did not reach its utopistic level from which the thing becomes really fascinating when utopia is challenged (Birkás 1983, 31).

In that sense, according to Birkás, the Hungarian New Sensibility, the comeback and echo of the sixties painting was born from the recognition of a failure. The return to painting was therefore obvious and necessary. The theory imported and introduced into the domestic context by the art historian Lóránd Hegyi following Achille Bonito Oliva's writings, according to which the comeback of painting occurred as a reaction to the ascetic nature and sensorial void of Conceptual art, could not be applied as such to the Hungarian situation. Unlike the *Neue Wilde*, the *Hefitge Malerei*, and the *Transavanguardia*, the fact that the New Sensibility gathered different generations (firstly, Imre Bak, István Nádler, and Tamás Hencze who were already active in the sixties; secondly, artists like Birkás, and Károly Kelemen, who, despite being a few years younger, were also known for their happenings and conceptual activity; and, thirdly, the youngest ones like László Fehér, who developed a painterly activity from the start) was a paradox in itself, as the art of a previous generation is usually challenged by a homogeneously younger group of artists. The New Sensibility exhibitions were certainly controversial, as they raised a number of questions: beyond the stylistic heterogeneity of the group, the role of the curator as a cultural diplomat came to the fore in the figure of Hegyi; the doors to foreign representation suddenly opened – the Hungarian pavilions at the Venice Biennale in 1986, 1988, and 1990 – and propelled artists who could barely exhibit in the previous decades into official and international recognition with no transition. As Piotr Piotrowski points it out:

The [artistic] situation in Hungary was the most “normal”. This “normality” had a very different impact on the artists' careers compared to the situation in 1970s, when Hungarian artists, functioning in opposition to the official institutional structures,

attempted to establish contact with the global culture of the neo-avant-garde. In 1980s, those same institutions were looking for artists who already had had contacts with the international scene of neo-expressionism to recruit them in order to advertise the changes taking place in the country (Piotrowski 2009, 403-407).

This explains why the artists associated with neo-expressionism, such as Birkás, Károly Kelemen, and István Nádler, were chosen to represent Hungary at the 1986 Venice Biennale – a connection with the international art scene, a progressive attitude, and a firm intention to show the liberal character of the regime that marked a U-turn in its cultural politics. The fact that in Hungary, as opposed to Czechoslovakia, or Poland, those artists switched from a neo-avant-garde attitude to a neo-expressionist position that basically confronted their own previous period highlights the lack of a generational shift and questions ‘the extent to which the critique of neo-avant-garde could be considered under those conditions to be ‘genuine’’, as well.

As a result of this schismatic situation, the production of the Hungarian New Sensibility was both abstract and figurative. The artists of the older generation, such as István Nádler, Tamás Hencze, Imre Bak, or Ákos Birkás, returned to the formal problems they had been exploring already in the sixties, albeit with a different approach – István Nádler with a calligraphic, gestural content transcending the the Suprematist and geometric heritage, Tamás Hencze with a mimicking re-enactment of his dynamic works of the sixties through a pseudo-gesture, and Imre Bak with a way to construct an image that builds on the architectural order and perspective. Birkás also went back to expressive, at first grotesque, ‘bad,’ then sensual painting as the quintessence of his space of creation, while the younger artists Károly Kelemen and László Fehér clearly oriented their practice towards re-legitimising figurative painting against the formal questions of geometric abstraction that rooted in the constructivist visual traditions of the interwar period. This is especially the case of Károly Kelemen’s series of works focusing on the motif of a teddybear/human figure struggling with geometric forms, such as *Promeheus-Teddy* (*Prométheus Teddy*, 1986), *Sick Source* (*Beteg forrás*, 1986), or *Man with a Cube* (*Férfi kockával*, 1987). This objective also came with another essential aspect which was to liberate it from the appropriation of figuration by Socialist Realism.

Echoing the unstable and spasmodic political agenda of the Hungarian socialism, the status of abstract painting in the period spanning from 1945 to 1990 certainly fluctuated between unequivocal censorship and quasi-acceptance. Thanks to their ethical stance that opposed the prevalent uniformization of style, artists working in the field of abstract



painting contributed to the restoration of its legitimacy as a form of visual, intellectual, and conceptual freedom, as a link between Hungarian and European art, and as a language understood internationally that challenged the control exerted by authorities.

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**illustrations®**



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1. Ferenc Martyn, *Old Tools* [*Régi szerszámok*], 1947, oil on canvas, 62 x 47 cm  
Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs

2. Endre Rozsda, *Composition* [*Kompozíció*], 1945, oil on canvas, 65,5 x 46 cm  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

3. Dezső Korniss, *With a Kite* [*Sárkányos*], 1947, oil on canvas, 95 x 115 cm  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

4. Tihámér Gyarmathy, *Evening* [*Este*], 1947, oil on cardboard, 47,5 x 67,5 cm  
Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs

5. Sándor Molnár, *Composition* [*Kompozíció*], 1964, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm  
Jáky Collection, Budapest

6. Imre Bak, *Structure III* [*Struktúra III*], 1965, oil on canvas, 151 x 132 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and acb Gallery, Budapest



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7. Endre Hortobágyi, *Night [Éj]*, 1965, oil on canvas, 120 x 85 cm. First Hungarian Visual Collection, Tapolca-Diszel. Courtesy of the artist's estate

8. János Fajó, *Diagonal asymmetry [Átlós aszimmetria]*, 1966, oil on canvas, 73 x 61,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist's estate



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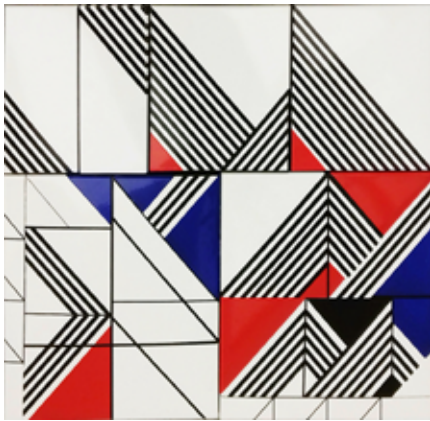
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9. Imre Bak, *Stripes No. 1* [*Sávok I*], 1968, acrylic on canvas, 135 x 240 cm. Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest. Photo by József Rosta / Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of the artist's estate

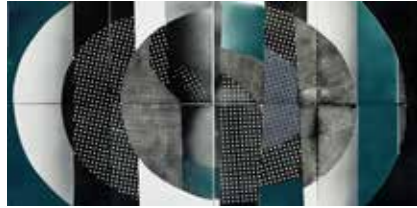
10. István Nádler, *Untitled I* [*Cím nélkül I*], 1968, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Kisterem Gallery, Budapest

11. Imre Bak, *Form I* [*Alakzat I*], 1969, oil on fibre board, 117 x 240 cm  
 Private collection. Courtesy of the artist's estate

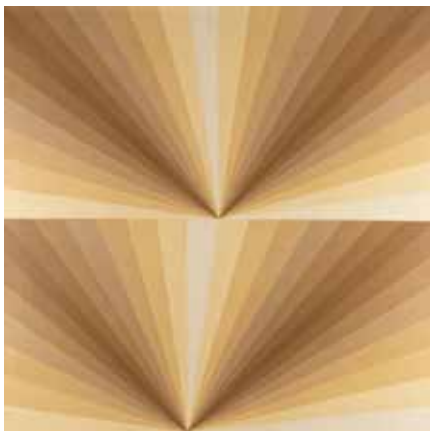
12. Tamás Hencze, *Dynamic Structure* [*Dinamikus struktúra*], 1968, oil on paper, 100 x 70 cm  
 Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



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13. Kálmán Szijártó, *Untitled [Cím nélkül]*, 1971, enameled steel plate, 75 x 90 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and acb Gallery, Budapest

14. Ferenc Ficzek, *Untitled [Cím nélkül]*, ca 1970, enameled steel plate, 90 x 180 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist's estate and the acb Gallery, Budapest

15. Károly Hopp-Halász, *Colour series IV (Gold diagonal) [Színes sorozat IV (Arany átló)]*,  
 1969, oil on fibre board, 137,5 x 137,5 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist's estate and the acb Gallery, Budapest

16. István Nádler, *Hommage à Malevich July 8 [Hommage à Malevics július 8]*, 1985, oil on  
 canvas, 202 x 149 cm. Hungarian National Gallery



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17. Tamás Hencze, *Transparent gesture* [*Transzparens gesztus*], 1985, oil on canvas, 250 x 100 cm  
Hungarian National Gallery

18. Imre Bak, *Quotes No. 1* [*Idézetek No. 1*], 1983, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and acb Gallery, Budapest

19. Ákos Birkás, *Rocky Slope* [*Köves domboldal*], 1982, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm  
Jáky Collection, Budapest



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20. Ákos Birkás, *Head 25* [*Fej 25*], 1987, oil on canvas, 206,3 x 126 cm  
Hungarian National Gallery

21. Károly Kelemen, *Sick Source* [*Beteg forrás*], 1986, oil on canvas, 320 x 140 cm  
Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest  
Photo by József Rosta / Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art  
Courtesy of the artist



# Zsóka LEPOSA

LÁ Art Museum in Hveragerði, South Iceland

CHANNELING  
IDEAS: INSTITUTIONAL  
BACKGROUND  
OF SEMI-OFFICIAL  
ART IN THE SIXTIES  
AND SEVENTIES

## Introduction

For better understanding of the terms, a brief insight in the cultural politics changes during the different eras of state socialism is offered.

After the defeat of the 1956 Revolution with Soviet intervention, the leader of the party (renamed as Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) became János Kádár who ran the country until 1988, the last year of state socialism. During the Kádár era (see: Glossary of Terms: 'Kádár era'), the Central Committee governed all areas of economy and culture according to the Soviet doctrine. The director of the cultural policy was György Aczél who became the leading politician in the field of culture of the time.

There is an inconsistent use of terms in the art field of that period. The term 'official art' vaguely overlaps with the field of art supported by the state. Commissions for public art, subsidised and approved by art committees, belong to the category of official art alongside big exhibitions in prestigious art spaces, such as the Hungarian National Gallery, the Kunsthalle Budapest, or smaller cultural centres in the countryside. Nevertheless, as it shall be demonstrated further, tolerated artists (see: Glossary of Terms: 'Three-T system') could get official public decoration commissions as well as take part in artists' workshops, even when banned from official exhibition spaces. The essay focuses on the subtle ways of transition that made it possible for abstract art to find its way from being banned to tolerated and – in some cases – even supported by the authorities in state socialism in Hungary.

## Cultural Politics Changes in the Approach to Abstract Art

The funding of artworks decorating public buildings was regulated by the so-called two-permille decree issued in 1954. According to this rule, two per mille of state construction project budgets had to be spent on the commission or acquisition of fine art (Decree No. 2006/1954 of the Hungarian People's Republic's Council of Ministers on "fine art in state constructions." *Határozatok Tára* [Repertory of Decrees], No. 3, 24th January 1954). The 1954 Decree had its precedents: Addendum to Part 7 of Spending Regulations issued by the National Planning Office (No. 2300-63/1952 [Tg. É. VI. 17]) prescribed that new buildings be decorated with

fine artworks for the cost of two permilles – but not more than half percent – of their budgets; the Decree confirmed this resolution (Horváth 2015)).<sup>1</sup> The institutional framework for selecting and commissioning artists was initially provided by the Fine Art Fund, then, from 1964, by the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts under the supervision of the Fine Art Department of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

In the ‘consolidation’ period that followed the rigid Stalinism of the early fifties and the harsh retaliations after the Revolution of 1956, Kádár first announced the slogan of the new ideology in 1961, which was widely known by November 1962: “Whoever is not against us is with us.” In the new conditions, changes also ensued in the art world with a reconsideration of the jury and the establishment of a new institutional framework for the support and control of art.

In such an atmosphere, a public debate on the question of abstraction began in the magazine *Új Írás* (*New Writing*). Critics and artists tried to find a place for the abstract artists silenced in the Stalinist era, and then suppressed again after the brief respite offered by the 1957 *Spring Salon*, where abstraction could appear publicly for the first time since the early fifties. In the polemical article published in 1961, the art historian Lajos Németh openly criticised the personality cult of Stalin of the fifties and the violent disruption of the modern tradition of Hungarian art. He did, however, observe progressive developments in the present, when modern Hungarian architecture could finally exist again after the decline of Socialist Realism. He considered the cooperation with architecture as a great opportunity for modern art. “So, the current period in the development of the post-Liberation [1945] fine art is full of exciting questions awaiting answers. The most urgent ones concerns establishing the cooperation with architects” (Németh 1961, 738–744 as cited in Hornyik and Tímár 2001, 9–17).

Nóra Aradi, an art historian and a party hardliner who had held key positions at the Ministry of Culture in the fifties, in her response to the article criticised Németh’s enthusiasm for abstraction. In her opinion, at the 1957 *Spring Salon*, “the obvious condemnation on the part of the audience clearly showed what kind of support nonfigurative art could expect there. (...) Today, a nonfigurative artist can receive commissions for the decoration of buildings, or for flat, ornamental, decorative works. (...) It cannot be the duty of the state to subsidise abstract artists beyond that” (Aradi 1962, 57–61 as cited in *Kritikák és képek* 1976, 215–223).

Aradi essentially implied that the ‘still supportable’ trend of nonfigurative art had been consciously channelled towards cooperation with architects and the decoration of buildings after 1957. After all, abstract geometry ‘did no harm’ and could serve a purpose well, namely, the creation of ‘flat ornamental decoration.’

## Changes in Economics

### Growing Influence of Architects

Although, in terms of numbers, abstract artworks were not in an extreme majority, they were often brought before the Art Committee<sup>2</sup> as problematic, e.g., the glass mosaic by Zizi Makrisz decorating the Karancs Hotel in Salgótarján (architects: György Jánossy, József Hrecska). (il. 1, 2) Even so, as such works gained headway in the early sixties, voices of alarm and anger grew stronger in the Committee. It was mainly figurative artists such as Aurél Bernáth and Pál Pátzay who took every opportunity to sound the alarm. Pátzay went even further focusing his anger primarily on architects: according to him, architects were capricious fools with an inflated, destructive viewpoint, who brought the milieu of provincialism to Hungary via their commercial architecture.

So, there was a problem with architects. They believed that modern buildings required modern artworks and tried to get this point across to the client. They argued for the selection of nonfigurative designs in competitions or, *horribile dictu*, for abstract artists to receive commissions from the two-permille budget. By late autumn 1962, the Art Committee<sup>2</sup> realized that the tendency had got out of hand to such an extent that it jeopardised the existence of figurative art. Therefore, they decided to use political pressure to force architects to demand figurative works for their buildings. As György Szilárd summarised the issue to Aczél: “The problem here in the Committee is to decide what kind of decoration we can still allow and where we should stop. This question is vital to fine art because the 2‰ has started to shift completely. Professors Bernáth and Pátzay challenge the idea that these works constitute fine art, while comrades Domanovszky and Aradi say that they should be categorised under fine art, but their access to the 2‰ funding should be limited” (Session of the Art Committee, 21 January 1963).

An interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the reports is that the members of the jury attacked those artworks due to their fear of losing their prestige and commissions, rather than on an ideological basis. The paragraphs about protecting the socialist idea were just rhetorical, formal elements in their proposals. György Aczél, in his own way, gave a Delphic answer to the problem: “If not by other means, it should be declared through a government memorandum that anyone can create abstract artworks, as creativity is free in this country...” but, at the same time: “abstraction should not be funded from public money.”

## New Economic Mechanism and Its Influence on the 'Westernization' of Applied Arts

It shall be demonstrated how the New Economic Mechanism contributed to the structural changes that subsequently led to the involvement of modern artists in industrial production from 1968 onwards. Later, from the mid-seventies, the focus shifted to the role of artists in society. From the seventies, this resulted in socialist contracts with factories issuing contracts to artists. The year of 1968 marked the beginning of the establishment of artists' workshops and symposia throughout the country, mostly in factories, where artists could experiment with the industrial technology used by a given facility (e.g., the enamel factory in Bonyhád and, later, in Kecskemét, the steel mill in Dunaújváros). In 1974, the central cultural policy specified the tasks of artists' colonies. As it stated, "the aim of artists' colonies is to create a connection between different social classes that will bring art closer to society and society closer to art." Further, the manner in which economic regulations filtered through the institutional system in Hungary and became the driving force for 'the democratisation of art' is discussed. In that process, artists' symposia played an important role.

To understand the necessity of the above-mentioned structural changes, we need to get a brief insight into Hungary's economical background.

Beginning in 1948, a forced industrialisation policy based on the Soviet example changed the economic character of the country. A centrally planned economy was introduced and millions of new jobs were created in industry (notably for women). Although that Soviet-like economic modernisation generated rapid growth, it was based on an early twentieth century structural pattern and outdated technology. The heavy industries of iron, steel, and engineering were given the highest priority, while modern infrastructure, services, and communication were neglected. New technologies and high-tech industries were underdeveloped and further hampered by Western restrictions on the export of modern technology to the Soviet bloc. In May 1966, the Central Committee approved a sweeping reform package known as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). The central features of the reform were set to be introduced on January 1, 1968.

With the New Economic Mechanism, the government sought to overcome the inefficiencies of central planning, to make Hungary's products competitive in foreign markets, especially in the West, and, above all, to create the prosperity that would ensure political stability. It decentralised decision making and made profit the main goal of enterprises. The economic focus moved from heavy industry to light industry and the modernisation of infrastructure. The product variety broadened, sales increased faster than production, and the trade balance with both East and West improved.

In practice, however, the reform was not as sweeping as planned. It also failed to dismantle the highly concentrated industrial structure which was originally established to facilitate central planning, and which inhibited competition under the New Economic Mechanism. The websites <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hungary/Economy>, and <https://countrystudies.us/hungary/40.htm> contain various useful information on the NEM.

The documents kept in the Hungarian National Archives show how those macro-economic decisions widened the opportunities for artists in industrial production. Most documents from 1966 onwards refer to new demands with regard to industry, commerce and art due the economic reforms. In 1967, a proposal for the establishment of the Institute of Industrial Aesthetics was made. Even the name 'industrial aesthetics' says a lot about the new times coming. Among others, it read: "we need to ensure the equality of aesthetics in production and encourage enterprises to produce modern products that reflect a high aesthetic standard in their appearance." And: "The main tasks of the institute (among others) are the establishment of direct cooperation with similar institutions in socialist countries and studying the methods and results of non-socialist countries" (Hungarian National Archives: MNL-OL-XIX-I-4-m. Képzőműv. Főoszt. 1958-73. Box 57, Folder I (Iparművészeti Tanács)). (il. 3)

Several documents also from 1967 deal with the issue of the framework within which industrial designers can be employed in factories. The general directions correspond with the aims of the New Economic Mechanism, such as shifting focus to light industry, widening the product variety, and creating modern designs that make everyday products suitable for export, even to Western markets.

The implementation had widespread positive consequences throughout the country in the following years. Artists were employed in factories - the regulations clarified their positions, payments, and duties. As for the institutional background, decision-making became more decentralised, and counties got a bigger role and autonomy in shaping the cultural life in the countryside.

## Artists' Workshops: Platforms of Free Experimentation and New Design

It is not a coincidence that the first artists' workshops that were connected to factories date back to those years: the Stone-Sculpting Artists' Workshop in Villány in 1967, connected to the stone quarry in the Szársomlyó Mountain, the enamel factory in Bonyhád from 1968, and the ceramic symposium in Siklós also in 1968.

The official art magazine of the central cultural policy, *Művészet*, reported regularly about the ceramic symposium in Siklós. In the first years, in 1968-69, the authors of the reviews felt it was important to emphasise that the aim of the symposium was not of conflicting interest with other official organisations and forums. They also underlined the social educational importance of the summer exhibition (1969): “more than forty thousand people have seen the exhibition in the countryside.” However, non-figurative and avant-garde works needed a well-founded explanation, and so the authors used the general terminology of the time: “the exhibition serves the society” or, in a more detailed manner, “non-figurative works avoid ‘empty decorative style,’ or ‘naturalism that degrades the nation to the level of petty bourgeois’” (Kovács 1969).

In 1971, an article in *Művészet* reported about the ceramic symposium becoming international. It stated that “in order to raise professional standards, the fight had to be started centrally” (Láncz 1971) – which came into being with the help of the Ceramics Section of the Association of Fine and Applied Artists. The examples were Gmunden in Austria and Bechyně in the Czech Republic. As a result of the ceramic symposia held for years, the standard of ceramics in the two countries rose significantly. In Siklós, for the first two years, the symposium operated with Hungarian artists, in 1970, however, it became international: Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Turkish, Austrian, Czech, Polish, and Soviet artists were invited.

After the success of the previous year, some political turbulence occurred in 1971. The leadership of the ceramic symposium proposed a list of foreign artists to be invited. It contained nine persons from the Soviet bloc as well as Pierre Székely from France, the Hungarian sculptor who had emigrated to Paris in 1947. The list passed many levels of administration unchanged, however, the Department of International Relations intervened eventually and stated in the correspondence between the authorities concerning the artist’s participation what follows: “it is – in a right way – an event of Socialist profile, and as such, we think there is no reason to invite even a single person from a capitalist country. Furthermore, we do not support the idea that the only capitalist nation would be represented by a ‘son of our country.’” They agreed to the participation of the other nine artists with only the invitation of the Czech members perceived as problematic due to the lack of contact between the artists’ associations of the two countries (Hungarian National Archives: MNL-OL-XIX-I-4-m. Képzőműv. Főoszt. 1958-73. Box 92, Folder 2 (N-P)).

Showing the importance of the international symposia in political terms, Baranya County proposed a three-day conference for the leaders of the artists’ colonies from the Eastern Bloc, also in 1971. The invited guests would give lectures accompanied by presentations, speak about the history and organisational structures of their own symposia, the participating artists and, above all, the works created there so far. (il. 4, 5)

## Artists' Workshops and Symposia in the Service of Society

From the beginning of the seventies, more and more emphasis was put on the manner of developing an institutional background and legal framework for the symposium movement. Many artists themselves were devoted to the democratisation of art and bringing it closer to the public. There were several ways to achieve it. Ferenc Lantos began his educational activities in Pécs in 1952. He taught at the High School of Art at first, then, from 1973, at the Mihály Pollack College of Technology, where he introduced a new subject to architecture students, *Study of Form, Colour, and Space*. Lantos believed that abstraction inspired by nature was the best technique for urban and environmental design. His exhibition series *Nature – Vision – Creation*, which also represented his method of visual education, was held in Pécs between 1972 and 1976, and then travelled to several locations throughout the country. (il. 6)

Beside his various teaching activities, Lantos laid great emphasis on the visual education of the public and considered placing artworks in public spaces as an opportunity for that. “What is not applied is not art either. It is redundant. Hence, in my view, there is no such thing as high art as opposed to applied art; there is just one encompassing visual system (...) and the rest is its application, painting as well as making” (E.H. 1976, 3 as cited in Keserü 2010, 54). A new, cheap, durable, and easy to use technology provided an excellent opportunity for environmental planning and public education: enamel. Led by Lantos, an artists' workshop specialising in enamelwork was founded in 1968 in Bonyhád, at the enamel factory. Lantos's variational system built from basic geometrical elements was especially well-suited for covering larger surfaces. Between 1967 and 1972, he decorated many public buildings in Pécs and Baranya County with geometric enamel and wood-fibre compositions, the latter in cooperation with the wood-fibre factory in Mohács (Gyergyádesz 2006, 9–10). (il. 7, 8)

An innovative collaboration between an architect and a fine artist, of the kind advocated by Lajos Németh ten years before, was realized in Pécs in 1970 in an exemplary way. The Southern Transdanubia Electricity Company (Dél-Dunántúli Áramszolgáltató Vállalat – DÉDÁSZ) constructed its lightweight Computing Centre based on the plans by the architect Zoltán Erdélyi of the state-run design company PÉCSITERV.

Erdélyi and Lantos had a strong working relationship, as also demonstrated by the cover of the 1971 issue of PÉCSITERV's eponymous periodical, designed by Lantos. In the case of the DÉDÁSZ Computing Centre, the geometrical frieze, as well as the enamelled cubes standing on their corners in front of the building, spelling out the acronym DÉDÁSZ, were made by Ferenc



Lantos. The frieze not only had a decorative function but fulfilled a structural role, too: the enamelled metal sheets formed the casing for the floor where engineering works took place. At the inauguration of the Computing Centre, the idea that the abstract shape was determined by the function was suggested by the architect himself: "The abstract, indirect design of the panels has been partially inspired by the work happening in the building, which is also indirect – it involves translation into a programmed 'machine language'" (Z. E. 1971, 21).

Almost simultaneously, in the spring of 1970, in Budapest, Imre Bak, Tamás Hencze, and János Fajó spent three months at the Csepel Metal Works creating about fifty experimental sculptures. A year later, Bak, Fajó, and István Nádler formulated their proposal for the establishment of a creative community for urban and environmental design. This led to the formation of (Pesti) Múhely (Pest Workshop) in 1971, whose work was primarily focused on artistic multiplication. Then, in 1973, a screen-printing workshop was founded in Benczúr street, and the group also started publishing art portfolios. The need for complex urban and environmental design was also reflected in Pál Deim's and László Balogh's colour plan for the town of Szentendre (1978) as well as IPARTERV's calls for a comprehensive design (and execution) of the colour dynamics scheme of several factories in the Hungarian countryside (1978–1981).

In the process of 'democratising art,' the Public Education Act of 1976 also declared the need for the artist to use his/her creative energies for a greatest social benefit. Exhibiting works in public spaces instead of galleries was an obvious vehicle for the 'socialization of art.' As stated in the Act, "far more lasting than the impact of exhibits is the impact of works of art placed in public spaces as well as the social impact of the so-called symposium movement." In 1977, the connection between the symposia and the improvement of industrial production was stated officially: "the task of the symposia is to explore areas where artistic work can be involved in industrial production."

Artists' workshops in factories were partly supported, as the end products could serve the visual education of society. The results were sometimes very productive, e.g., the interior of the Culture House in Pécsvárad decorated with the enamel works from Bonyhád. Attempts were made by Ferenc Lantos, the leader of the enamel symposium, for wood-fibre compositions in cooperation with the wood-fibre factory in Mohács.

Artistic creation at the symposiums was free in Hungary for the participants. It was free within the limits of state socialism – according to the research, those limits were changing from year to year, sometimes becoming tighter, and sometimes looser – depending on economic, political, and often personal decisions.

## Abstract Art Becomes Widespread in Public Buildings

Supported also by the above-mentioned processes, a growing number of artworks labelled as ‘decorative,’ i.e., non-figurative, started to appear in public buildings from the early seventies. The relevant files can be found in the archives of the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts. By then, the initiatives the Art Committee had aimed to suppress through political means ten years before had become part of everyday practice: the client submitted a request to assign the artist(s) recommended by the architect and the committee mostly approved their choice. Nevertheless, the real proportions need to be perceived here: a much larger part (nearly 80%) of the central budget was spent on sculpture: freestanding sculptures erected in public spaces, figurative reliefs decorating buildings, etc. Also, the highest honoraria were paid for such works, as for the Hungarian reality of that time. Thus, sculptors had a much greater power and earned much more – public statues were also selected more rigorously. Painted murals (secco, mosaic, sgraffito, etc.) became less popular which also meant, on the other hand, that their creators could enjoy more freedom. From the mid-seventies, especially on the part of institutions receiving foreign guests, there was a growing demand for modern artworks that would stand their ground even by foreign (that is, Western European) standards. For example, the constructor of the BVSC’s (Budapest Railway Workers’ Sport Club) swimming pool commissioned Zoltán Bohus and Mária Lugossy to create a modern glass sliding wall with the explanation that “next to time-honoured sport clubs, our club also maintains close connections with “sister associations” (foreign railways), and sport gatherings are regular within this circle as well” (Archives of the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Lectorate Archives, file B/32).

Thus, public buildings open to foreign (Western) guests became playgrounds for an intentional artistic competition with the West (András 2001, 38–60). In hotel interior design, the most modern genres appeared by the seventies and eighties. In 1976, Tibor Csiky designed a lean, modern fireplace for the Hilton Hotel in Budapest. It was not realized eventually, unlike the glass sculpture made by Bohus for the same building, which saturated the night bar with mysterious lights. The 1985 mobile neon light structure in the Grand Hotel Hungária’s Főnix Bar, also by Bohus, earned a special honourable mention from the Lectorate’s jury: “The mobile light is a novel and high-standard creation from an artistic and technical viewpoint alike” (Archives of the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Lectorate Archives, File B/32). In 1977, György Z. Gács said the following about Bohus’s glass sculptures

*Cell* located in the courtyard of the Mogyoródi Street dormitory of the University of Veterinary Medicine: “Transparency, reflections, refraction – all new effects which can express the more complex state of mind of our times more perfectly (...) than it would be possible within the framework of a traditional genre” (Archives of the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Lectorate Archives, File B/32).

In the early seventies, the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts had no predetermined directives regarding the genre and type of works to be created. Personal connections and preferences of taste played a role in awarded commissions, but social concerns were also important in the process of selecting artists. Architects had a strong influence, but office clerks and jury members could get their preferences across as well. Hence, within the framework of Aczél’s more permissive cultural policy, some transition between the supported and tolerated art became possible. According to István Hajdu’s reminiscences, one could help avant-garde artists to, at least, receive prizes and small assignments to carry out other artists’ designs, even if they could not receive full commissions themselves. By then, geometrical abstraction had come to be seen as an acceptable form of expression, well suited to decorating buildings. As a result, Tibor Csiky was able to create a monumental mahogany relief for the new Customer Support Office of the Hungarian State Railways (MÁV) in Népköztársaság Street (Andrássy Avenue today) in 1973-74. The glass facade of the same office overlooking Nagymező Street is still decorated with Zoltán Bohus’s chrome steel sculpture. This collaboration marked the beginning of a friendship between the two artists, and when they were next invited to take part in a competition – for the decoration of the facade of the Telephone Centre in Martinelli (today Szervita) Square – they requested the possibility to submit a joint application instead of competing against each other. (il. 9)

In the second half of the seventies, abstract geometrical artworks on public buildings did not need any special explanation anymore, as the demand for them became mainstream. On occasion, a designer asked for a geometrical wall decoration for his/her building to transfer the expenses of the wall casing from the project budget to the central art budget. On the other hand, it also led to a depreciation of modernism. By the late eighties, geometrical compositions appeared on numerous buildings countrywide: for the Kiscell Museum’s exhibition in 2017, the volunteers working on the Köztérkép (Public Map) online database compiled a list of two hundred geometrical artworks of various aesthetic standards created between 1958 and 1990 (<https://absztrakt-kiscelli.kozterkep.hu/#p=list>).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The point of departure for the research was the exhibition *Separate Ways. Karl-Heinz Adler and the Hungarian Abstraction* held at the Kassák Museum (curators: Edit Sasvári, Anna Juhász) and the Kiscell Museum Budapest (curators: Márta Branczik and Zsóka Leposa) from May 31 to September 17, 2017. The research results were partially published in German (Branczik and Leposa 2017, 15-27).

<sup>2</sup> The Art Committee was an important institution of fine art censorship. The nine members of the Art Committee (commonly named: Committee of Nine) were appointed by the Minister of Cultural Affairs. They discussed theoretical and practical issues within the jury's purview and could overrule problematic cases as an appeals court.

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**illustrations<sup>®</sup>**



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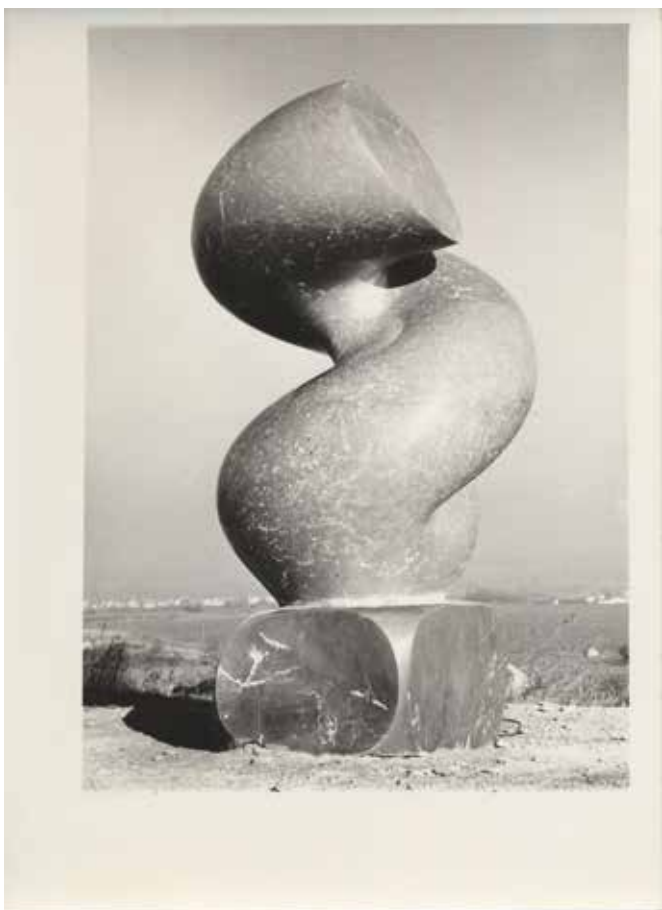


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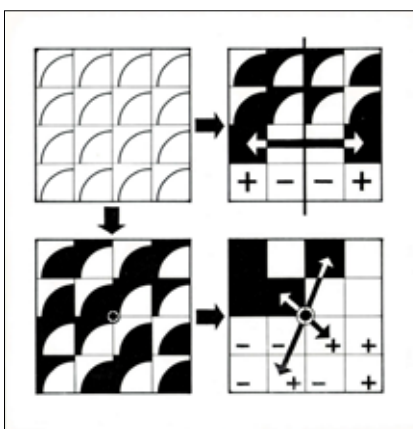
1. *Hotel Karancs* in Salgótarján, 1963, architect: György Jánossy (1923–1998) In the foreground: István Tar (1910–1971), *Monument of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (Armed Labourer)*, 1959. Photo by Fortepan / Magyar Rendőr
2. Zizi Makrisz (1924–2014), *Industrial landscape*. Glass mosaics in the restaurant of Hotel Karancs, Salgótarján, 1965. Photo by Fortepan/Bauer Sándor
3. Cover of the booklet *Industrial Design: Handout of the Council of Industrial Design* (Budapest, 1968)



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4. Exhibition of the ceramic symposium in Siklós, 1972. Photo by Fortepan / Szalay Zoltán
5. Gyula Bocz (1937–2003), *Spiral*, sculpture at the Villány–Nagyharsány Quarry and Open-Air Exhibition, 1971–1973. Photo by Katalin Nádor, courtesy of acb Gallery Budapest
6. Ferenc Lantos (1929–2014), a page from the booklet *Nature – Vision – Creation IV*. (Természet – Látás – Alkotás, IV). Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, 1976
7. Ferenc Lantos (1929–2014), *Twenty circles, one square*, 1969, oil on canvas, 65 × 55 cm. Photo: Courtesy of acb Gallery
8. Ferenc Lantos (1929–2014), enamel decoration of the Puskin Cultural Center in Pécs, 1968. Photo: köztérkép





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9. Miklós Erdély (1928–1986) – Tibor Csiky (1932–1989), decoration on the facade of the Telephone Centre in Martinelli (today Szervita) Square, 1976. Photo: köztérkép

10. Zoltán Bohus (1941–2017) – Tamás Hencze (1938–2018), *Narrowed Spectrums*, 1970s, mosaic composition in the stairwell of the building Daróczy street 3 (then Broadcast Technology Company), Budapest



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VENUES AND PUBLICITY,  
EXPERIMENTATION AND  
SYMPOSIA. NOTES ON THE  
INTERCONNECTIVITY  
OF NEO-AVANT-GARDE  
TENDENCIES AND THE  
SYMPOSIUM MOVEMENT  
IN HUNGARY

# I

This article presents the research concentrating on the so-called symposium movement that started in 1968 and played an undeniably decisive role in Hungarian art throughout the seventies to the first half of the eighties. The history of the symposia continued even after 1989, however, due to the changes in the institutional, political, and economic conditions and circumstances, as well as the foundation of the Symposium Association and its associated bodies, it should be researched separately.

We aim to present the symposia focusing on one medium, material (fabric, iron, steel, wood, enamel, ceramics etc.), or a technical genre (sculpture, graphic art etc.) that operated with state support and were connected to the handicraft traditions of a profession as a field for experimental art. The locations to be analysed – without mythicizing their role – or rather the ‘types of shelter’ with less ‘representational potential’ and ‘recognition’ were situated mostly in less exposed places outside of Budapest, in rural Hungary, or in small towns outside the capital, and provided a platform and infrastructure to artists with an ‘avant-garde’ approach, or artists that belonged to the ‘tolerated’ zone of Hungarian culture. In support of the concept, we may cite György Galántai’s thoughts that he expressed during the making of a video interview conducted by the authors of this text in 2022 (camera by Zsuzsanna Simon). Galántai’s Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár - a venue considered to be a centre of un-official art - was closed as a result of official pressure in 1973. However, even as a ‘tolerated’ artist afterwards, he was a regular participant in the symposia in Győr and Dunaújváros in the seventies as well as the Velem Textile Art Workshop. In the video he refers to the symposia as a way to continue the ‘Boglár spirit’ as well as islands of freedom that also played a ‘lifesaving’ role in his work.

The article provides an overview of the venues, their historical background and context, as well as their position in different layers of official / semi-official / un-official art, while reflecting on similar events in the region and, moreover, raising the question of whether the symposia should be positioned in such a manner, i.e., definitely far away from the centre and the original official intentions of the ‘symposium movement,’ and the ideological context that brought the symposia into being – relativised in such circumstances. By studying the complex history of the phenomenon and compiling a rather descriptive overview, we hope to provide a further nuanced

view regarding the nature of the 'three T-system,'<sup>1</sup> the most significant characteristic of the Kádár era's<sup>2</sup> cultural policy.

This study can serve as a supplement to the more canonised, largely processed, and already published information about the un-official art venues of the seventies. Earlier, in the sixties, private apartments had fulfilled the role of the reference points for un-official culture, e.g., meetings had been held at Pál Petrigalla's flat, László Végh's apartment, and the Zugló Circle was formed at Sándor Molnár's place. The first happening took place in a private cellar in 1966. The seventies 'second public sphere' was connected to culture houses, communist youth association clubs, university clubs, but also 'artist clubs,' such as Young Artists' Club, or Fészek Artist Clubs, that separated and at the same time kept together artists' collectives. While it made their surveillance and control easier, allowing these places to function also served as a 'pressure valve' for the political and cultural opposition and underground. The two legendary exhibitions *Iparterv I-II* (1968-69) were organised at the headquarters of the state architecture office Iparterv. Another legendary exhibition, *Szüirenon*, was also organised at a venue outside of the official art venues, at the Kassák Culture House (1969), while the synthesis of the two shows, *R-exhibition*, was held in the R building of the Technical University. Even though most of the venues were located in Budapest, Pécs (just to mention the banned *Motion'70* exhibition), or the St. Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár - thanks to its dedicated museologist team, especially the Kovács-Kovalovszky couple - also served as important centres. Szentendre should be mentioned where, already from the late sixties, radical, open, outdoor exhibitions were organised with neither aesthetic nor ideological jury - they could avoid official control by organising events lasting only for one day. By the beginning of the seventies, a radical artist collective, the Vajda Lajos Studio, had been established in Szentendre which had opened the Cellar Gallery that is still functioning today. The most internationally well-known venue that could be an 'artist-run initiative' in today's terms is the Balatonboglár Chapel Gallery. It served as a centre of avant-garde/experimental tendencies and an informal meeting point of artists from different generations, as well as a platform for transregional connections (1970-1973). Several other independent cases can be mentioned as well, such as the *Exposition* exhibition dedicated to avant-garde and neo-avant-garde photography, organised at the museum in Hatvan in 1976. Thanks to the changing atmosphere in the eighties and the rise of Hungarian new painting, the 'domestication' of the avant-garde (above all the series of *New Sensibility* exhibitions curated by Loránd Hegyi between 1981 and 1987), as well as Katalin Néray's directorship at Múcsarnok, even progressive national and international art could make it to official venues.

We assume that the study of the existing concepts in the official and un-official cultural Hungarian registers – also taking into consideration that the contemporary official cultural policy strictly separated the fields of applied (industrial art, design) and fine art – may be enriched with new information thanks to an analysis of the role and nature of the symposium movement.

When considering the region's history of the symposia, usually Polish examples of such events are used as points of reference, most of all, the *Biennial of Plastic Forms* in Elbląg, initially planned as the *First Biennial of Socialist Art*, but eventually realised as a major event of post-war Europe, especially its first edition in 1965. The biennial reconsidered the possibilities of public sculpture from the perspective of constructivist traditions. It is important to note that one of the most important representatives of post-war Hungarian abstraction, Tihamér Gyarmathy, also participated in the first edition of the Biennial producing a large-scale sculpture (spatial form) that was erected in the city. It was the first international event with large visibility that Gyarmathy took part in after a long period of silence and inner immigration in the period of the fifties Stalinist dictatorship in Hungary.

Elbląg definitely left an enormous mark on the symposium history in the Eastern Bloc. In 1966, the *Hořické Sochařské Symposium* in Czechoslovakia followed the example of Elbląg, as well as the larger-scale *Mezinárodní sympozium prostorových forem / International Symposium of Spatial Forms in Ostrava*. The Elbląg concept made an impact even outside of the Iron Curtain: a symposium was organised in Aalborg that followed in the Polish event's footsteps and even included four Polish artists relevant also in the context of Elbląg (Magdalena Więcek, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Marian Bogusz, and Bronisław Kierzkowski). However, the second biennial in Elbląg was less influential, even though it was planned as a large-scale event with the participation of eight architects such as Oscar Hansen. In 1969, the third meeting resulted in only one completed public sculptural work (Baraniewski 2017, 199-222; 2015).

At that time, the terms of 'symposium' and 'art camp' / 'creative workshop' / 'artist colony' were interchangeable despite the fact that 'symposium' actually referred to an event that included a discussion and dialogue about the works, themes, genre / technical issues, or methods (Keserü 1988, 731-735). Still, the most distinctive aspect seemed to be the background of an event - whether it was an 'industrial' or an 'autonomous' one. E.g., Piotr Piotrowski distinguished the symposia linked to industrial locations and plein-air (Piotrowski 2009, 197-198). The biennial in Elbląg was the most important example of the first type, but such 'scandalous' events as the *Puławy Symposium* organised at the Nitrogen Plant in 1966, or the *Wrocław '70 Symposium*, which was

decisive for Polish Conceptual art (Monkiewicz 2015), should also be recalled. Plein-air emphasised free creation (Fowkes 2018, 77-93) (the one in Osieki is the most famous and also most relevant from the point of view of experimental art between 1963 and 1981, just to mention Tadeusz Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening* in Łazy at the 5th Plein-Air in Osieki in 1967 (near Koszalin), or the 1970 Osieki gathering with the participation of most of the artists taking part in *Wrocław '70* that served – together with Jerzy Ludwiński's textual contribution – as a base for the exhibition *Concept Art* organised at Galeria Pod Moną Lisą in Wrocław in 1970). It is worth mentioning that the Pécs Workshop, having tight connections with Poland thanks to its member Sándor Pinczehelyi, was invited to *Oborniki Śląskie in 1979*. However, artists were often suspicious and distrusted the symposia and the possibility of an ideologically determined dialogue between different social and political layers in the socialist society that those events embodied. Referring to Maja and Reuben Fowkes' essay analysing the venues of 'Conceptual art' in Central Europe, we could recall Włodzimierz Borowski's piece *Dialogue* as a good – and complex – example of these aspects:

The concept [was] to connect Wrocław and Elbląg by aligning two 'maximally enlarged' chairs in the public space of the two cities that were to be produced by an industrial plant in Elbląg that also sponsored the town's Biennale of Spatial Forms (Fowkes 2018, 85).

The artwork was presented at *Wrocław '70* and referred to Tadeusz Kantor's monumental *Chair* that was originally supposed to be installed at the same event (it was finally installed in 2011).

## 2

The origin of the symposium organisation in the region can be found in the international symposium movement created by the Austrian artist Karl Prantl, and, above all, in the sculptors' meeting organised in Sankt Margarethen (Szentmargitbánya) in Burgenland in 1959. Burgenland also played a role with regard to the beginnings of the symposium organisation in Hungary from yet another point of view: the Burgeland painting weeks in the early seventies gave space to the artists from the Iparterv generation such as Gábor Attalai, Imre Bak, Tamás Hencze, or Gyula Pauer. The first sculpting symposium in West Germany took place in 1961. The 1962 sculpting symposium organised by Prantl in Berlin – coinciding with the actual construction of the Berlin Wall and thus becoming a protest act against it – also served as a starting point

for further proceedings. He was also involved in other regional events that launched the symposium movement in Central Europe, going beyond geographical or political boundaries (Baraniewski 2015). To such events belonged, e.g., the *Symposium Urbanum* in Nuremberg in 1971, supported by the collectors Defet and their gallery. Prantl's participation in the first international sculpture symposium in Czechoslovakia in Vyšné Ružbachy (Oberrauschenbach/Felsőzúgó) in 1964 can also be recalled here. He was part of the group organising the symposium until 1968, consisting also of *Miloslav Chlupáč, Rudolf Uhlér, and Andrej Rudavský*. Another one was the *Forma Viva* sculpting symposium in Yugoslavia, an event concentrating on wood and stone, held in two locations. It was first organised in 1961 by two artists (Jakob Savinšek and Janes Lenassi) after they had participated in the events in Sankt Margarethen and Germany; they even invited to the first meeting two Polish artists (Jerzy Beres and Alina Szapocznikow), also regarding the *Spatial Forms* event in Elbląg.

Hungary's symposia and art workshops are usually missing from regional overviews. E.g., Baraniewski's above-mentioned texts provide a summary and a well-founded overview concerning the aspects that led to the Elbląg event and other that derived from it in Central Europe, but they do not include any venue or initiative in Hungary, even though they were in line with the contemporary endeavours in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and even Yugoslavia. We would like to address this matter and supplement the analysis with examples from Hungary.

In Hungary, just like elsewhere in the region, the organisation of the meetings related to factories was made possible by the political will in relation to the short-lived but impactful New Economy Mechanism launched in 1968. Bringing members of fine arts (artists, intellectuals) and the socialist industry (workers and socialist production) together served also as a representation of the modernist dream of connecting art and industry. It contributed to the post-war (re)construction of cityscapes as well, and it was undeniably connected to and enhanced by the new policy's intentions to facilitate economy. However, the results of the efforts, including the utilisation of 'new' materials such as plastic or steel and the new technologies provided by factories, as well as the general educational purpose and the aim to disseminate industrial design achievements, while also raising its standards by means of the symposia, can often be questionable for bureaucratic reasons. It was the case of the *Biennial of Industrial Textile* launched in 1973 as part of the textile biennials organised in the town of Szombathely: it started as a successful initiative but did not fulfil the hopes for its role as an economic booster.

The Szombathely biennials, however, can be regarded as a well-developed system of events in which the official parties (the Local Government and the Ministry of Light Industry and the crucial figure of



György Gonda, the president of council in Vas county), the local Savaria Museum, and the members of the textile community took decisive roles. The series of the Szombathely biennials started in 1970 with the first edition of the *Wall and Spatial Textile Biennials*. It was preceded by a ground-breaking exhibition organised at an official venue, the Ernst Museum, in 1968. The show *Textile/Wall Hangings'68* was created on a grassroots initiative of artists from the field of textile / fabric art that, looking back from today's perspective, did not, in fact, reflect the revolutionary nature it was attributed by the era's critics. Nevertheless, it was the first show that explored the possibilities provided by textile / fabric / fibre other than traditional tapestry, taking Lausanne as a reference. The *Wall and Spatial Textile Biennial* – preceding the most important regional initiative of similar nature, Triennial in Łódź, where many Hungarian artists exhibited throughout the decades – was followed by the first edition of the *Biennial of Industrial Textile* in 1973 and the *Biennial of Miniature Textile* – the most interesting medium as it is reminiscent of cross-border and free Mail art: the maximum size of each piece could not extend 20x20 cm therefore they were easy to mail and exhibit, organised as an international event from 1976. The Museum's collecting policy was also linked to this network of biennials, as well as the solo exhibitions organised in Kőszeg during the *Wall and Spatial Textile Biennials*, dedicated to the artists winning the previous biennials. The Textile Art Workshop in Velem was established in 1975 under the auspices of the Szombathely Museum as well. It opened the way between the participants, both national and international ones, as well as between the biennial and the workshop which was complemented by a symposium. As a partial conclusion, the term 'biennial movement' linked with the 'symposium movement' could be used, as exemplified by the *Ceramics Biennials* (and, to a certain extent, the *Small Sculpture Biennials* from 1968, too) closely linked with the *Siklós International Experimental Ceramics Symposium* from 1967.

The origin of the symposia/creative workshops/art colonies is also connected with Sankt Margarethen and Karl Prantl's initiatives. The sculptor József Somogyi was invited to Sankt Margarethen in 1964, but was then replaced by Sándor Rétfalvi, who, enjoying the support of the local Young Communists Association after his return, attempted to establish a traditional artist colony in 1967. However, it soon moved to the disused quarry in Nagyharsány-Villány and so the history of the Villány Stone Sculpture Symposium began, already in 1970 in an international form. Near the site, the ceramist Imre Schrammel – after his visit to the Gmunden Ceramics Symposium in Austria in 1965 and under the influence of Bechyně in Czechoslovakia – took the first steps to create a ceramics symposium with the intention to move away from the traditional crafts of pottery. Among other officials, the head of the Culture Department of the County Council in Pécs at the time, Gyula

Takács, supported the proposal, especially with regard to the more than a century old local ceramic tradition represented by the Zsolnay Porcelain Factory in Pécs.

The first meeting was of local interest, but in 1969 it was organised as a symposium in the empty monastery in Siklós. A year later, it was organised as an international event (mostly with guests from the neighbouring countries and Northern Europe) seeking, with uneven results, to find common ground with contemporary architecture and working around such topics as “Ceramics and the garden” (1976-77), or “Ceramics in urban environment” (1978). The Józsefváros Gallery commemorated the 10th anniversary of the movement in 1977.

More recently, from October 7, 2021 to January 14, 2022, an exhibition dedicated to the symposium was held at the Janus Pannonius Museum in Pécs that showed the richness of its history: *Az eredendő anyag (The Original Material)*. It was curated by Orsolya Mogán and Eszter Tóth.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the venues in the surroundings of Pécs in the late sixties, one of the first initiatives of the kind (less a symposium, more a creative workshop) in the nearby Bonyhád Enamel Factory as well as the early activities at the Csepel Iron Works (1970) should also be considered. But, above all, the very first of such venues - the industrial proto-symposium that took place at the Székesfehérvár Light Metal Works in 1967 directly following the example of the biennial in Elbląg (Nagy 2017, 41-42; Sasvári, 19-20). Its aim was the creation of aluminium sculptures by applying new industrial technologies with the participation of the sculptors Ferenc Laborcz, Erzsébet Schaár, Imre Szébényi, Imre Varga in 1967. The works were erected on the premises of the factory. In 1977, Vilt's and Schaár's pieces were transferred to the King Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár as permanent loans. Furthermore, the 'second wave' industry-related symposia that began in the mid-seventies should also be taken into account. The activities taking place at the Rába Works in Győr (1976), the Dunaújváros Ironworks (1974, the first editions took place at the Engineering Department's workshop of the Technical University of Heavy Industry; the workshop subsequently moved to the Ironworks) and, to a limited extent, also the Tiszaújváros (then Leninváros) Chemical Plants (1977), or even at the short lived Siklós Cement Symposium (1978-79), concerned with a highly experimental industrial technology, can also be listed here.

The Makó Graphic Artists' Colony (1975/77-1990, restarted with a different profile in 1996) (Üveges – Tóth 2016), serving as a centre of experimental graphics, as well as other symposia independent of industrial facilities (e.g., the sites in Villány and Siklós) had a more classical artist colony-like approach, such as the Wood Sculpture Symposium in

Nagyatád, even though it had some industrial background involving the local silviculture company (Kovács 2001), or the Textile Art Workshop in Velem, both starting in 1975. Each venue (but above all, the textile-related locations) had their own yearly publications, usually bilingual, dealt with and discussed by the contemporary press, however, only a few texts that provide a summary or a comparative analysis are available. The first and, so far, the only one was published in 1987 (*Dvorszky* 1987). There is also a series of exhibitions and publications from 1983-1985 concerning the 'results of the symposia' at the most official and prominent exhibition space in the country, the Budapest Múcsarnok (Kunsthalle) (Dobai 1983; Udvary 1984; Feuer 1985).

As Melinda Géger sums it up in the introduction to the Nagyatád Symposium's description:

The newer type of artist colony movement started roughly in the second half of the 1950s and spread worldwide. In Hungary, with a certain delay, towards the end of the 1960s, spontaneous events of a similar nature began. In Western Europe, the desire to be independent from the dictates of the art trade and to realize artworks within a more informal framework was the driving force. It was then that they began to discover activity-centred art forms instead of object-oriented artistic activity. In Hungary, these considerations were less influential: artists wanted to become independent from the bureaucratized art media channels and institutions. Rural (sometimes amateur) artists managed to create a more direct relationship with the leaders of the local administration, and, in some cases, the artistic ambitions fortunately coincided with the cultural development plans of those small settlements. (In Nagyatád's case, Attila Rumi, a local amateur sculptor, was the originator of the idea and was later supported by István Bors.) Spontaneously formed at first (as smaller groups of artists chose this form to realize their avant-garde aspirations), after the Council Act and the Public Culture Act officially founded and formed creative colonies were established across the country. By the mid-1970s, artist colonies had been established largely with the help of councils as a way of social patronage. Over time, the groups that referred to political and professional responsibility interfered with the spontaneously organised initiatives, primarily the Association of Professional and Industrial Artists - including the Symposium Committee specialising in this field - and the Ministry of Culture as the main authority (Géger 1998, 50-51).

Regarding the institutional background, the symposia, backed by local factories and heavy industry, were usually local grassroot initiatives highly relying on the industry intertwined with local governments (city councils) that managed the meetings. Participation was possible upon invitation or application. However, the Young Artists' Studio also served as an organising partner at times: in the case of Dunaújváros, the application process took place within the Studio's framework. It was followed by a more official protocol when the era's main and only legitimising art organisation, the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists, took the role in 1979 (Sasvári 1996, 23; Nagy 2017, 42-43). It is also important to point out that the authorities became aware of the possible 'dangers' of the symposia as well as workshops and art colonies and answered with a law that aimed to regulate their operation in terms of participation, application process, and collecting. Following the international meeting on the symposia in 1977, the Symposium Committee was established to centralise and to shape the movement. In 1981, the Ministry of Culture collected the symposium /workshop operational regulations intending to establish central rules, but their actions lacked a general concept of cultural policy, so it did not become effective. Local symposium committees were founded, often only loosely adapting to the centralised regulations. Even if the new law was to support regaining control over the experimenting symposia, it was apparently already too late. Still, it also made it clear that the 'movement' goals and community could not be kept together anymore. It is reflected in Gábor Rideg's article (in *Művészet*, 1982/7) in which he categorises the symposia according to the emphasis on the individual or communal aspects of artistic activity, citing the Baranya Art Camps' leading art historian Éva Csenkey's study in which she discusses the 'movement' and 'institutional' eras in the history of the Villány symposium. Consequently, some venues closed, e.g., the crucial Velem Textile Art Workshop in 1983. By 1989, changes in the industry and the emergence of a free market had radically altered the symposium network, often causing major intervals in the operation of certain locations, and even definitive ends to some initiatives.

The Bonyhád Enamel Factory can be assigned to the type of venues linked to industrial facilities, although it lacked an institutional framework – in contrast to the other two important enamel art locations, Salgótarján and the Kecskemét Enamel Art Camp. The latter was initiated by Mihály Kátai and provided a platform for a well-defined group of artists based on invitation – except for the 1976 gathering dedicated to environmental culture and planning when representatives of nonfigurative tendencies were invited as well, e.g., Ferenc Lantos. Kecskemét also provided a venue for the Kecskemét International Ceramics Studio, founded by János Probstner in 1978.

The activities in Bonyhád, initiated by Kamill Major and, later, Ferenc Lantos, took shape in 1968 as the Architectural Enamel Art Camp with the participation of Gyula Pauer, Tihamér Gyarmathy, Oszkár Papp. From 1969 to 1972, the members of the Pécs Workshop – which had formed from a group of Lantos' students (Ferenc Ficzek, Károly Hopp-Halász, Károly Kismányoky, Sándor Pinczehelyi, Kálmán Szijártó, and, initially, Lajos Szélényi) – regularly attended the art camp in Bonyhád (then, from 1970 onwards, in Mecseknádasd). In 1970 and 1972, the list of its participants also included such representatives of geometric abstract art as Imre Bak and János Fajó, among others. The members of the former Pécs Workshop (with the exception of Károly Hopp-Halász) submitted their works in response to the call announced in 1971 by the art historian László Beke under the title *Work=The Documentation Of Imagination / Idea*, which is regarded as the first collection of Hungarian Conceptual art. Their participation shows how the activities at the Bonyhád Factory (relating not only to enamel art) appeared on the avant-garde platforms of the era. Their participation – besides others – in the *Idea* project sheds light on some heterogeneous interpretations of the relationship between art and idea, based on the works of the artists whom Beke sought out in the early seventies. By including the enamel works and enamel designs tied to the activities in Bonyhád, the material submitted by the Pécs group introduced into this collection a kind of functional, but also dynamic, thinking about public space and the natural environment, based on modernist, but also urbanistic considerations as inspired by Victor Vasarely's work.

In addition to the variability and seriality inherent in enamel art, its categorisation potential as an applied art also played a particularly important role in this respect. This point is evidenced not only by Lantos's letter submitted in response to Beke's call, but also by Sándor Pinczehelyi's semiotics-inspired montages questioning the traditions of the commemorative monument building. Ferenc Ficzek's cube, submitted in the form of documentation, addresses the problem of creating and perceiving space, while also bearing traces of Gyula Pauer's 'pseudo' notion and Vasarely's method based on illusory effects. The chain of thought that connects the initial planning stages of an artwork with experiments in form and medial variations, and, then, with the execution phase, can clearly be traced in the documents entered by Kálmán Szijártó and Károly Kismányoky, a selection of which is presented at the exhibition. The rhythm of their joint Land art actions – which were closely related to the artists' stay in Bonyhád, also bringing to the foreground the ties created between geometric forms and the natural environment – and the element of the paper ribbons woven through the trees and the landscape are also echoed in Kismányoky's enamel art. Taken together, they reflect

the interconnections between varied forms arising from different motifs, genres, techniques, and conceptualisations of space.

The exhibition *Space Marks*, organised at the beginning of 2022 as part of our research project at acb Gallery's Attachment space, by bringing to the fore the considerations and international aspects that emerged during the memorable 'abstraction debate' of the sixties (see: Róna Kopeczky's and Zsóka Leposa's text in this volume) helped outline the context in which the linking of fine arts with architecture and industry offered abstract art an alternative, and also – in the form of mural or applied works of art – the opportunity to benefit from a more permissive climate of the cultural policy.

Among the symposia related to industrial facilities was a meeting held at the Csepel Metal Works very early on, in 1970, with the participation of such figures of the Iparterv generation as Imre Bak, Tamás Hencze, or János Fajó. Fajó reported on the 3 months they spent at the factory and the 50 'experimental' sculptures that were made during that time on the pages of *Művészet* (Art). Fajó's text places a great emphasis on the cultural function of factory work, as does Imre Bak introduction published in the *Leporello* in 1978 on the occasion of the exhibition *10 éves a szimpozium mozgalmunk '68-'78* (*10 Years of Our Symposium Movement '68-'78*), dedicated to the ten-year anniversary of the beginning of the symposia. It was curated by Fajó and held at the Józsefváros Gallery in Budapest. It was established as part of the 'small gallery' system that was used by the Institute of Public Education, an important institution of the time. The gallery was one of the main venues dedicated to geometric abstraction. The group of the artists also participated in the workshops organised at printing houses, e.g., the Kner Printing House, a pioneering representative of modern book art. In Fajó's text, experimentation is closely linked to the educational purpose:

Raising economy to a higher level is unthinkable without raising the aesthetic standard of goods. This notion presupposes a new type of aesthetics with wide horizons. In addition to economy, modern aesthetics affects science and technology and thus becomes a direct productive force. Today's visual educational work and its entire network is a productive force shaping the future. This is why we need to pay more attention to our industrial art and experimental art that serves as a source of information for it, to do more, to make it organisationally suitable (Fajó 1976, 39).

To put the issue in a wider context, it seems that the term 'experimentation' is crucial with regard to the use of the infrastructure of the symposia for avant-garde, 'tolerated' endeavours: it appears to serve as a justification intended for official bodies as well as the audience and smaller

professional circles – with regard to the latter, these experiences could also be reminiscent of the avant-garde art's practice from the early twentieth century. György Aczél, who controlled the cultural life of the Kádár era holding various positions, in his cultural policy regarded the 'experiment' as contrary to high art which could somewhat explain the permissive stance towards it, but it also classified experimental tendencies that produced less serious results than works officially considered as high art.

It was a unique initiative when, in 1977, the active members of the Lajos Vajda Studio in Szentendre (it was also the occasion when Imre Bukta met the members of the Studio, an event that became very significant in their careers), the most radically open underground community of the era both in the cultural-political and subcultural sense, founded the Experimental Workshop in Leninváros (today Tiszaújváros), at the Tisza Chemical Plants. They experimented with plastic at the factory and the results were first shown at the local cultural centre and then at the Dorottya Exhibition Hall of the Institute for Cultural Relations in 1978. The Tisza Chemical Plant played a significant role also in the career of the fabric artist Lujza Gecser. She won the *Wall and Spatial Textile Biennial* in 1976 with her iconic spatial textile piece made of sisal, *Bridges*, created at the *Velem Textile Art Workshop* in 1975. As usual, the biennial winners were provided with the opportunity of a solo show in Kőszeg during the following biennial. Experimenting with plastic in textile is not surprising as synthetic materials are common in textile industry: beside Gecser, her colleagues Anikó Bajkó and Gabriella Farkas also analysed the possibilities of plastics and synthetic materials in the context of experimental textile art, studying the nature of fibre. However, Gecser explored plastic and epoxy at the Tisza Chemical Plant when she was preparing for her solo exhibition in 1978: her works were created in this spirit and, moreover, plastic played an important role in her work in the years to follow her show in Kőszeg.

Considering the Rába Workshop in Győr and the Symposium in Dunaujváros, it can be stated that Győr served as a centre for constructivist-geometric/minimalist sculpture with the participation of, among others, Zoltán Bohus, Tibor Csiky, János Fajó, Mária Lugossy, István Haraszty, István Nádler, and György Galántai. Dunaujváros was a venue for large-scale steel sculptures (among others, Attila Csáji, Ferenc Friedrich, Károly Hopp-Halász, Gábor Heritesz, Zoltán Bohus, István efZámbó, Gyula Gulyás, Enikő Szöllőssy, György Buczkó, Ferenc Martyn, Géza Samu, Gyula Várnai etc.), while Nagyatád hosted sculptors experimenting with wood where each of them donated one large-scale wood sculpture for the statue park at the end of their stay. Thus, provided with an appropriate amount of time (weeks, months – e.g., 3 months in Nagyatád, 2-5 months in Villány), supplies, fulfilment of technical and

material needs, and, where necessary, an industrial background, artists created open-air sculpture parks at those venues that can be visited to this day. These monumental, largely non-figurative works situated in public, city/community spaces (see: e.g., the riverside installation in Dunaujváros which best fits the fabric of the city) used a characteristically different visual language than the state-supported official sculpture dominating public spaces at the time, but it can be detected even in the case of the stone sculpture park at the Villány quarry.

That is why, for many artists, the presence gained in this way – in addition to the commissions supervised by the official body of the Lectorate of Arts and related to construction and investment projects – cannot be underestimated, as it provided a rare opportunity to realize larger-scale works and ideas. It is not an exaggeration to conclude that those activities were possible thanks to the cover word 'experimentation' which often appeared in the decisions on the establishment of the symposia and in the initiatives emphasising their *raison d'être*. All of that was supplemented by closing or introductory exhibitions related to the workshops and the symposia, as well as founding collections of the works created in the workshops and the symposia (see: e.g. the enamel collection in Kecskemét, or the textile collection in Szombathely). At the same time, the solid city/county background raised the need for internationalisation and the establishment of relations extending beyond borders, at the earliest in the case of the symposia around Pécs, but also in Dunaujváros (from 1983), Nagyatád and, occasionally, even in Velem.

### 3

Some events and works from the history of the symposia, which are now well-known elements of Hungarian neo-avant-garde's narrative, are already included in the neo-avant-garde canon, in terms of both the first and the second generation of neo-avant-garde. Such is the case of the above-mentioned participation in Beke's *Idea* – project that highlighted the intersection of the symposia and the avant-garde tendencies that were considered the most transgressive at the time. As already mentioned, the 'portfolios' submitted by the Pécs Workshop artists that were included in Beke's selection (e.g., Károly Kismányoky, Károly Szijártó) that also comprised works executed at the Bonyhád Enamel Factory or in the facility's vicinity, indicate the confidence and the more realistic approach resulting from the lessons learned during the pragmatic tasks carried out at the factory, as well as the intention to create public artworks. The works sent for *Idea* included Land art pieces as well, especially by Károly Kismányoky and Kálmán Szijártó. Getting out from the closed studio or factory space,



they discovered potential in nature (in the woods surrounding Bonyhád or the stone quarry in Pécsvárad), even if the enamel pieces are often tightly connected to the Land art pieces documented on photographs.

Land art meets concept in the collage by Gyula Gulyás, intended for the Villány Stone Sculpture Symposium - an attempt to 'stitch' a wall in the Villány quarry. It is a 'sketch' that was submitted by the artist to the *Imagination/Idea project* as well:

The location would be a wall of the mine in Villány with stitches running up a 15-metre-long crack in it, intended to prevent the impending collapse of the mountain. As a supplement to the work, I am sending a photographic documentation of the wall in the mine in Villány. The place where the work would be undertaken is indicated therein (Hegyí - László - Szakács 2014, 56).

It so happened that also in Villány Gyula Pauer - the artist who became famous for his Pseudo concept - a notion born in 1970, reflecting on both the current political and existential depths of appearance, perception, and reality - began his *Pseudo-relief* in 1971. He transferred a part of the wall of the quarry onto an aluminium sheet which he then placed next to the original site, so that, at a particular moment of the year, the original and the relief should match the lighting conditions at the time of the creation of the relief.

The painter Ilona Keserü's work *Pasted forms* was also executed in Villány, the description (plan) of which she sent to Beke's *Imagination / Idea project*:

Imagination - I do not pursue any of the activities designated in the letter of invitation. For me the creation of a work of art is one and the same thing as the realization of an object. The manner of execution plays a determining and qualifying role from the very beginning of the course of the work production, often becoming an independent dynamic force. Example: I came up with a 'plastered sculpture' made of pieces of stone and a bonding medium. The material and the method of the work made the large-scale realization in the necessary rhythm possible. I am making a 10-metre-long relief built on the ground, most of the work is done (Hegyí - László - Szakács 2014, 86).

Pauer's famous works *The Famous Pseudo Tree of Nagyatád* (*The Monument of the Tree*), the *Signboard Forest* and *Maya* were created at the Nagyatád Wood Sculpture Symposium - not part of *Imagination / Idea* though - in 1978. The *Pseudo performance* concept was also elaborated

in Nagyatád, and the first *Pseudo performance* was held at the same place in the same year, too. Pauer was invited to Nagyatád by István Bencsik – causing a stir among the symposium committee's other members – a key figure in the history of both the Wood Sculpture Symposium and the Villány Stone Sculpture Symposium. Bencsik held an important position in the symposia in general, although his career was disrupted several times due to his conflicts with the political authorities. One of them resulted in his dismissal from the Symposium Committee and from the leadership of Nagyatád following his expression of support for Gyula Pauer when Pauer's *Signboard Forest* caused a serious issue with the authorities in Nagyatád. Bencsik was first dismissed as the leader of the Young Artists' Studio in consequence of the scandalous, jury-free, 1966 annual exhibition of the Studio members' works, showing also abstract art. He spent the following years in reclusion to eventually start working on a series of four non-figurative sculptures at the Villány quarry in 1971-74: the site provided Bencsik with both asylum and infrastructure. He took part in the launching of the Nagyatád Workshop in 1974 and served as the secretary of the Symposium Committee of the Association of Fine and Applied Artists (1974-1977). After the fiasco of Pauer's activity in Nagyatád, he went to Villány in 1978 and became one of the founders of the International Sculpture Workshop there.

Pauer's pieces executed in Nagyatád show the manner in which artworks were transferred to the 'forbidden' area in the seventies. Pauer was working as a scenographer at the time at the legendary, progressive Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár in a relative reclusion, living the life of a 'tolerated' artist of the seventies. Both the *Pseudo Tree* and the *Signboard Forest* dealt with the epistemological issues of art. In the first case, it consisted in a recreation of the trunk of a tree with the idea of 'pseudo' and reflection on the act of erecting a monument, while in the other, the installation consisted of 131 oak boards recalling the notion of signboards used in a pseudo protest. In the case of the *Pseudo tree*, Pauer created canvas 'prints' of the tree trunk that he painted with spray paint, thus creating an illusory image of it. He peeled off the crust and fixed the canvas pieces onto the trunk, then pulled off the painted canvas parts, but the image – the image of the trunk – remained. The piece was erected on a cement plinth covered with semi-granite as an ironical reflection on a monument. In the case of the *Signboard Forest*, half an hour after its installation, the local police smeared the inscriptions on the signs with mud, even though Bencsik previously had sent them to the Association of Fine and Applied Artists for approval, suspecting that the piece might cause trouble. A few days after the erection, the work was destroyed and only survived in Katalin Keserü's positive lectorate account (Sasvári 2005, 151-153) from the summaries compiled later about the Nagyatád Symposium.

As Edit Sasvári puts it, it is extremely hard to determine how such a drastic act of artwork destruction could occur in the history of the symposium movement that constantly declared its commitment to artistic freedom. It might be that György Aczél himself gave the order to dismantle the *Signboard Forest* as he called out the town of Nagyatád at the Party's gathering in Kaposvár asking on the possibility of a piece doubtlessly belonging to the 'forbidden' category of culture to appear publicly at a state-founded event. The boards were hidden and recycled in the years to follow, or just got destroyed over time, only a single board from the original piece was found in Székesfehérvár. However, the entire work was reconstructed in 2015, after decades of information gathering and 'spiritual / theoretical reconstruction.' Pauer's only surviving, original work from the 1978 Nagyatád Symposium is the sculpture *Maya*, which later played an important role in his pseudo-performances and 'ceremonies.' The piece is now a part of the Hungarian National Gallery's collection.

Considering the above-mentioned stories, circumstances, and artworks, it is clear that the range of these events could be expanded. The most adequate example would be the inclusion of the Velem Textile Art Workshop (1975-1983), the venue with the most complex history. Its launching is rooted in the framework of the Szombathely textile biennials, also connected with the foundation of the textile collection at the Savaria Museum in Szombathely. As a sign of the self-identifying role of fabric art in the case of the Museum, the exhibitions *50 Years of Wall and Spatial Textile Biennials in Szombathely* and *Velem Textile Art Workshop 1975-1983* were organised in 2022. They were complemented with the museum specialists' contributions (Mária Mihály, Gábor Bándi, Péter Ficz), texts, bilingual catalogues, photographic documentation, and PR activities, as well as the participation of artists active in the representative organisations (Gábor Attalai, Zsuzsa Szenes, Margit Szilvitzky, Árpád Búzás), and professionals supporting 'experimental textiles' (András Bán, László Beke, Éva Forgács, János Frank, Márta Kovalovszky, etc.). With the generation of a series of excellent works, the efforts to renew textile reflected the rise of the conceptual way of thinking in Hungary (Zsuzsa Szenes, Anikó Bajkó, Lujza Gecser, Csilla Kelecsényi, etc.). The notion of 'conceptual textile' was especially fully realised in two exhibitions closely connected to the most radical experiments conducted in Velem: the *Textile After Textile* exhibition (Gábor Attalai, Anikó Bajkó, Ilona Keserü, Dóra Maurer, Ana Lupas, Zsuzsa Szenes, at Galeria40 in Eger, curated by András Bán), and the *Textile Without Textile* (Anikó Bajkó, Miklós Erdély, György Galántai, Lujza Gecser, Judit Gink, Kati Gulyás, András Halász, György Kemény, Zsuzsa Szenes, Margit Szilvitzky, György Szőnyei, László Vidovszky, Gyula Pauer, at the Young Artists' Club in Budapest) exhibition. The latter was subsequently accompanied

by an editioned, extended graphic folder. One of the most significant experimental textile artists, a *Łódź Triennial* exhibitor, Romanian Ana Lupas took part in the show in Eger, giving it an international, and again, transregional dimension. The decade-defining series of six exhibitions, *Tendencias*, organised at the Óbuda Gallery between 1980 and 1981 – each of which was curated by a different art historian – aimed to collect and show the relevant phenomena that occurred in the grey zone of the seventies art, and already included fabric in the form of 'soft art' in the exhibition no. 6 organised by László Beke. Also, Gábor Attalai curated the exhibition *Objects, Situations with Soft Materials* at Múcsarnok in 1981 with the same fine arts-related approach to textile. All the examples demonstrate close connections with the radical changes in the medium of fabric and its 'fine art' approach. Spatial textile and fibre experiments were the most prevalent among the works created in Velem, although action-based, performative pieces gained an increasingly bigger ground as well. Judit Kele's performance in the garden involving ten artists and ten art historians centred around the possibilities of moving large pieces of fabric in 1977. Zsuzsa Szenes created an environment by covering the objects and the space elements with fabric in her work *Cell (Interior, Exterior, 1977)* and used wool-stitching to 'domesticate' typically male and war-related objects, such as a gas mask or a military watch-box. Szenes did performances as well - the moment when she covered the barrier blocking the border area (as Velem is very close to the Austrian border) with fabric, as a hidden and instinctive political reflection, was especially memorable.

One of the most versatile Hungarian neo-avantgarde artist, Gábor Attalai should also be mentioned here. He was a very active theoretician of new textile, a curator, a networker (Mail art), and a conceptual artist who did performances and worked with photography. He worked mainly with felt (see: his *Rolls* series), and his hung pieces could be paired up with Robert Morris' (post)minimalist works. He was a very active organiser (together with some other leading members of the Textile Department of the Association such as Zsuzsa Szenes, Margit Szilvitzky, or Árpád Búzás) and an exceptionally well-informed artist who also disseminated new information among his colleagues. According to Ilona Lovas, who started her career as a textile/fibre artist and became a fine artist working with organic materials (wheatgerm, wafer etc.), Attalai facilitated their trip (Ilona Lovas, Judit Kele, Orshi Drozdik) to the Feminist Congress in Belgrade in 1978 where they showed a photo series presenting them in typical, daily, 'womanly' situations.

The freedom offered by Velem Workshop can be partly explained by the presence of women, considered 'harmless', who worked together in a remote area, in the periphery. The aspect of feminism or even

essentialist women art is usually refused by the former participants – except for a few artists – strengthening the notion of 'latent' feminism prevalent in the region.

Judit Droppa experimented with the transparency of layers of stretched knitted fabric in geometrical compositions, while Kati Gulyás (connecting textile and her original profession, porcelain painting) mostly dealt with photography combined with fabric. Judit Gink experimented with a printing grid and silkscreen printing transferred onto fabric. Lujza Gecser's pieces, whose experiments with plastic are mentioned above, should figure among the most radical international works that used fabric/fibre as a base. From 1979, she further expanded her toolkit and used paper, cellophane, aluminium foil, mirror, glass, silver spray paint, black cloth, and film strip. In the autumn of 1980, in the attic of the Velem Textile Art Workshop, she created a 120 m<sup>2</sup> installation, a 'labyrinth' named *Mirror-Reflection*: its walls were made of mirrors, aluminium foil, cellophane, and black cloth. The work was immortalized in the film *Mirror-Space* shot together with the filmmaker and then-husband András Szirtes. Similarly to Gecser, Anikó Bajkó organised her radical solo show in 1978. Gecser presented her pieces in Kőszeg, while Bajkó – who started her career as a winner of the *Industrial Textile Biennale* in 1973 – also exhibited outside of Budapest, in Eger. She showed her works reflecting and based on her findings in the Mohács textile cemetery, a dump she had visited with the photographer István Halas. From then on, Bajkó's work became engaged with the mutilation, destruction of textile – she even buried the fabric. She recorded the sound of tearing, burning, 'torturing' fabric, imitating in such a manner a whole life cycle from destruction and death to resurrection and a new life through the material – the piece was shown at the *Textile Without Textile* exhibition.

Csilla Kelecsényi, originally interested in the spatial intersection of free-standing, parallel fibres, did performances at Fészek Club (a venue especially supportive towards new textile thanks to its curator, Éva Molnár) in 1978 as well as in Velem in 1980. There she blocked the audience from directly seeing the actual performance by separating the space where the performers were sitting and only showing the piece on a TV screen. After winning the *Wall and Spatial Textile Biennial* in 1978, she held a solo show in Kőszeg (1980) where she created a dark space that served as an 'action space.' Kelecsényi was the only Hungarian participant in *K-18 Stoffwechsel*, a satellite exhibition to *Documenta* in Kassel in 1982. It reveals the controversial nature of the era that, at the same time, her 1981 work *Involvement* (a piece using plaster - another of her signature materials along with tar or the colours black and white) was censored. It was intended to be sent to the *Łódź Triennial* but was interpreted – falsely - as a reflection of the events in Poland and an expression of sympathy with

Solidarity. The work never arrived in Łódź - it was stored at the Savaria Museum in Szombathely until the artist decided to destroy it.

György Galántai worked in Velem twice: first, in 1979, he used his own portrait photo to put it on fabric and used it in different outdoor situations as a conceptual action. In 1981, he used the clothes created during his performance with his wife Júlia Klaniczay and G.A. Cavellini. The original performance (*Homage to Vera Muhina*) took place in Heroes' Square in Budapest in 1980 when Galántai and Klaniczay recreated Vera Muhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman Statue*. Cavellini wrote the names of the artists that he considered crucial on the performers' white clothes. Galántai then used the clothes in his installation in Velem and in the performance series executed in various locations, among others, at the Savaria Museum in Szombathely, together with Klaniczay.

We have presented here the most radical and experimental pieces connected to Velem, but it is also important to note that the workshop brought together at least two generations of artists as well as, just like the biennials in Szombathely, different approaches to textile/fibre art. As a result, even the most traditional genre, the wall hanging, could be renewed as demonstrated by the 'conceptual tapestry' works by Gizella Solti or Judit Nagy.

These material and spatial experiments, thanks to the open way of thinking that characterised the Velem Workshop, attracted avant-garde artists such as György Galántai or the graphic artist György Kemény to cross-genre nomadism. Velem's structure of operation was exceptionally solid: participants went through an application process in which they had to present their projects and the required materials that were then financed by the organisers, i.e. the Savaria Museum or even the Ministry of Light Industry that participated in the late seventies - the involvement of the Ministry signalled official attention as well as the fact that the potential of the workshop was noticed by the representatives of the industry, although, naturally, it was a complete misunderstanding regarding the intentions of the art camp and the symposium. The art residency in Velem was six weeks long and took place in early autumn each year concluding with an exhibition, presentations, and actions. Even performances were organised within the framework of the Open Days that served as the symposium in the colony and attracted professionals and artists from all fields resulting in broad, often critical coverage. In the November 1978 issue of the review *Művészet* dedicated to the symposia/workshops, Nagyatád and Siklós figure among the most often mentioned venues. Nagyatád gets most of the criticism, too: the most common issues are the vague nature of the selection process and - a general issue relevant also in the case of Villány and Dunaújváros - the problem of an unplanned, crowded setting of the statue parks.

A bilingual book was published every second year with texts by the involved art historians. As was the case for the other symposiums and workshops, one piece produced during the art camp was selected for the collection of the museum.

#### 4

In conclusion, taking all the above into account, it is worth reflecting on the canonizing effect – including its relevance after 1989 – and the role of regular participation resulting in the visibility in exhibitions, symposia, and art camps, and subsequent inclusion in collections, or even building a career in the neo-avant-garde generation. It can also be stated that in most cases the role of the art historians leading the venues and museum professionals was crucial in this process, just to name a few beside the experts already mentioned: Éva Csenkey, who dealt with the Baranya County Symposia with great commitment (since the artistic management of the sculpture symposium and the ceramics symposium merged in 1973), Ferenc Romváry, a museologist at the Janus Pannonius Museum Pécs, or Katalin S. Nagy who served as the Nagyatád Symposium's art historian. It is obviously no coincidence that the specialists of the Museum of Applied Arts – Dénes Radocsay, Éva Sz. Koroknay, Pál Miklós – defined Szombathely (Savaria Museum) and Pécs (Janus Pannonius Museum) as 'centres of collecting ceramics and textile, respectively' in their plans for founding and developing collections as early as in 1972 (Ernyey 2022, 57).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: Glossary of Terms, entry 'Three T-system'.

<sup>2</sup> See: Glossary of Terms, entry 'Kádár era'.

<sup>3</sup> The authors express their gratitude to Eszter Tóth for her help in the compilation of this text.

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acb ResearchLab's series on Pécs Workshop artists (2016-2020; Károly Hopp-Halász in comparison with Imre Bak, Ferenc Ficzek, Kálmán Szijártó, Károly Kismányoky, Sándor Pinczehelyi).

Catalog series of the Siklós, Villány symposia.

Catalog series of the Wall and Spatial Textile Biennales, the Industrial Textile Biennales and the Miniature Textile Biennales in Szombathely.

Catalog series of the Velem Textile Art Workshop (1975-76, 1977-78-79, 1980-81, 1982-83).

**illustrations®**



Ferenc Lantos. Image taken at the Bonyhád Factory of Enamel Works, 1971–72. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery.

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1. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture *Dunaújváros Steel Sculptor Workshop*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest
  2. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Győr Art Colony, Rába Works*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest
  3. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Nagyatád Wood Sculpture Workshop and Symposium*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest
  4. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Tisza Chemical Plant*, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest.
  5. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Villány Stone Sculpture Symposium*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest
  6. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Tisza Chemical Plant*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest
  7. Interior view of the exhibition Achievements of Art Symposia I, Sculpture – *Győr Art Colony, Rába Works*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, 1983. Courtesy of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest



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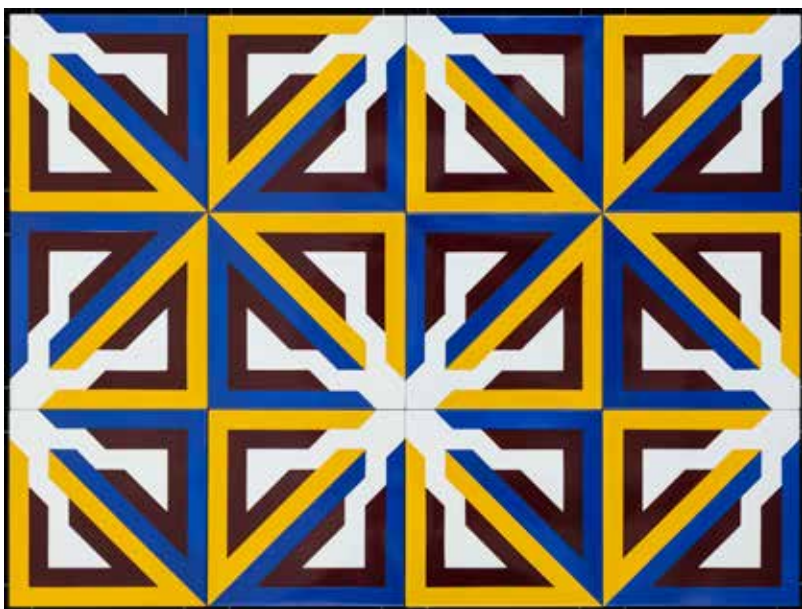
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Imre Bak, *Sketch for Enamel*, 1973, felt-tip pen on paper, 18x23 cm. Photo by Dávid Tóth. Courtesy of acb Gallery



1. View of the Villány–Nagyharsány Quarry and Open-Air Exhibition with Pierre Székely, *Evolution*, 1971-72;. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery
2. Gyula Bocz, *Life*, 1969-71 and Gyula Bocz, *Spiral 2*, 1971-73 at the Villány-Nagyharsány Quarry and Open-Air Exhibition. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery



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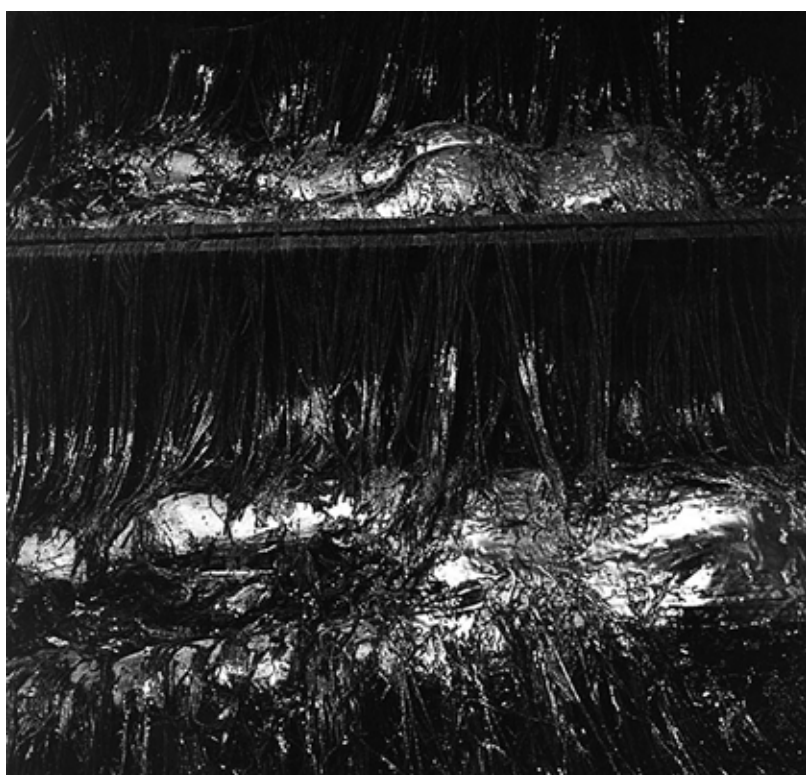


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1. Iona Keserü Iona, *Pasted Forms*, marble, limestone, mortar, 1971–73, Villány-Nagyharsány Open-Air Exhibition. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery
2. Csilla Kelecsényi, Installation at Zwinger, Kőszeg, 1980. Photo by László Lelkes. Courtesy of the Artist



Interior of the exhibition *Térjelek/Space Marks* with the works of Sándor Pinczehelyi, Ferenc Ficzek, Kálmán Szijártó, Károly Kismányoky, acb Attachment, Budapest, 2022. Photo by Dávid Tóth. Courtesy of acb Gallery



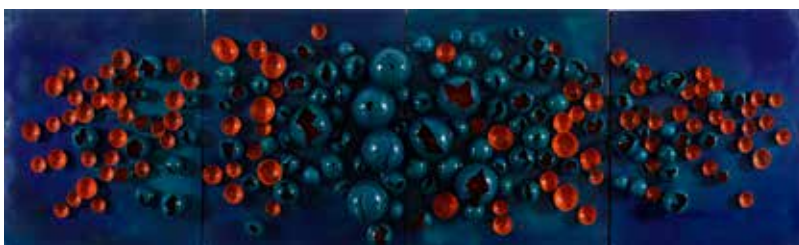
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1. Ferenc Lantos, *Study of Spatial Elements*, 1968, enamelled steel plate, 90x120 cm (12 pcs, 30 x 30 cm each), private collection. Photo by Tibor Varga Somogyi. Courtesy of acb Gallery

2. Gyula Gulyás, *Geometry I-II*, 1973, Villány-Nagyharsány Open-Air Exhibition. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery



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1. Gyula Pauer, *Mural Composition*, 1968, enamelled steel plate, ladles, 125x400x20 cm (4 pcs, 125 x 100 x 20 cm each), private collection. Photo by Tibor Varga Somogyi. Courtesy of acb Gallery

2. Károly Hopp-Halász, *Untitled*, 1969, enamelled steel plate, 60x60 cm (4 pcs, 30 x 30 cm each). Photo by Dávid Tóth. Courtesy of acb Gallery



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2

1. Judit Droppa, *From Plane to Space*, 1977, polyester, plain knitted fabric, 70x280x70 cm (4 pcs, 70x70 cm each). Private Collection. Courtesy of the Artist

2. Károly Kismányoky, *Relation*, 1971, enamelled steel plate, 100x200 cm (2pcs, 100x100 cm each). Photo by Csaba Aknay. Courtesy of acb Gallery



Károly Kismányoky – Kálmán Szijártó, *"Forest"*. *Ordered - unordered signs; signs becoming unordered*, 1970, silver gelatin print mounted on docubrom mounted on cardboard, 29.3x42 cm. Photo by Dávid Tóth. Courtesy of acb Gallery



Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Imagination*, photo sketches, 1971, gelatin silver print, 40 pcs mounted on cardboard, 73x64 cm. Private collection. Photo by Dávid Tóth. Courtesy of acb Gallery and the owner



Siklós Ceramics Symposium (Ceramics in the Garden) with works by Béla Bükki, Sándor Kecskeméti, Magda Müller, Antal Pázmándi, Margit Gerle, Zsuzsa Móker, Gyula Kovács, Éva Koller, 1976. Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of acb Gallery

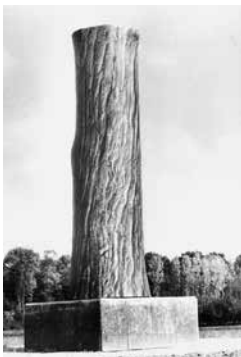




Gyula Pauer, *Maya*, 1978, wood, silk, 203x40x40 cm, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



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3

1. Kati Gulyás, *Mozdulatlan mozgás II. / Motionless Motion II*, 1979, canvas, paper, photograph, 180x233 cm, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest
2. Gyula Pauer, *The Famous Psuedo Tree of Nagyatád (The Monument of the Tree)*, 1978. Photo by Tibor Durgó. Courtesy of Nagyatád Cultural Centre
3. Gyula Pauer, *Pseudo-relief*, Villány, 1971 (lost). Photo by Katalin Nádor. Courtesy of Annamária Szőke and the artist's heirs



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1. Gyula Pauer, *Signboard Forest*, 1978. Photo by Gyula Pauer. Courtesy of Annamária Szóke and the artist's heirs

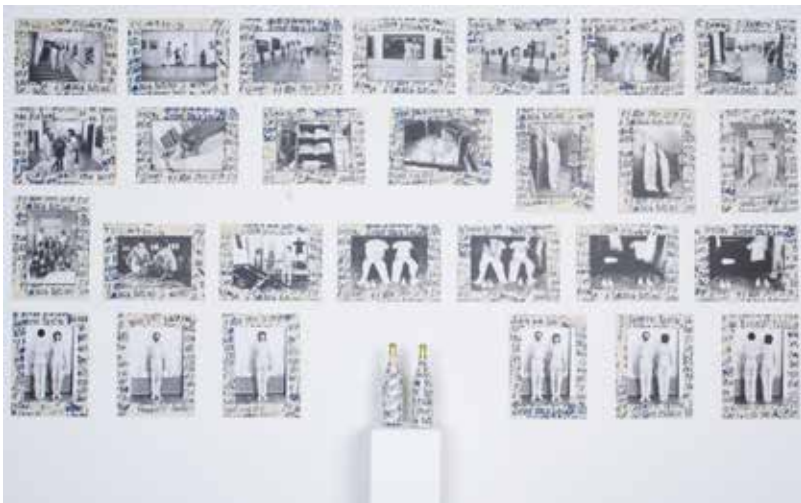
2. Anikó Bajkó, *Textile Cemetery*, Mohács, 1978 (Finding Autopsy – Textile Cemetery Mohács, 1979). Photo by István Halas. Courtesy of István Halas



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3

1. Lujza Gecser, *Bridges*, 1975, spun sisal, 360x40 cm each, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely
2. Lujza Gecser, *R-series 1-3.*, 1983, impregnated textile, molding, 150x50x50 cm each, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely
3. György Galántai, *Clothes make the man*, 1981, glass, photo, own technique, 30x40 cm each, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely



Judit Gink, *Displacement (Rubens)*, 1978, textile, rayon, printed, 85x115 cm each,  
Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely



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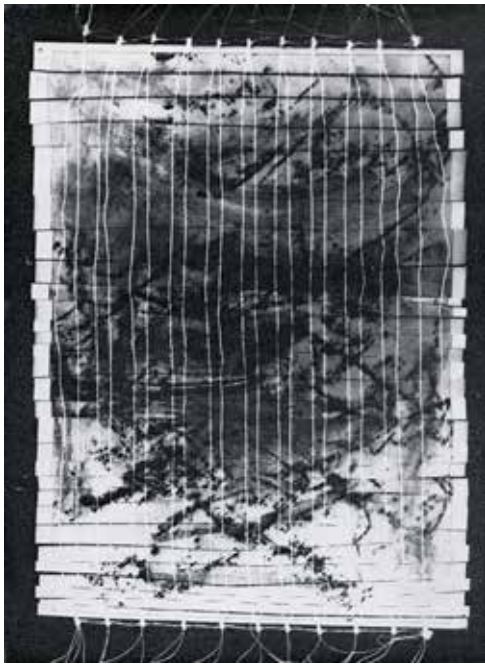


3



4

1. Ilona Lovas, *Small window*, 1977, window frame, fiberglass, fishing line, aluminium fiber, glass, woven, mixed technique, 40x25x3 cm, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely
2. Gizella Solti, *Preserve*, woven, wool, linen in bottle, 19x9 cm, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely
3. Zsuzsa Szenes, *Previously utilitarian, now decoration (Gas Mask)*, 1975, wool, mixed technique, 18x15x15 cm, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely
4. Zsuzsa Szenes, *Against Cold In General (Guard Box)*, 1978, wool, wood, laced, painted, embroidered, 220x60x60 cm, Savaria Municipal County Museum – Kunsthalle Szombathely



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Gyula Gulyás, *Stitching the Mountain*, 1971, gelatin silver print (the original contains the threads as well), 21.3 x 14.7 cm. From the *Imagination/Idea* project. Courtesy of Kontakt Collection, Vienna



1. Lujza Gecser, *Changes in a Drawing by Weaving and Spinning*, 1980, photo weaving, drawing, photograph, film, cotton threads, 110x180 cm (from the exhibition catalogue *Objektek, szituációk és ellenpontok lágy anyagokkal*, Múcsarnok, 1981. Curated by Gábor Attalai, p. 33.)
2. Károly Halász (left) at work, Dunaújváros, 1981. Courtesy of Gyula Várnai.
3. György Galántai: *Entry to the Future*, Dunaújváros, 1989. Courtesy of Gyula Várnai
4. György Galántai and the Előre (Forward) Brigade, Dunaújváros, 1979. Courtesy of Gyula Várnai
5. Gyula Gulyás during the making of his sculpture *Unfolding I-III*, Dunaújváros, 1975. Courtesy of Gyula Várnai







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**THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF CONTEMPORARY  
ART IN POLAND  
IN POST-YALTA  
CONDITIONS**

## INTRODUCTION

### Assumptions and Methods

In Poland as well as in the other Visegrád Group (V4) countries, during the post-Yalta period in Europe, a specific type of contemporary art emerged that was adapted to the prevailing socio-political conditions. At the same time, artists in these countries referred to their own traditions of avant-garde art, strongly developed in the period before World War II. Considering this regional specificity, Piotr Piotrowski, a Polish researcher, labelled the processes in operation here a 'horizontal' art history based on the assumption that in the countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, art developed in its own way, and these developments were not just a result of the reception of trends from the West (Piotrowski 2009, 2008).

This study presents a selection of art facts, works, and events characterised by the most radical artistic assumptions. They are the ones that were ground-breaking in some way, or which initiated new trends, or met the essential features of a given trend. Such case studies make it possible to examine the idea of art, its understanding, and interpretation. They mark the 'triangulation points' of art history. Linking these points allows one to form a comprehensive image of the development of art in a country or a region.

### Timeline of Contemporary Art

The basic time frame of this presentation of contemporary Polish art covers the period from the mid-sixties to the collapse of the Communist state in 1989.

In the period immediately following World War II, in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, Socialist Realism became the officially-recognised art style, which resulted from the cultural policy adopted by the governments of the post-Yalta countries. Socialist Realism was related to Stalinism. Just as Stalinism was a political system imposed by the Soviet Union after World War II on the countries of the region, Socialist Realism was a trend that upheld that system and so was supported by the national authorities. Therefore, after Stalin's death in 1953, and after overcoming the Stalinist system in individual countries, it was dismissed and replaced by the trends

dominant in world art in the fifties, i.e., non-geometric abstraction such as Abstract Expressionism and Informel painting. Compared to Socialist Realism, abstraction seemed to liberalize the possibilities of artistic creation in particular, hence, it was eagerly used.

It was also then that semi-figurative art emerged, i.e., a combination of expression and deformation, but with a clear suggestion of anecdote, a theme that made such art accessible, and thus consolidated its social status and the social standing of the artists who practiced it. With time, this type of painting became the leading trend in official art, accepted by the authorities in the circumstances of a totalitarian state which aimed to control all aspects of social and individual life.<sup>1</sup>

However, the trend in question did not cause any fundamental change in the way art was defined, which remained linked to the tradition of modernist painterly production and reception based on aesthetic contemplation, with the role of the artist as a picture-maker. Over time, such painting became self-replicating as well as ceasing to conform to both changing art and political realities. Nevertheless, it continued throughout the post-Yalta period. In parallel with this tendency in art, new trends appeared, marking the process of development of contemporary art based on a different definition of art.

In the sixties, new trends emerged that extended the definition of art beyond the means of that type of painting. Later in the decade, they became more visible and gained the power to shift the way art was defined. The new way of defining art covered a whole range of new artistic practices that constitute the framework of contemporary art today. The artists used other, mainly non-painterly means to create art. The amount of ephemeral time-based art produced grew rapidly, primarily in the form of Action art, happenings, and events, along with space-based, environmental Installation art, and site-specific art. The type of object art that was of key importance was based on the use of a ready-made. All these were pre-conceptual forms that constituted the basis for the development of Conceptual art. The emergence of such works in the field of art in Poland as well as in the other V4 countries marked a breakthrough in art everywhere, as well as the beginning of the history of contemporary art presented here.

The process of changes leading to the redefinition of art culminated in Conceptualism as a broad trend encompassing many forms of artistic realisation. Along with Action art, it was socially grounded as an alternative, independent, *de facto*, un-official art institution. It was Conceptualism that was the game changer. In all the countries behind the Iron Curtain in the discussed time frame, similar processes can be identified taking place, with slight differences in timing not affecting the image of the dynamics of the trend. Everywhere, its development was

additionally motivated by the nature of ephemeral works which offered the possibility to escape the control of totalitarian state authorities.

Conceptual art dominated the decade of the seventies in world art. It was the awareness of Conceptual art among artists, audiences, and art institutions, that was the decisive factor in the development of art. In Poland, as well as in the other countries of the V4 region, it was no different. Therefore, one can equate Conceptualism and contemporary art, while the art of the following decades can be described as Post-Conceptual due to the consequences of Conceptualism.

The most dynamic development of contemporary art in the seventies and eighties closely correlated with the development of Conceptualism. In Poland, the dynamics was the highest in the decade of the seventies, somewhat 'extended' until December 13, 1981. The eighties (in fact a 'shortened decade' until 1989), was the period of the imposition of martial law and its consequences, i.e., the abrupt closure of the public sphere. Contemporary art created on the basis of Conceptual art survived that period in private studios and was reborn in the second half of the eighties, proving its strength and resilience. In this late phase, it turned into Post-Conceptual art and merged with post-modern and post-avant-garde trends.

The end date for this study is essentially 1989. This date marks a political breakthrough with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the post-Yalta division of Europe. In the internal politics of both Poland and the V4 countries it meant the end of the totalitarian rule, a change in the political system, and the advent of parliamentary democracy as well as the market economy system. This led to the opening of borders, the freedom to travel, the expansion of contacts and access to more information translated into a diversity of inspirations and forms of art. Nevertheless, the fundamental Post-Conceptual trend in contemporary art continued. The consequences of the development of the leading trends of the seventies and eighties go beyond the breakthrough date of 1989. Today's art can be legitimately called Post-Conceptual in general terms, which justifies the inclusion of selected facts from the nineties and two-thousands in this study.

The emergence of contemporary art museums in Poland and the other V4 countries meant that un-official art was musealised. The works went to their collections and started to be in demand on the art market. The reintegration with Europe, the accession of Poland and the V4 countries to the European Union and the Schengen area is a measure of overcoming the post-Yalta political system. It also sets the horizon for research into the history of contemporary art in Poland and individual V4 countries.

## The Un-official Art Institution and the Conceptual Definition of Art

An art institution is a system including all the persons and places actively involved in the shaping of the hierarchy of art values based on common general theoretical and artistic assumptions, who are able to embed these values in a society by building a distribution system of these values.

The function of an art institution lies in its ability to be validated as art, i.e., to be qualified as a work of art, or to be an artist, and thus to have the power to anchor art in a society. The role of art institutions is therefore political *par excellence*.

The history of art presented in connection with an art institution appears as a holistic and continuous development. Without an established art institution, art history refers to isolated artists, artworks, exhibitions, and events that fail to form an influential grassroots system that can constitute a local art scene, gain social impact, and, consequently, political power.

Conceptual art was of key importance for the development of contemporary art in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. The definition of Conceptualism covered a whole range of ephemeral practices related to installation in various spaces including landscape, ready-made objects, sound art, or Performance art. As new art requires a new medium for new art forms, Conceptualism was defined mainly by the use of photography and film (and then video), with performance for the camera constituting the main artistic means. Making this kind of art was highly political. While abstract or semi-figurative painting gained acceptance in official art institutions, galleries, and museums, Conceptualism did not - under any circumstances. The only place for Conceptualism remained the un-official sphere, i.e., and more broadly speaking - the social space it had to build itself. The lack of support for this type of art from the state authorities and institutions was a political decision. The un-official art institution that emerged in response was political by virtue of its very artistic assumptions. Conceptualism was political because of its ephemeral nature. At the same time, it was a radically different kind of art, and thus critical towards the kinds of art promoted as part of the state's cultural policy.

For that reason, the history of art is presented here as a co-occurrence of the process of creating new art forms and the creation of the conditions for the institutionalisation of this type of art. The un-official art institution ensured a constant presence of new art trends in culture by creating and maintaining its own infrastructure and providing a system for the circulation of artworks in the Conceptual gallery movement (which also contributed to its development) - as the possibility of presenting

and receiving works stimulates their production. Such un-official art institutions came to being in each of the countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. Such an institution is also the key aspect of the 'horizontal' reading of art history. In each case, it was based on broadly understood Conceptual art. It was the nature of Conceptualism that enabled the emergence of the un-official art institution in Poland and in the other V4 countries. The huge political role of Conceptual art consisted in the fact that it brought the possibility of practicing contemporary art outside official institutions, and thus outside the state authorities' control.

In Conceptual art, the boundaries between the roles of the artist, theoretician, curator, or art organiser were blurred. Conducting and presenting theoretical speculations and the organisational activities, such as establishing and running galleries, and curating artistic projects, became forms of art-making. The same was true for conferences, symposiums, or lectures, i.e., the types of events that allowed the emulation of the functioning of science. Conceptualism greatly expanded the possibilities of creating art. All these practices belong today to the area called artistic research.

The process of building un-official art institutions started in Poland in the second half of the sixties and was based on the model of operation of the Krzysztofory and Foksal galleries constituting the founding myth of the gallery movement. The seventies saw a significant acceleration of this process with the development of Conceptual art that expanded such organisational activity as a recognised artistic practice. Its peak development occurred in the second half of the decade with many local examples of such an activity grounded in artists' societies. Hence, the years 1980-81, the period of the official functioning and political influence of *Solidarność*, which brought more freedom, was the time to sum up the decade of the development of contemporary art on the basis of Conceptual art, and, at the same time, a demonstration of the power of un-official art institutions capable of organising large international exhibitions using their personal contacts only, such as *Construction in Process* in Łódź, the 9th Kraków Meetings, or *70-80* in Sopot. After the period of suppression following the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, the movement was revived around the mid-eighties by a new generation of artists and organisers – a demonstration of the strong social roots of un-official art institutions.

In the legal system of a totalitarian state, it was not possible to establish NGOs. There was no art market with galleries. For that reason, galleries were established as nested within official institutions, hence, they were sometimes called 'semi-official,' a term which took into account a degree of administrative subordination pointing to their independence in respect of their programmes at the same time. Those were, e.g., local



galleries, student cultural centres, artists' clubs, and other venues run by the authorities of cultural institutions. The terms 'artist-run' or ARI (artist-run-initiative) are to some extent not applicable to the Polish circumstances, as the institutions themselves were not established at the grassroots, like associations or foundations, but were run by people favouring contemporary art with Conceptual characteristics. The other terms used such as 'second sphere' or 'second culture' describe a relationship with the political authorities, but they are misleading as those were parallel spheres, and completely autonomous in terms of their role in relation to art. The 'second' one did the same thing as the first one, that is, it defined art and determined the scope of its artistic practices creating their social circulation - but in relation to a different art. Only the 'second' was related to the leading trends of contemporary art.

The term 'un-official,' on the other hand, indicates a difference from the type of art officially promoted in galleries, museums, or magazines. The term 'independent' has a similar meaning, defined at that time by a type of artmaking and referring to artists working within broadly understood Conceptual and Performance art trends. It was independence *de facto*, not *de jure*. All those initiatives formed a network of institutions. The amount of artistic production within the network was huge, be it Poland or the V4 region. Its common denominator was the way of defining contemporary art via Conceptualism (Patrick 2003).

The history of the gallery movement and the un-official art institution can be demonstrated by means of a sequence of key events illustrating the dynamics of its development. Still, it should be borne in mind that the history was created by many artist-run initiatives. In the period discussed in this study, more than seventy institutions of this type operated in Poland (sic!).

1968

Meeting of Galleries and Salons of Debutants at the odNowa Gallery in Poznań in 1968. Eight galleries and five salons of debutants participated. The first event grouping initiatives of this type. The beginning of the formation of un-official art institution.

1972

The NET initiative was founded by Jarosław Kozłowski (artist) and Andrzej Kostołowski (critic). The project based on distributing a manifesto-letter entitled NET to artists in Poland and abroad. The project was a result of the development of the Conceptual art trend and referred to such artistic practices as Mail art and Fluxus activities. NET integrated an ARI activity and transformed it into a movement (network). The practice to publicly publish the postal addresses of the artists participating in the art

initiative was used for the first time on a large scale by NET. Still, it was a widespread practice in the art world in Poland and other countries of the region. Providing one's address in a public space made practical sense in terms of seeking contact with other interested parties, and, especially, bridging the boundary of the Iron Curtain. It also meant belonging to the elite of contemporary art. At the same time, it was a manifestation of the overcoming of the fear of surveillance. It was an individual political act, and NET was also political. In 1975, art magazine *Flash Art* began publishing the *Art Diary*, its own mailing list.

1973

*Przegląd dokumentacji galerii niezależnych (Documentation Review of the Independent Galleries)* was held at the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw. Nineteen galleries participated. The curatorial model consisted of the contribution of a gallery to the exhibition by their exhibiting artist and their art first appeared there.

1977

The *CDN Art Festival* in Warsaw, curated by Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski (b. 1948), was held in an urban space (under the bridge over the Vistula river). Twenty-two galleries and six groups participated.

1981

*70-80. Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej (70-80. New Phenomena in Polish Art)* held at the BWA Gallery in Sopot founded by Józef Robakowski and Witosław Czerwonka. Thirty-five galleries from Poland were invited. The biggest presentation of the Conceptual gallery artists and their art in the seventies.

1987

The 2nd Biennial of New Art in Zielona Góra at the BWA Gallery. Artworks selected by galleries were presented at the exhibition. Twelve galleries participated with most of them newly established by the new generation of artists-organisers.

# THE DYNAMICS OF ART TRENDS IN POLAND

## **The Sixties**

### **Political and Social Context**

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the condemnation of Stalinist crimes in the Soviet Union by Nikita Khrushchev, who became the head of the new authorities, did not automatically change the policy of the regimes in the Central European countries subordinated to Moscow.

The political breakthrough in Poland began in June 1956 after the change of the ruling party's leadership as a result of a strike and riots in Poznań. They were suppressed by the Polish Army, which meant that the authorities established by the Soviet Union in Poland after World War II stood on solid ground with a firm social basis and could feel strong. At the same time, the events in Poznań were the result of dissatisfaction among the workers of large factories only, and it was them that constituted the main force of resistance. That would be repeated in subsequent crises. Hence, the repressions carried out by the authorities were aimed mainly at the working class, not intellectuals, which created an illusion of relative freedom in Poland. That was a different course of de-Stalinization than in Hungary, where the uprising was suppressed by the Soviet Army and changes were postulated by the elites inside the authorities, in the army, and intellectuals. The scope of Hungarian demands was also wider. In Poland, the nature of the demands was social, concerning the living conditions of the working class. Hungary hoped to change the status of the state from complete Soviet domination to relative independence in the style of neighbouring Austria or Yugoslavia. The Poznań protest in Poland had no such ambitions.

In the second half of the sixties, the post-Stalinist authorities began to show signs of decay and increasingly fell short of social expectations. Their symbolic legitimacy was still based on the myth of rebuilding the country from post-war destruction, which was supposed to justify material deficiencies and social sacrifices in the name of a bright future. Meanwhile, society had higher modernisation ambitions. The year of 1968, marked by various events in the world, in Poland was dominated by street demonstrations and strikes organised by students at universities in March, with the main demands focusing on the abolition of censorship. However, they did not gain any wider public support. At the same time, an anti-Semitic campaign was unleashed by the authorities, which, although resulting from internal factional fights in the ruling party, referred to the prejudice against Jews deeply rooted in Polish society. It brought about a huge wave of forced emigration of Poles of Jewish descent, mainly

intellectuals and members of the educated middle class. Those internal circumstances meant that the great political events of 1968, such as the events of May in Paris, the Prague Spring and its suppression by the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries with a significant participation of Poland, or global issues such as the Vietnam War, or the fight against the Apartheid, did not find much resonance in Poland. At the same time, the combination of those internal and external factors meant that the authorities were under the pressure of pro-liberalization, and the Iron Curtain was becoming less and less tight.

## Art Context

The new post-Stalinist authorities resigned from the administrative imposition of Socialist Realism quite quickly i.e., as early as 1955 (the exhibition at the Arsenal in Warsaw). Instead, they accepted expressionist semi-figuration based on deformation in the style of late Cubism, as well as abstraction, mainly of the art Informel type, less of the geometric type, so the kind of art that was already backward and secondary. Nevertheless, it became the official art. That continued throughout the period of totalitarian rule in Poland. Art magazines were full of reproductions of those types of paintings and sculptures. All other art was un-official and had to find its place in the social system in its own way.

New art trends appeared in Poland in the second half of the sixties. The most important art centre at that time was Kraków with the Kraków Group (Grupa Krakowska) founded in 1957 and their Krzysztofory Gallery, led by Tadeusz Kantor. The Kraków Group was characterised by post-avant-garde eclecticism, and its member artists represented various approaches to art, rooted in the trends of the historical avant-garde. The Kraków Group was - both in terms of the continuity of the development of art forms and the artists' biographies - a continuation of the pre-war group (the so-called first Kraków Group). It was the only artistic circle in post-war Poland with such a direct relationship with the historical European avant-garde tradition.

The other important artistic circle, formed in the second half of the sixties, centred around the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw established in 1966. It was inspired by Tadeusz Kantor who functioned between the Kraków and Warsaw circles - and of which he was also the leader. At the same time, it was also anchored in the tradition of the European avant-garde through the person of its doyen, Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988), a member of the international groups of abstractionists *Cercle et Carré* (from 1929) and *Abstraction-Création* (from 1931). Hence, his paintings and collages, both geometric abstract and organic ones in the style of Hans Arp, were based on the art learned at its very sources.

The link with the pre-war avant-garde determined the special status of the two galleries in Poland. For the art community, they provided a sense of participation in the continuity of the contemporary art tradition and constituted a symbolic bridge over the Iron Curtain.

The first happenings initiated a shift towards new art and marked the beginning of the history of contemporary art. The live action art form, throughout the period discussed here, represented the most radical artistic solutions. It challenged the official cultural policy and its way of valuating art, which contributed to the creation of art institutions independent of the official ones, with their own value system. The very openness to new art was a political declaration, not to mention its creation. Therefore, it is the occurrence of Action art forms that marks the triangulation points in Polish art history. However, in the sixties, there were only a few such points - and those were happenings.

## Art Facts

### Pivotal Role of Happening in the Shifting of the Paradigm of Art

Tadeusz Kantor was deeply convinced that only in the theatrical form could the ideological assumptions of fine arts be fully realised. He shared this fundamental belief with all historical avant-gardes. His theatre, Cricot 2, was a continuation of the first Kraków Group's theatre operating under the same name, which was a puppet theatre. And so was Kantor's theatre. The actors played like marionettes, like machines. There was no psychologising, it was not about presenting the emotions of individual characters, playing with the face, which is one of the basics of professional acting. The faces of the actors were like masks, immobile, hidden under make-up that deprived the characters of their features. They represented types, models. Their movement was mechanical, based on the repetition of gestures, scenes or spoken sentences. As in ballet or film editing e.g., in *Ballet Mécanique*, *Entr'acte* or *Relache*, where the characters do not interact with each other or address the viewer, building their emotional reception. The recipient is left alone in their own world. The performance does not represent the world but indicates a different reality - the one hidden in the subconscious. Such a surrealist base was the foundation of Kantor's theatre and, at the same time, his happenings.

The structure of the stage could vary. A theatrical performance could be staged classically in a box, but the audience could also be arranged around the stage. Then, an actor could play facing either way. It was a substitute for a revolving stage which was one of the main ideas of

the theatrical avant-garde. But it was also a kind of environment where the work surrounded the viewer, forming the space for a happening.

The stage set consisted of moving objects that entered the stage and were moved around on small wheels - so that there were no intermissions. Objects on wheels were used in Allan Kaprow's happenings. The principle of a movable composition of rearranged panels, push-and-pull ready-made objects, objects with a mirror, or the simultaneity of isolated actions served to open the work to the participation of others. Kantor staged a happening theatre, but he rejected participation. In this respect, the division between the audience and the artist was strict. Nevertheless, when composing a spectacle, he used the compartmented structure of a happening and scenes unrelated by narrative it was a collage of events harking back the sources of the avant-garde in Cubism. The viewer had a sense of breaking up with the illusion of the continuity of reality, as in a dream, Surrealist art, and avant-garde film.

Kantor based on the local tradition, Expressionism, and Surrealism in the style of Witkacy's visual and literary works (1885-1939). He was also familiar with the trends of world art, both avant-garde and new ones. After visiting the USA, he brought the art of happening to Poland. At the same time, he was a great supporter of the French avant-garde. He drew from both L'Art Informel and Nouveau Réalisme and understood their affinities with Surrealism and Dadaism. This mix of inspirations allowed him to create a hybrid style where action played a major role.

Kantor's first happening - and the first one in Poland - was *Linia podziału (Dividing Line)*, 1966, or a *Cricotage* which was Kantor's general name for an event of this type. It took place in a public space, in a café and was composed of events or people's behaviours that did not match the situation in such an environment. The café arrangement functioned as a ready-made turned into a surreal situation by events or interventions. The title referred to the postulate of seeing and creating differences. Kantor's most famous and complex happening was *Panoramiczny happening morski (Panoramic Sea Happening)*, 1967. It was held on a beach by the Baltic Sea in Osieki, during a summer holiday. Here, it was the situation on the beach that functioned as a ready-made which was disturbed by events unusual for the place. Individual compartments - scenes were highly differentiated, individualised within the composition of the whole piece, resulting in separate happenings, especially due to the fact they were realised by invited artists. Edward Krasiński (1925-2004), a conceptual artist from the Foksal Gallery, created the *Sea Concert* during which, dressed in a tailcoat, he conducted the movement of waves as if in a philharmonic. A dress-code ready-made transferred to a different situation clashed with the holiday beach creating confusion, as per the dada-surrealism principle. That happening was also the most open to the

participation of others. Other parts: *Tratwa Meduzy* (*The Medusa Raft*), opened to public participation, was an animated and spatial (panoramic) picture based on the painting by Theodor Gericault. *Kultura agrarna na piasku* (*Agrarian Culture on Sand*), opened to public participation, was an environment built on the beach with the use of newspapers, i.e. ready-made things from everyday life. Newspapers were 'planted' in 'patches' in the sand on the beach, which could be interpreted as political criticism. *Barbujaz Erotyczny* (*The Erotic Barbujage*), only women participated, consisted of 'bathing' in large amounts of tomato pulp. This form refers to action painting (Informel), Gutai (actions in the mud by Kazuo Shiraga), and Yves Klein's *Anthropometry*.

In *List* (*The Letter*) at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw (1968), a letter-object was carried through the streets to the gallery by postmen dressed in their uniforms. The letter-object was over-scaled in the style of Claes Oldenburg. The official state institution, the Post Office, and communication and information exchange were used as ready-mades. That opened the field for political interpretation in the context of censorship and the Iron Curtain. In the happening *Lekcja Anatomii wedle Rembrandta* (*An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*), 1968 and 1969, Kantor used a reference to a painting from art history as a ready-made. It was a surreal procedure and a clear reference to Marcel Duchamp and his postulate of 'using a Rembrandt as an ironing board,' or the way he used a postcard with the reproduction of *Mona Lisa*. The outcome of the happening was a picture-collage in the style of Robert Rauschenberg's *combines*. During this happening, Kantor declared 'the end of so-called participation.' Indeed, Kantor performed the entire happening himself. He not only conducted, but also performed, as it were, an autopsy of a corpse. The work was no longer open to the participation of others in the happening style. In theatre performances, as a rule, Kantor was present on stage all the time, conducting and directing situations in real time. He was the only one to show emotions. However, Kantor's theatre was based on the happening method. *Umarła Klasa* (*The Dead Class*), 1975, his greatest worldwide success, contained elements of happening in the composition of scenes as well as in the functioning of ready-made objects, including dummies placed next to the actors playing, which was intensified by dada-surrealist absurdity, alternation of realities, or death and life (Jurkiewicz 1998).

Włodzimierz Borowski (1930-2008) was one of the most individual and brilliant artists on the Polish art scene. Initially, he belonged to the Foksal Gallery circle, but was too radical for them, which meant - politically dangerous, and ultimately remained an outsider. He was the first artist who placed his art in the trend based on the culture of mass production and consumption of goods and commented on it. In 1959, he

started a series of works called *Artons* - objects-sculpture collages made of commonly produced plastic objects, which represented well the times when plastic was considered a symbol of modernity. They formed a new iconosphere and provided a visual means to build direct connections with the surrounding reality. However, his gaze was not affirmative, but critical. For him, plastic was rather a symbol of decline than development, unlike the historical avant-gardes, where plastic as a new material indicated a work belonged to modernity.

Borowski called his happenings *Pokaz synkretyczny* (*Syncretic Show*). Syncretism was the key term defining his art. It was also the chief formal assumption of his art, i.e., composing works of heterogeneous elements. As an artistic method, it consisted in combining such elements into a new whole. On the one hand, it was a derivative of collage and Dada and Surrealist objects, and on the other hand, it heralded intermedia art and performative works. Hence, in accordance with the trends of that time, happening art became his key medium. Syncretism is a descriptive term for post-avant-garde art based on its own tradition vs. novelty as an avant-garde challenge. Borowski's pre-Conceptual artwork form resulted from the condition of the art of the sixties, preceding the Conceptual breakthrough.

The series of *Syncretic Shows*, initiated in 1965 (seven realisations), began with *Manifest lustrzany - Manilus* (*Mirror Manifesto - Manilus*), where the mirror image was a reference to representation as the traditional definition of art and the function of the artwork as imitation.

The *IV Pokaz synkretyczny - Ofiarowanie pieca* (*4th Syncretic Show - The Offering of a Furnace*), 1966, was a happening performed in a fertilizer plant. The artist, wearing an evening suit, climbed the stove assisted by two workers and sang the national anthem, keeping the melody but replacing the lyrics with a single word 'urea' (fertilizer ingredient). That was his commentary on the state propaganda, which then presented heavy industry as the state's achievement, while artists already saw its devastating effect on nature. The word 'offering' was a reference to the liturgical language of the Catholic Church (offer), but also to the state propaganda of the ruling party according to which everything that the authorities did was 'for the people.' It was therefore a highly political gesture. In a situation where any accusation of the policy could result in repressions, such as a ban on exhibiting in state-run institutions, political or critical art was feared and avoided. For this reason, it was very rare (Patrick 2001, 27-30).

The happening *VII Pokaz synkretyczny - Zdjęcie kapelusza* (*7th Syncretic Show - Taking the Hat Off*), 1967, referring to the raising of a hat as a cultural gesture was analysed by Ervin Panofski as an example of a symbolic sign. Borowski studied art history and used this knowledge



in his works. This work is therefore an example of an early method of applying artistic research. For Panofski, the hat-off gesture was an example of a sign widely recognized in our culture which allowed him to describe the way a sign functions in a society that uses it and intuitively encodes and decodes its meaning. Similarly, references to historical avant-garde works or general historical artworks constitute signs recognized by everyone in art. *Taking the Hat Off* was performed in front of an artwork (a window-object), not an audience. Borowski used it as a gesture of a happening artist, i. e. as a ready-made, and as familiar for the viewers. The happening was performed at the same location as the *Panoramic Sea Happening* and Krasieński's *Sea Concert*. Thus, they are an example not only of an individual gesture, but of a tendency to use situations or socio-cultural codes as ready-mades in accordance with dada-surrealist assumptions.

Andrzej Matuszewski (1924-2008) ran the odNowa Gallery in Poznań in the years 1964-1969. The name of the gallery refers to a 'thaw' in politics and means 'from the beginning' and 'anew.' His activity contributed to the formation of a Conceptual gallery movement as well as un-official institutions of art at the early stage of their development. In 1968, in his gallery, he organised the first meeting of artist-run galleries with the participation of eight galleries and five salons of debutants. This event can be considered the beginning of an organised gallery movement and the formation of un-official art institutions. Such meetings or symposia in the gallery later became a regular practice constituting the foundation of the strength of this movement. The odNowa Gallery was one of the galleries affiliated with student cultural centres, which was a common practice in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. The most famous one was the SKC (Studentski Kulturni Centar) gallery in Belgrade, where Marina Abramović began her career.

As an artist, he was a creator of pre-Conceptual art installations based on ready-made objects. His happening *Postępowanie (Proceeding)* held in the odNowa Gallery in 1969 was the most classic form of the compartmented structure of a happening ever made in Poland. The time and script (event score) were strictly given, as was the number of participants. The gallery space was divided into boxes (rooms) where various actions were taking place at the same time, watched by the audience. The structure referred to Jean Cocteau's avant-garde film, *The Blood of a Poet*. The happening and its compartmented structure are an example of the influence of avant-garde film on post-avant-garde art with completely different characteristics (Patrick 2003, 142-145).

*Jerzy Bereś (1930-2012)* was a founder-member of the post-war Kraków Group and remained associated with it throughout his life.

His art stemmed from the ethnography of the Polish province and referred to pseudo folk art or naive art, which brought his practice closer to Surrealism.

Bereś's sculptures were made of pieces of raw, untreated wood or with traces of pre-treatment, mostly non-polychrome, without the use of nails or adhesives. Actions, which he entitled *Manifestations*, were always performed in the nude, with body painting gestures. He called his works 'reports' as they were created on the basis of his own reflections about the situation in the country and in the world. His art was therefore an interpretation of the world context and as such belonged to critical art, politically engaged to a high degree.

*Przepowiednia I. Akt twórczy (Oracle I. Creative Act)* was held at the Foksal and then at the Krzysztofory Gallery in 1968, and in 1988 with the accompanying statement 'it comes true.' The work was, in his own words, a living sculpture. The artist, standing naked on a pile of raw wood logs, tried to initiate conversations with the audience, as he believed that the sculpture was a message. This manifestation was accompanied by the lighting of small fires on the gallery floor which symbolised the community concentrating around common problems. *Manifestacja romantyczna (Romantic Manifestation)*, 1981, consisted of making five inscriptions on the pavement of the Main Square in Kraków and lighting five fires signifying Hope, Freedom, Love, Dignity, Truth in those places. They were also notion-slogans around which people gather as a society (Węcka 1995).

Happening introduced into Polish art a model of artistic practice open to experiment and so ready to change its definition, redefine the status of the work and the artist, but on its own terms, regardless of the state authorities and their policy in the area of culture and art. The development of new trends in contemporary art had exactly this goal - the artists' search for a way to take an independent position.

In order to achieve this goal, the notion of 'art' and its understanding had to change - radically. There had to be a pivot in defining art, turning away from object-making and towards more ephemeral art forms. The art and theory of happening offered such a possibility grounding art production in a new paradigm, a new model of art, artist, artwork. The Polish art of the sixties made use of this.

## The Seventies

### Political and Social Context

In December 1970, labourers' protests were held in Gdańsk and other cities on the Baltic coast. They ended with bloody massacres in Gdańsk, as well as Gdynia, Szczecin and Elbląg, but at the same time enforced a deep change, also personal, at the top of the ruling party, with the very nature of the totalitarian system unchanged. However, compared to the sixties, the new internal policy of the state authorities became relatively liberal. It manifested itself in the desire to build a mass consumption system, albeit without a free market and democracy. This idea was therefore similar to the Hungarian path, which at that time could be perceived as the authorities' success.

Consumption was carried out with loans taken abroad. Ultimately, this resulted in the bankruptcy of Poland at the end of the decade, and a new wave of strikes in August 1980, which ultimately led to the creation of an independent organisation, *Solidarność* (the Solidarity trade union), led by Lech Wałęsa. The period of Solidarity's influence lasted until December 13, 1981 and the imposition of martial law. It can therefore be perceived as an 'extended decade.'

### Art Context

Art was governed by the rule stating that unless something was political, it was allowed. International relations were still limited which made access to information difficult. Therefore, each such contact was very valuable in the artists' community and had an impact on the development of art trends. Still, in terms of cultural policy, it was not enough that the authorities allowed something other than Socialist Realism, as in the sixties – they had to allow more radicalism in art. Hence, there was a certain tolerance of the authorities, though not support, for new art trends such as Conceptualism.

The seventies in Poland were a period of a dynamic development of contemporary art. It was determined by the co-occurrence of two factors: relative liberalization in the socio-political sphere which overlapped with the development of the assumptions of Conceptual art.

In the seventies, the Kraków Group with the Krzysztofory Gallery, as well as the Foksal Gallery, artistically rooted in traditionally defined art, i.e., an artistic object such as a painting, or the New Realism style, gradually lost their influence on Polish art as the Conceptual art trend developed. They were also apolitical institutions in principle and, as such,

far from the radicalism of Conceptual art, which became the basis for building an un-official art institution.

A leading role was played by the gallery movement and other types of artist-run initiatives, established on the basis of Conceptual art, which, together with the Conceptual practice of conferences, symposia, or festivals, and the already existing plein-air session system, resulted in the development of un-official art institutions. In Poland, they were extremely strong and operated on a large scale across the country, organising events presenting new art trends, international exchanges, and anchoring contemporary art in the society. Un-official art created its own circulation and evaluation system that promoted contemporary art, despite the state's cultural policy. In this sense, it was political, even if it did not take a political stance understood as a direct criticism of the government or the political system.

Conceptualism, its development, and consequences were key factors that contributed to the development of contemporary art in Poland.

## Art Facts

### The Birth of Contemporary Art out of Conceptual Art

Permafo and the Film Form Workshop (FFW) were two social circles that introduced Conceptual art in Poland based on photographic and film experiments. Conceptualism redefined the place of media in art. It also defined a new role of art in relation to reality. The main assumptions of the art-making practice in this early period were based on tautologies and structural analyses of the medium, or 'tests.' On the other hand, the narrative - the 'literary' function of the media - was rejected. According to this concept, the surrounding reality was treated as a ready-made. Hence, documentation and registration played an important role in using the media image. The main means of testing the medium was actions for the camera, image (documentation) based on an actual presence in a given situation. Actions of this type took very different forms and were widely used in art throughout the period of Conceptualism. Still, they initially appeared in the output of the two art collectives.

The Permafo Gallery - as well as an artist group - was founded in Wrocław and operated in the years 1970–1981 until the imposition of martial law. Its establishment was an aftermath of the Symposium Wrocław '70, organized for strictly political propaganda reasons as a promotion of Polish culture in the territories that had belonged to Germany before World War II, and were granted to Poland in the Yalta

agreement. The main goal was to present a new urban design of cities destroyed during the War, as well as contemporary art in an extremely progressive form. The types of works presented were para-Conceptual projects, mostly utopian interventions in urban space that were in the end not realised, models for monumental spatial realisations, and abstract city sculptures. Only five projects were realised during the event, and some of them later. Despite that fact and due to the large scale of the event - over fifty artists and twelve critics from Poland participated in it - it significantly contributed to the establishment of the pro-Conceptual direction in art, practiced in a most radical way possible (Markowska 2013).

That is where Permafo came from and that is why it was in Wrocław that was founded the first gallery declared Conceptual and based on new media art. The gallery operated on a hit and run basis in the Artists' Club (panels were set up to form the exhibition space and dismantled afterwards). However, it was enough to create an influential milieu. Permafo also published an art-zine under the same name in the years 1972-1980, founded by Andrzej Lachowicz (the leader), Natalia LL (personally associated with Lachowicz), the art critic Antoni Dzieduszycki, and Zbigniew Dłubak (the Nestor of Polish photography). Permafo was not only the name of the group and the gallery, but also of an artistic project based on the Conceptual art method developed by Andrzej Lachowicz and known as 'permafo' (which is an acronym from 'permanent photography: perma(nent) pho(to). The core of the project was creation as a continuous process of recording (documenting) all the manifestations or aspects of life in the immediate surrounding reality without taking the camera off the eye. All Permafo's works stemmed from Lachowicz's idea of compulsive documentation, including recordings of his and Natalia LL's erotic lives. Her famous photographs from the *Consumer Art* series were also based on the assumption of recording the consumption of food eroticized as a sensual activity. Such unmasked eroticism did not occur in other media-based art in Poland, which focused on structural and meta-media issues. The Permafo Gallery's activity in the seventies grounded Conceptual art as a leading trend in contemporary art, synonymous to contemporaneity. At the same time, Conceptual art became the type of art native to the un-official art institutions in Poland.

The Film Form Workshop (FFW)<sup>2</sup> was founded by the students of the Cinematography Department of the Lodz Film School (PWSFTviT in Łódź). It operated in the years 1970-1977. After 1977, its members pursued individual careers. It was led by Józef Robakowski (b. 1939) and the founding members were Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Andrzej Różycki, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Ryszard Waśko, Janusz Połom, and Antoni Mikołajczyk. Although they never opened their own gallery, through organising numerous screenings and other art events,

FFW created a broad and influential milieu that functioned like an art institution (Kuźmicz 2017).

As they had professional skills and knowledge of film production, they were particularly consciously addressing meta-media issues such as a study of the cinematic means of expression i.e., so called 'pure film' or 'film as film' which has no relation to film as a narrative storytelling - that was the strongly emphasized difference. The assumptions of Conceptual art in FFW's photographic and film works were also implemented by removing not only narration, but also all traces of emotional expression e.g., in their collective and individual works there were no references to the erotic and sensual image, there was no female nudity (or semi-nudity, or any of that type). It was also a manifestation of a non-cinematic approach to film production as the presence of beautiful women on the screen was considered an important means of building a film narrative. An experimental film and photography were used by them as a means of realisation of numerous tautological Conceptual works, performance for photography (film), and various forms of photo-objects, and Installation art works. A film about art was developed by FFW as an independent genre. Another important cinematic field was documentation, or a documenting process, as a direct representation of reality, captured unmasked in a given moment of its actual presence.

FFW's largest and most complex group work was *Akcja 'Warsztat'* (*Action 'Workshop'*), 1973, at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. The rooms of the museum were changed into multimedia installations. There were various types of actions performed for the camera, a mockery of propaganda film, or sound works. The most innovative television installation was *Obiektywna transmisja telewizyjna* (*Objective Television Transmission*). Inside the museum, monitors were set up with real-time cable transmission of images from three locations near the museum: a carpenter's workshop, a private apartment, and a street corner. The artistic realisation using professional television technology was possible thanks to the FFW artists' associations with the Film School. There is no analogous work in the art of that time.

Józef Robakowski (b. 1939) was one of the most influential persons within the Conceptual art base of the new art movement due to both his art and his social and organisational activity (Czubak 2017, Maier 2011). He has been creating experimental photographs and films since the beginning of the sixties. In his artistic practice, he has made numerous photographic and cinematic performances, as well as pioneering experiments with video as a new medium in art and film. His film *Rynek* (*Market Square*), 1970, is an early example of a self-referential, structural film created on the basis of the mechanical principle: a steady camera, two frames every five seconds, shot on October 25, 1970 from 7am to 4pm in a particular

location. Revealing the filmmaker's skills and tools he deprived the film of its narrative features and linked it with the Conceptual art idea of presenting an art medium as such along its inherent features. *Test (Test)*, 1971, a non-camera film, is another example of structural film work. Through the holes mechanically made in a celluloid film a beam of light falls from the projector onto the screen producing a strobe effect. The film demonstrates that the main cinematic medium is light. The photographic series *Czeluście (Abysse)*, 1978, is a good example of a structural analysis of photographic image. Photography happens where, in the registration process, image information is lost - technically they are underexposed or overexposed, and these are the abysses. *Po linii. . . (Along the line)*, 1976, shows how the change in the use of the technical medium of recording - film or video - influences the image of the same line.

Examples of video-film collages using footage from public TV are the videos *Pogrzeb Breżniewa (Brezhnev's Funeral)* (1982) and *Sztuka to potęga! (Art Is Power!)*, 1984-5, as well as photographic sets in series, TV footage from the Soviet Army's parade on Red Square, both with music of the band Leibach.

*Idę (I'm Going)*, 1973, is an example of a performance film where the artist carrying a camera is climbing a high tower up the steps and his physical effort is documented. Among his performance films, the series *Ćwiczenie na dwie ręce (Two-Hand Exercise)*, 1976, presents his filming method consisting of taking the camera away from the eye and making a film without eye control, but with the movement of the artist's body. This constitutes yet another idea and method of using the medium completely differently from the ideas and practices of Lachowicz and Permafo. It derived from his own physical condition coupled with an image recording machine (and not from a relationship with reality mediated via a photo image - representation, as in Lachowicz's concept). The combination of the body and the medium gave rise to the key idea guiding his work and the slogan 'art is energy'. The works *Kąty Energetyczne (Energetic Angles)*, 1975-1999, *Manifest energetyczny (The Energy Manifesto)*, 2003, refer to Andrzej Pawłowski's concept of art as an energy field.

*Podanie ręki (The Handshake)*, 1981, is a series of works made on a special occasion. At the very beginning of the martial law period, Robakowski made a series works where images were the result of moving his hand with the fingertips covered with a developer over the canvas coated with a photosensitive emulsion. They were dedicated to selected friends, thus establishing symbolic contact with them despite physical distance. Recently, he has been working in the field of critical visual art using visual material found on social media.

In 1979, Robakowski, together with Małgorzata Potocka, founded Galeria Wymiany (the Exchange Gallery) in their private apartment

in Łódź, at the peak development of the Conceptual gallery movement. As a gallery, and as artists, they participated in the *Infermental* project (works distributed on VHS videotapes). Eventually, Robakowski donated the documentation and the gallery's collection to the Museum of Modern Art (MSN) in Warsaw.

At that time, within the framework of the Conceptual gallery movement, there were several galleries in Poland whose program was mostly dedicated to photography and film as Conceptual art media. They were, among others, Jerzy Olek's Foto-Medium-Art in Wrocław, Maria Anna Potocka's Foto-Video in Kraków, Andrzej Jórczak and Marek Grygiel's Mała in Warsaw, Leszek Brogowski's gn in Gdańsk, Tadeusz Porada's Art Forum in Łódź, Krzysztof Cichosz's FF in Łódź.

An early example of the gallery as a Conceptual artwork was Galeria Tak (the Yes Gallery) founded in 1970 by Leszek Przyjemski (b. 1942) and run together with Anastazy Wiśniewski at the beginning. It was the most radical form of a gallery in the entire gallery movement. Przyjemski was the most acute dissident artist in Poland. His entire work (as an artist and organiser) was a harsh critical commentary on the surrounding reality. He was forced to emigrate with his family in 1981 and now lives in Germany. The Yes Gallery was an institution-idea or an art project, not a place. As an artwork, it was a poster with the manifesto printed on it. It stated the gallery was to approve all activities in/as art. Thus, the gallery as an institution emulated the authorities in a totalitarian state as it also approved (said 'yes' to) various artistic activities. Another institution-idea or an art project he founded was the Museum of Hysterics operating permanently since 1968, the year he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, believing that the world around him was mentally ill and one could only function as a madman (hysteric) in such circumstances. It was presented for first time on the Baltic Sea beach in Gdańsk-Brzeźno during the International Meeting of Non-Existent Galleries in 1975, which was, in fact, his one-person action.

The gallery and the museum are simply Conceptual works of art. Przyjemski's conceptual artistic practice refers to art as an idea. He uses texts, slogan-like statements, stamps, postcards, posters, banners, mail-art, and performance as well as installation, even a painting in a picture plane. His activity has contributed to the foundation of the Conceptual gallery movement and un-official art institution in Poland thanks to its radical form.

His key work *Mój ulubiony krajobraz* (*My favorite landscape*) was first presented in 1971 and distributed as a painting on canvas or a printed poster. The title text, written in bold black font, was placed on the border of white and red fields, as on the Polish national flag. In his works he has often used long strips of red, or white and red linen, as in official ceremonial



settings. He also used a red banner with a white text-slogan as a work of art. Visually, his installations imitated the interiors of the party's offices or decorations for national holidays.

*Rozmowy indywidualne (Individual Conversations)*, 1972, was a one-day action conducted together with Anasztazy Wiśniewski at the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw. It was also an emulation of the secret police's operation mode, which would summon people for 'talks.' The installation in the gallery resembled an interview room. Each of the viewers individually entered and sat on a chair, a lamp shone on a table covered with red cloth. In such circumstances, one could talk to the artists, the authors of the action. Przyjemski has conducted numerous actions and interventions and created regime-critical works of art.

Jerzy Treliński (b. 1940) founded the 80x140 Gallery in a local artists' club in Łódź in 1971. It was one of the most radical forms of a conceptual gallery within the Conceptual gallery movement in Poland and, at the same time, its founder's work of art. The 80x140 Gallery was, in fact, a board of such dimensions hanging on the wall. On this 'gallery' documentation of artists' actions and their texts, such as manifestos or declarations were presented.

In the 80x140 Gallery, the A4 Gallery of Andrzej Pierzgałski (1938-2016) was nested, operating on the same principle - publication (exhibition) of Conceptual artworks on a A4 sheet of paper. Both galleries contributed to a high degree to the development of the Conceptual gallery movement and un-official art institutions in Poland at their beginnings.

As a conceptual artist, he has used a linguistic philosophy and a discourse on the originality of artworks, their uniqueness, questioned authorship, and created works based on the word-meaning relations.

In a series of works he used his surname placed in a typographic arrangement in various contexts, in-situ locations, on ready-made objects, thus marking them. During the May 1 Parade in 1971, he performed an action-intervention carrying a large plaque with his name on it, which was a bold political gesture as it was a major political propaganda national festival and a manifestation of unity with the Soviet Union celebrated every year in small and big cities throughout Poland and the Eastern Bloc.

Zbigniew Warpechowski (b. 1938) was a pioneer of Performance art in Poland. He emphasised the distinctiveness of the practice of Performance art as a discipline and consistently used the word 'performance' as a proper name not only for his own art, but also as the name of the art trend. He was also a tireless promoter of the concept of Performance art, contributing to the development of performance through increasing awareness of this form of art i.e., filling the word with meaning - consolidating and socially grounding the definition of Performance art. Moreover, he closely associated Conceptual art and Performance art. To him, they were

interdependent and interconnected and the one could not exist without the other. Both Conceptual art and Performance art were considered practices in the field of visual arts, albeit undertaking a critical reform of traditional fine arts. They were seen as a radical shift but also a continuation of art history, another of the avant-garde revolts that challenged the art establishment.

*Talerzowanie (Dishing Out)*, 1971, was his first performance piece based on the principles of Conceptualism. It was an installation - plates were placed in marked areas in the gallery and each of them was associated with a concept, through a sign or word placed on it. Another version of this work consisted of boxes with plates prepared in the same way. It was, therefore, a work based on ready-made objects, but also on a semiotic and syntactic relation i.e., composition. His action consisted in auctioning those objects-notions and the remaining last one was to be the guiding idea for his further work. It was the word 'nic' ('nothing'). It became the catchword in many of his performances.

Warpechowski's first live action took place in the late sixties. Until the nineties, he developed a performance method based on an individual physical action, e.g., doing something as long as possible (such as holding a metal tube with his hands upstretched). Another method consisted in illustrating words-notions with live performance. His later actions are more speeches on a variety of current topics, critical to contemporary culture.

*Modlitwa o nic (A Prayer for Nothing)*, 1974, and *Lewitacja (Levitation)*, 1979, are examples that define the nature of performance in Warpechowski's view: levitation here was the realisation of the myth of the mental control over the body. This first performance piece was created for photography, and showed the artist jumping up as if floating above the ground on the hilltop. The other one was a live performance: the artist attached some sticks to his limbs and tried to stand and move without touching the floor, again, as if levitating.

The use of a fish (since 1972) and then a bird (since 1974) as a ready-made has been another recurring motif and a meaning-making factor in his performances. The fish was used for the first time in the performance *Woda (Water)*: a live fish was lying on a board with the inscription 'water,' while the audience was drinking water from glasses. It was still a Conceptual play of meanings par excellence with the use of a word-notion and an object-sign. His other performances with a fish have involved changing one's life condition. For example, he would take a fish in his hands and act out his feelings for it while the fish was dying, or repeated switching: when a fish was taken out of an aquarium, the artist put his head into the water. Among numerous performances with the use of birds, the most spectacular one was *Marsz (March)*, 1983, and 1984, given in Stuttgart. The bird had a ribbon tied to its leg, while the other

end the artist tied to his leg and marched in a military step. Finally, he released the bird and set his hair on fire. It was yet another performance form based on role changing. In the performances *Gwóźdź (The Nail)*, 1980, and *4*, 1981, the key element was the gesture of putting a hand on the nail. This self-aggressive element was combined with a statement on aspects of Polish art and culture.

## Conceptual Art in the Second Half of the Seventies

The development of the Conceptual trend in the second half of the seventies resulted in the formulation of the idea of contextual art in 1976 by Jan Świdziński (1923-2014). The exhibition under the title *Contextual Art* was held in St. Petri Gallery run by Jean Sellem in Lund, and the manifesto *Art as Contextual Art* (in English) followed by the book containing Świdziński's theoretical text were published by the Remont Gallery in Warsaw (Świdziński 1977, 1979). The follow-up was a conference on contextual art at the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) in Toronto. There Świdziński met Joseph Kosuth, who presented there his concept of anthropological art, published earlier in 1975 in the *The Fox* art zin as an article entitled 'Artist as Anthropologist.' From then on, they respected each other. A transcript of the Toronto discussion was published in Świdziński's book *Quotations on Contextual Art* (Świdziński 1987). Those events had a tremendous impact on the Polish art scene and Świdziński became the most prominent promoter of Conceptual art. Also, Kosuth's idea of Conceptualism had a great influence on Polish art.

1977 saw a few realisations of contextual art. The international conference *Art Activity in the Context of Reality* held at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw (in the Warsaw University of Technology students' club) was organized by Jan Świdziński with the participation of Jorge Glusberg (1932-2012), a conceptual artist and activist from Buenos Aires, Argentina, among other guests. Under the influence of South American art, contextual art took on a more socio-political, critical character. Świdziński's other undertakings, such as his collaboration with Hervé Fisher, the founder of the sociological art concept, took the same direction. Such an approach offered a different art development mode than the analysis of art as a linguistic system. Also, Joseph Kosuth was more interested in commentary on the cultural background of art at this stage of his art idea development, although he refused a direct political involvement.

All those contacts made Polish artists aware of the political nature of art and the social duty of the artist. There was a shift in the definition of art from self-referential considerations of the definition of the term 'art' i.e., regarding art as a language, to contextual, or social, relations of art. For Świdziński, the development of the grassroots gallery movement meant the increase of social awareness of this activity, and thus the anchoring of new contemporary art trends in the society. He described these changes in his book *Art, Society and Self-consciousness* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1979), first published in English. His reflections contained in the book could be regarded as a theory for the artist-run initiative movement, grounded historically in the contemporary political and economic system constituting a stage in the process of historical changes, and, socially, in the context of 'the world we live in.'

Contextual art was practically implemented as the project *Działania lokalne* (*Local activities*) in the Polish countryside, in the Kurpie region, realised by Świdziński together with the members of the artist-run Recent Art Gallery from Wrocław. It was a type of artistic research – a collaboration of scholars and artists based on ethnography research and documentation recorded in situ and presented in the galleries in various forms such as media installations, exhibited documents and photographs, and as conferences and lectures as art forms, or generally various media Conceptual art practices contextually involved.

His next contextual art project realised together with the Znak Gallery from Białystok took place in Mielnik on the Bug river in 1981. Later, from the mid-eighties onwards, he adopted performance as his main art practice, as he believed that direct contact with the beholder is the most convincing and at the same time best fitted to the individual manner of reception. Contextualism marked a postmodern break in Polish contemporary art. At that time, making art, curating events, or delivering symposium papers were all art practices to Świdziński, as well as photography and Installation art. That moment marked the beginning of the popularisation of the contextual (anthropological) art practice in Poland (e.g., the Lucim group, a collective working in a village of the same name, since 1977). Later, from the eighties, performance became a chief art form for him, both live and filmed, practiced until his late days.

Świdziński's activity contributed to the formation of un-official art institutions in Poland, and his writings on contextual art became the theoretical background of the movement. As an artist of the eighties, he worked with postmodernism, discussing through art its leading slogan 'anything goes.' Right after the 1989 break, he became one of the major organisers of booming Performance art festivals.

Another landmark event in the second half of the seventies was the *LAM* (International Artists' Meeting or 'I am') held at the Remont Gallery,

run at that time by Henryk Gajewski (b. 1948), in Warsaw in 1978. It was an international Performance art festival, the first major presentation of this art form. Since then, the term 'performance art' has been grounded in the Polish discourse of contemporary art as a practice closely related to Conceptualism and belonging exclusively to the field of visual arts (not to theatre or dance practices). This event demonstrated that the independent un-official art milieu is so strong and so deeply rooted in the art world that it was able to organise events and international exchanges on a large scale (48 artists from abroad and 26 from Poland participated in it), i.e., to act as an art institution alternative to the official one. This meant that an alternative art institution was established and was prospering, as well as that the official art institution was marginalised as a source of new art ideas and deprived of its social influence in the art field.

In the same year, another Performance art festival, the international festival *Body and Performance*, took place at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin (it was smaller in terms of the number of participants than *IAM*) which finally established the position of Performance art as a leading contemporary art practice in Poland due to its inherent artistic and social radicalism. This festival was organised by Andrzej Mroczek (1941-2009), the gallery director and curator-friend of many artists. Thanks to this, even in the martial law period, the Labirynt Gallery was the only one not boycotted, although it was a municipal institution. Remont and Labirynt both were landmark points in the network of un-official art institutions throughout their history.

The year of 1981, marked by *Solidarność* and social freedom, also in the field of culture, resulted in Poland in the organisation of large-scale art events which were based on previous personal contacts that could prove effective in those conditions. It was a time of recapitulation of the art of the seventies created by an un-official art institution. Those were the high days of un-official art institutions that were the ones able to present the most developed and radical contemporary art issues. Three major exhibitions of 1981 are worth mentioning:

The first was *70-80. Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej (70-80. New Phenomena in Polish Art)*, the BWA Gallery, Sopot. In this summary of a decade of Conceptual art, 35 galleries from Poland belonging to the ARI movement were invited. This event marked a peak development of the movement in question. It was organised by Józef Robakowski and Witosław Czerwonka. A catalogue containing statements and manifestos by the artists and theoreticians representing the decade was published (only in Polish).

The second noteworthy event was *Konstrukcja w procesie (Construction in Process)*, first edition, held in Łódź. This was an international exhibition of realisations in the urban space (there are

examples still in situ in the city to this day) as well as Conceptual and Post-Conceptual art. It was a summary of the decade of Conceptual art, international contacts, the relationship of Conceptualism and new media. Here, 54 artists from all over the world participated. The curator of the international part was Ryszard Waśko. A special part devoted to Polish art was curated by Antoni Mikołajczyk, and the documentary film section by Józef Robakowski. The exhibition was prepared by the Film Form Workshop milieu. The organisational and financial support was provided by Solidarność. The participants visited factories on strike during their stay in Łódź. Today, a part of the works realised during the *Construction in Process* event are credited in Muzeum Sztuki (MS) (Museum of Art) in Łódź as 'the Solidarność collection.' The second edition was held in Munich in 1985 (46 artists). In 1990, *Construction in Process* returned to Łódź (96 artists), as well as its fourth edition held in 1993 with the participation of 150 artists. In 1995, the fifth edition of *Construction in Process* took place in the Negev desert in Israel, and its sixth edition in 1998 - in Melbourne (96 artists). In 2000, the last edition of *Construction in Process* took place in Bydgoszcz and its vicinity with 130 participating artists. The selection of participants was based on the personal relationships of the curator and the artists.

The third noteworthy event of 1981 was the IX Spotkania Krakowskie (9th Krakow Meetings), an annual event of local importance turned international that year. This was a summary of the development of Conceptual and Performance trends as well as international contacts. It was curated by Maria Pinińska-Bereś and the art critic Andrzej Kostolowski (40 artists participated). The exhibition was closed by the authorities with the introduction of martial law. The catalogue was published in 1995 during the next 10th Krakow Meetings, curated by Artur Tajber.

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Among the artists who in the above discussed period contributed to the development of the new trend of Conceptual art by using means and media such as photography and film, ready-mades, installations, and actions to make art of variable forms, were: Edward Krasiński (1925-2004), Zdzisław Jurkiewicz (1931-2012), Romuald Kutera (1949-2020), Paweł Freisler (b. 1942), Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943), the KwieKulik duo - Przemysław Kwiek (b. 1945) and Zofia Kulik (b. 1947), Grzegorz Kowalski (b. 1942), Jarosław Kozłowski (b. 1945), or Krzysztof Zarębski (b. 1939).

## Feminist Art

New art media created a ground for new content. Conceptual art along with Performance art became the artistic means for expressing social issues that belonged to broadly understood feminism. The combination of art and feminism resulted in a contextual shift within Conceptual art towards social art, which heralded the critical art of the nineties. Since feminism was a factor of profound change in culture, not only in Poland, but everywhere in the world, identifying this new trend is crucial in describing the stage of the development of contemporary art. Such relations between Conceptual art and social context were also present in the art of several Polish female artists during this period (Jakubowska 2018).

Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931-1999) should be considered a feminist art pioneer in Polish art. Already in the early sixties, she developed the artistic means characteristic of her entire oeuvre, i.e., the use of the pink colour, handwritten text as a formal element of artworks, painted or embroidered. Her sculptures (objects) were made of soft materials and took the form of furniture, which brought her art near to Surrealism (inviting comparison with the works of Dorothea Margaret Tanning or Toyen, for example). In her other works, she used ready-made objects. Her works contain direct references to eroticism, libido, sexual symbols, lips as an iconography of the senses. All that demonstrates a deep philosophical and aesthetic affinity to the assumptions of Surrealism. Pinińska-Bereś was a member of the Kraków Group where the dada-surrealist inspirations were very vivid, and she adopted this background to feminist issues. The series of objects *Psychome belki (Psychofurniture)*, 1968, are often painted pink, a colour that deprives them of materiality and at the same time connects them with the realm of dream. Her installations often took the form of an environment, a closed room into which a viewer looked or rather peeped like a voyeur, as in Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnes*. The enclosure suggested a representation of the subconscious in the sense of a Freudian theory adopted by the Surrealists. A similar meaning was conveyed by the motif of a sliding drawer, as in Salvador Dali's paintings. Aquaria played a similar role in her works, e.g., in the series *Existentarium* (1971). Also, her objects-windows were based on the motif sourced from Surrealist paintings that suggested an insight into another world, like in René Magritte's works. The use of materials in combination with the Freudian-Surrealist iconography stemmed from her efforts to represent her female identity in visual art forms. Her live actions were mostly conducted without an audience - small private rituals celebrating moments of imagination. They always took place in a specially designated action field. The role of such a space arrangement resembled that of rooms-boxes in the compartmented structure of happenings. *Pranie (Laundry)*, 1980, was her openly feminist

action. Inside a space delineated with ropes on small stakes, she washed and hung the 'washed' sheets of linen with letters on them on a rope. In the end they formed the word FEMINISM (Gajewska, 2000).

Natalia LL (1937-2022), a founder-member of the Permafo group, developed in her works Andrzej Lachowicz's idea of permanent photography. She declared openly her feminist attitude. In her art, she combined feminism with a form of Conceptual art and the use of photography as the main medium to visualize feminist themes. At the beginning she used her lips as a sign link with the linguistic theory and at the same time a reference to the sensual nature of art. Her most famous feminist manifestation was the series of photographs *Sztuka konsumpcyjna (Consumer Art)*, 1972, and then *Sztuka postkonsumpcyjna (Post-Consumer Art)*, 1975, presenting eroticised consumption of a banana (or other food products). The photographs were an extension of the Permafo idea of documenting the everyday. She presented the work at the exhibition *Frauen Kunst - Neue Tendenze* at the Galerie Krinzinger in Innsbruck in 1975, which introduced her to the international feminist movement. Then, in 1977, at the exhibition *Art and Feminism* in Lublin held at the Labirynt Gallery, which was the first presentation of Polish feminist art, she showed her works alongside those of Valie Export. However, *Consumer Art* aroused controversy among in feminist circles due to the fact that the actions with bananas were performed not by the artist, but by various models (Schumacher 2022).

Ewa Partum (b. 1945) founded the Address Gallery in 1972 in her private apartment in Łódź thus contributing to the Conceptual gallery and un-official art institution movement at its beginning. The gallery operated as a Mail art gallery - an example of the success of this artistic method, as she was able to create a personal network of international contacts that would help in the further development of her career after her emigration to Berlin during the period of martial law, in 1982. Among the three Polish feminist artists described here, Partum declared her connection with feminism in the most open way. All her works belonged to critical art and were dedicated to the feminist idea. However, neither she nor the other two artists mentioned here participated in the social movement as activists. They rejected direct involvement because they believed in the autonomy of art and did not link it directly to the political field. Art was an individual, private manifestation, not a social one. At the beginning she based her Conceptual art on the use of poetry as a syntactic-semiotic analysis of the word-sentence-text relationship. Such linguistic considerations were characteristic of the Conceptual art practice, here adopted for the purposes of the feminism discourse. Those types of works were a combination of the imprint of her lips corresponding to a letter in a given word thus forming a pair of signs (Szyłak 2012/2013).



Partum is the author of the first live performance by a woman in Poland performed naked in front of the public. Her key works are performances. The piece entitled *Zmiana. Mój problem jest problemem kobiety* (*Change. My Problem is a Problem of a Woman*), 1974, and 1978, were both recorded and presented as media works. A professional film make-up artist aged half of her face in the first version of the piece, and half of her body in the other version. The image was then displayed on street posters with the slogan constituting her art manifesto: MY PROBLEM IS A PROBLEM OF A WOMAN. Both *Kobiety, małżeństwo jest przeciwko wam!* (*Women, marriage is against you!*), 1980, and *Stupid Woman*, 1981, were public actions. During the first one, the artist cut the wedding dress she was wearing into pieces. In the other one, she played a 'stupid' woman dancing naked with Christmas tree lights wrapped around her body and acting provocatively towards men in the audience. A special piece of performance was *Hommage à Solidarność* (1982). Performing nude, the artist made imprints of her lips on the banner with the title phrase, where each touch of her lips corresponded to a letter of the phrase.

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Teresa Murak (b. 1949), Izabela Gustowska (b. 1948), and Anna Kutera (b. 1952) are artists who should be mentioned as pioneers of feminist art. Since the nineties, various feminist issues have become constantly present in critical art as part of the conversation about broadly understood gender topics.

## The Eighties

### Political and Social Context

On December 13, 1981, the imposition of martial law in Poland put an end to the existence of many galleries from the Conceptual gallery movement, nested in various institutions, such as student or artists clubs, and a great majority of them ceased to exist forever. At the same time, municipal or state galleries were closed for a long time, and most of them have never come back to their previous modes of operation. Official art institutions were boycotted which made them still less important. The art system based on competition between the two types of art institutions and two ways of defining art, a driving force behind the art scene in Poland, completely collapsed. Many legal regulations introduced along with martial law were gradually implemented into civil law to strengthen the mechanisms of a totalitarian state that controls all social activity, e.g., more strict

ensorship, control of correspondence and phone calls, restrictions on travelling to and from the country, or a ban on organised gatherings, both private and public ones. Operating under these conditions, un-official galleries turned out to be extremely resilient. The gallery movement began to revive almost immediately in private apartments and studios. Exhibitions took the form of organised social events and political manifestations of civil disobedience. In the situation of political and social control, art represented real power. Nevertheless, the power of the military regime finally failed to suppress public resistance and organised opposition. In the second half of the eighties, the repressions decreased and were limited only to the suppression of the activity of political opposition organisations. Thus, art returned to functioning on a larger scale in the places where organisers of contemporary art events survived, such as the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin, or new ones that appeared in the meantime, e. g., the BWA Gallery in Zielona Góra. In 1988, the Gdańsk Shipyard went on strike again, and at the same time the negotiations between the government and the opposition led by Lech Wałęsa (the so-called Round Table) began.

## Art Context

During the first years after the imposition of martial law, social and individual repressions intensified, and a severe economic crisis hit. Ephemeral art forms based on Conceptualism were a useful form of creating and presenting art. Hence, the art of this type remained the leading practice and continued to be developed. Performance art forms were particularly easily adapted to makeshift presentation conditions, or to a language of symbolic signs that made it possible to comment on living in the martial law conditions. It was easy because Performance art was already a highly developed practice in Poland and strongly associated with un-official art institutions. Thanks to this, contemporary art in Poland survived that turbulent time and continued to develop. The history of art can be read as a continuous process, but the post-martial law art life had to be reorganised.

## Art Facts

### Public Goes Private

At the beginning of the self-organised art scene, Łódź played the most important role. Its un-official art milieu gathered around the Film Form Workshop group that had just celebrated a huge international success of the *Construction in Process* exhibition, based on a grassroots type of organisation and personal contact. Those experiences and Conceptual-art-related art forms and practices made it possible to create art in those unfavourable conditions. In June 1982, during a private plein-air session in the village of Osiek on the Vistula River, near Toruń, Józef Robakowski and a group of participants shot a film entitled *Państwo Wojny* (*War State*) using the assemblage method, i.e., everyone contributed something. Such social and artistic meetups became a way of working and surviving as an artist after the abolition of public gatherings by the military regime (Lisowski 2012). From June 1982, the centre of art activity in Łódź became Strych (the Attic) (until 1985), a venue used as a studio by the Łódź Kaliska group led by Marek Janiak (b. 1955). Soon Strych became a meeting place for the artistic community of Łódź, integrating all of Poland. Major events held there were the Nieme Kino (Silent Cinema) festivals (three editions in 1983, 1984, 1985), based on art-as-film piece presentations. The same group of the FFW circle organised in Łódź an event called *Pielgrzymka artystyczna. Niech żyje sztuka!* (*Artist Pilgrimage. Long Live Art!*), 1983. A group of participants walked through the city from one apartment or studio to another, with art events or lectures at every stop. The same model was implemented later by the same group in Koszalin where *Kołęda artystyczna, bez hasła* (*Artistic Carol, Without a Slogan*), 1984, was organised by Andrzej Ciesielski (1946-2022). The group also organised private plein-air sessions, e.g., in Teofilów near Łódź (1983, 1985, 1987). Later, this form of collaborative art and social activity, where everyone contributed something to the common work, was called 'pitch-in culture' and constituted a social art activity of that time. The art zin *Tango* was also published using this method. All the art activity and its outcomes contributed to the development of contemporary art based on Conceptual and new media art practices and continued in the eighties.

In 1984, the Konger group was founded in Kraków. Its members were Artur Tajber (b. 1953), Władysław Kaźmierczak (b. 1951), Marcin Krzyżanowski (b. 1958), and Marian Figiel. There were only three Konger performances (two in 1984 and one in 1985). Their artistic practice was based on collective performances grounded on the principle which stated that everyone did something in their own way, but all acted in one place and time. Although live performance was the basis of the concept of their

works, the artists also created object installations for performance or space they used. They belonged to the generation for whom the period of *Solidarność* and Conceptual art were formative experiences. The two factors, social freedom and Conceptual art went together. Konger marked the beginning of a new development of the Post-Conceptual trend and its revival in new socio-political conditions.

The Black Market also grew out of the experience of living in a totalitarian system, and the need for contact over the Iron Curtain boundary. It was based on the cooperation of Tomáš Ruller (b. 1957) from the Czech Republic and Zygmunt Piotrowski (b. 1947). They first met in 1983 in Międzyzdroje, on the Polish Baltic Sea coast, at the Expanded Theatre festival organized by Grzegorz Dziamski (b. 1955), an influential contemporary art theoretician. At that time, Z. Piotrowski worked with the concept of the East-West Study Project developed under the umbrella of The School of Attention, which was another Conceptual art project-institution run by him. Its core idea was to join East and West in the field of Body art practices. A deep cultural tradition was to provide artistic means. At the same time, the East-West relationship referred to both the cultural distance and the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain. In 1985, at the second Expanded Theatre symposium held at the Maximal Art Gallery founded by Dziamski in Poznań, they were joined by Boris Nieslony (DE) and Jurgen Fritz (DE) and the name of the group was coined then. In 1986, the Black Market got together for the first time to perform on tour in Germany and Switzerland, together with Norbert Klassen (CH) and Jacques Van Poppel (NL). Later, Zbigniew Warpechowski (PL) became a member of the group (Liška 2021, 130-187).

Konger was a Polish group while the Black Market was an international one. Their common ground was performance as a Post-Conceptual practice. In Poland, but also in the countries of the region behind the Iron Curtain, this type of art was privileged as already having its own tradition created over the previous decade. This line of art is still developing in new forms.

## A New Trend – the Same Trend

At this time, another art trend was developed based on the new expression painting that then dominated European art, referring to the *Neue Wilde* and *Transavanguardia*. From 1983, the key venue for presenting this new trend was the Dziekanka Gallery in Warsaw. The gallery was located in a student dormitory and from 1972 actively participated in the gallery movement, significantly contributing to the formation of un-official art institutions. In the seventies, it was home to *Akademia Ruchu* (Academy

of Movement), a theatre group using Performance art forms, founded by Wojciech Krukowski (1944-2014), as well as for Z. Piotrowski and his workshop group.

From 1979 to 1987, it was run jointly by Tomasz Sikorski (1953-2021) and Jerzy Onuch (b. 1954). Both were associated, as artists and gallery curators, with Post-Conceptual art. Under their leadership, the gallery played a key role in the creation and development of a new art trend that merged painting and Conceptualism. In their gallery programme expressionist painting was presented as a Post-Conceptual art practice. At the time discussed here it was just one trend.

The leading theme of the new painting style was expression of anxiety in the face of the dramatically changing world. For these purposes the expressionist means seemed to be particularly suitable. The anecdote was important as it enabled demonstrating distance to the world through irony, grotesque, or absurd humour. That is why the painterly means used, such as a strongly marked contour, a flat colour field, a visible gesture of putting paint on a surface, and deformation resulting in semi-figuration, were as expressive and dynamic as possible and derived from expressionist painting of the post-cubist avant-garde. The form was closely related to the stories told in paintings. However, the painting in the picture plane as a form of presentation turned out to be insufficient at that time. Then expanded painting appeared. Large-format paintings sought to take over the entire space surrounding the viewer, taking on the character of objects, and most often environmental or Installation art forms. Actions that were numerous, or even dominant, took place in such an arrangement. The needs of new painting met with the practices developed in the Conceptual art trend. Painting pictures was not an end to this art. It was the later commercialisation of the trend that shifted its essence to standard painting on canvas. Commodifying these paintings deprived them of their dynamic relationship with the reality that characterised them at the beginning. And this is what makes those original artistic goals difficult to read today. As part of this trend, the painters' collective Gruppa (1984-1989) and Neue Bieriemniennost formed by Mirosław Bałka (b. 1958), Mirosław Filonik (b. 1958), and Marek Kijewski (1955-2007), active from March 8, 1986 (a celebration of the International Women's Day), to 1989, were established at the Dziekanka Gallery.

## Private Goes Public, Again

In 1985, the 1st Biennial of New Art in Zielona Góra held at the BWA Gallery was organised. Over 70 artists only from Poland participated in that large-scale event which marked the return to exhibiting in public institutions after the martial law period. Artists were not selected by a curator, but by a group of recognised persons in the Polish art world, which referred to the rules established by self-organised artists' communities of the eighties. The 2nd Biennial of New Art in 1987 had a similar impact on the Polish art scene. Artists were selected on the basis of the ARI movement's method, both the galleries that survived the martial law period and the newly established ones. Twelve galleries plus the organiser's choice were presented. The programme consisted of the gallery artists' presentations. Young people dominated and the gallery movement was revived in the new generation. A large part of the presented works were paintings in the new expression style, but showed within a Post-Conceptual art frame, i.e., not so much as pictures, but as painterly and non-painterly time-based works, objects, actions, and installations.

At these Biennials, not only the generation creating the unofficial art institution movement in the seventies showed up, but also the emerging generation of artists who had been too young to have taken part in the gallery movement creating contemporary art in the previous decade and to participate actively in the period of *Solidarność*, when their artistic careers were blocked by the imposition of martial law and its aftermath. The two Biennials were the first opportunity for them to manifest their presence. However, their art, based on the art of the seventies, introduced a new use of art forms based on spatial relations, such as installation and installation combined with action. The grassroots style of the Biennial organisations resembled the way in which the gallery movement operated. The selected artists represented the art milieu practicing dissident or critical art in Post-Conceptual forms, which in the eighties did not fit in the mainstream of the underground religious and nationalistic-patriotic opposition and boycotted the official system of government institutions. They were forced therefore to build their own art institutions with their own system of evaluation and circulation of artworks - once again in the history of contemporary art in Poland.

In the same year, 1985, another landmark venue was established, i.e., the Wyspa Gallery in Gdańsk, founded by Grzegorz Klaman (b. 1959). Initially, it was affiliated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, then moved to other locations in the Gdańsk Shipyard, which was largely closed due to the economic crisis of the eighties. Later, more art collectives appeared in the Shipyard which gave an important context to their activities. Klaman belongs to the generation of artists forming

the movement of new expression, but as a sculptor he has used a wider range of means of expression other than painting, which brought him closer to intermedia art. A special significance of the Wyspa Gallery in Polish art was related to the production of numerous projects based on the history of the Shipyard as a place linked to the ethos of labour combined with the ethos of the artist and creative work, as well as with the history of the fight for freedom, here seen as a freedom of individual expression uncensored by an oppressive state. It was also related to the preservation of the memory of the leader of pro-democratic changes in Poland and Europe, Lech Wałęsa. For example, *Subiektywna Linia Autobusowa* (*The Subjective Bus Line*) offered trips with an old-timer bus around the shipyard area, while former shipyard workers gave talks about abandoned and neglected places, or one could visit *Warsztat Lecha Wałęsy* (*The Lech Wałęsa Workshop*) which was an imaginary recreation of the workplace of the founder of Solidarność. Both projects were conceived by Klaman. His in-situ installation *The Gates* (2000) includes the historic Shipyard Gate, known from documentary photographs from the 1980 and 1988 strikes, as well as two sculptures of the *Gates* located alongside it. One, made of rusting steel used in shipbuilding, resembles a ship's prow. Inside, there are LED displays with quotes about politics. The other one - a derivative of the famous sculpture by Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International* - is a reference to the work of labourers and their struggle for social liberation. In the Gdańsk Shipyard, the political history of Poland and Europe has become an art material for Klaman and other artists, thus becoming art history. Such relations were not possible elsewhere, but Klaman used them in his artworks, which make them very important for Polish art. The political and economic history of the shipyard was a reference point for critical art as a artistic practice anchored in the context dominant in the Poland of the nineties (Gutfrąński 2010).

In 1989, the exhibition *Lochy Manhattanu* (*The Dungeons of Manhattan*), subtitled 'exhibition installation' and curated by Józef Robakowski, took place in Łódź. It was held in the garages under a high-rise apartment complex in the city centre. It was a large event with the participation of forty-two artists from Poland. The dominant form of presentation were various installation artworks which signified that type of art was the dominant Post-Conceptual practice in Poland at that time. The exhibition was a summary of the decade of the eighties, as well as of the new trend related to Post-Conceptual practices. It was a manifestation of the un-official art institution - it was created within such a framework with the involvement of its participants, whose activities formed that movement for decades. That was how contemporary art in its most radical forms contributed to the political breakthrough. At the same time,

its political mission was completed at this stage. Still, despite the change in the conditions of the functioning of art in a democratic system and market economy, challenges such as a fight for artistic freedom against censorship are still valid.

The exhibition *Lochy Manhattanu* was held from May 18 to June 18. On June 4, the first free election in Poland and in the Central European countries behind the Iron Curtain took place marking the beginning of the end of the post-Yalta partition of Europe.

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Among the artists who co-created the contemporary art of this period, the following should be mentioned: the AWACS group - Piotr Grzybowski (1954-2013) and Maciej Toporowicz (b. 1958); the Łódź Kaliska group with Marek Janiak (b. 1955) as a leader; Zbigniew Libera (b. 1959); Jerzy Truszkowski (b. 1961).

## The Nineties

In the nineties, art trends crucial for the previous decades continued to play an important role on the Polish art scene. Performance art in particular developed significantly through festivals. The formula of the festival was highly suitable for live art forms. It allowed for the presentation of many different works with various themes and using a range of Performance art forms within one event. In addition, performance had its network of festivals around the world based on personal contacts between curators and artists. It was indeed international art *par excellence*, and it enabled the execution of what was not possible, or possible to a limited extent, when Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain - the freedom of exchange. Hence, in the nineties Poland, several international festivals were organised by the artists and curators of both old and young generations.

## Post-Conceptual Relationship with Critical Art

In Poland, the dominant trend of the nineties was critical art. It focused on discussing current issues *via* art. The range of topics included pro-democracy, equality, and inclusivity discourses, including on feminist issues, which had already had an established tradition in Polish art as mentioned above. Critical art was an extension of contextual practice, which in that period became the essential practice of Post-Conceptual



art. Works of that type were realised in hybrid forms combining art media and techniques based on *par excellence* postmodern strategies such as intertext, quotation, and connection with the environment, e.g., site-specific installation or public space art. However, in terms of the continuity of art form development, it was the Performance art created at that time that was directly related to the art of previous decades, including the Conceptual trend. It was also useful as a critical art practice.

Held in 1991, *Real Time - Story Telling, International Performance Art Festival*, Sopot, BWA Gallery was the first large-scale international Performance art festival curated by Jan Świdziński and Witosław Czerwonka. Approximately 50 artists participated. It was the first major Polish and international review presenting live art forms and contemporary art trends after a break resulting from the imposition of martial law and the closure of Poland to foreign contacts.

In 1993, a large-scale international Performance art festival entitled *Zamek Wyobraźni* (The Castle of Imagination) was established in Słupsk and Ustka on the Baltic Sea coast. It was curated by Władysław Kaźmierczak, a performer. His curatorial activity significantly contributed to the Performance art boom at that time and introduced the festival to the larger international network of Performance art festivals. In its fourteen editions a whole range of Action art forms was presented by artists from around the world. This festival has maintained the reputation of Performance art as a leading practice on the contemporary art scene in Poland.

In the same year another international festival, *Fort Sztuki* (The Fort of Art) was founded in Kraków and had 13 editions until 2005. It was founded and organised by Artur Tajber, a performer and media artist who contributed to a high degree to the development of new art trends at that time. The festival was held in a nineteenth-century fortification in a state of neglect. From that point, a wide range of site-specific installation forms, time-based and place-related practices of various characteristics, combined with performance and media art were introduced as leading art forms of the nineties.

In 1999, the *InterAkcje* (InterAction) International Action Art Festival was founded in Piotrków Trybunalski by Piotr Gajda and Gordian Piec. Its initiators and curators were Ryszard Piegza (Paris) and Jan Świdziński. The festival has enabled a continued development of Performance art practices to subsequent generations.

Among festivals, the *WRO Festival*, founded by Piotr Krajewski (b. 1956) and Violetta Krajewska in 1989 in Wrocław, played a special role. WRO is an acronym from *Wizualne Realizacje Okołomuzyczne* (Music-Related Visual Art Realisations). It was an international festival dedicated to new media, video, interactive installations, digital art, and art

and technology issues. At that time, it was a summary and continuation of the development of media trends on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a forecast of their possible development in the following decades. As in the case of other festivals, the presence of performance was strongly marked in the programme. Since 1995, it has been operating as the WRO Media Art Biennial. WRO has introduced a wide spectrum of media art forms in Poland. It has been located in a new seat since 2006.

All the art-related facts listed in The Nineties section concern the continuation of the trends started in the previous decades. The artistic means developed in that period were adapted by critical art to its narratives based on the theoretical assumptions of postmodernism that were then dominant. There was a change in the definition of art and related terms, described from now on as belonging to the discourses of culture. Such a paradigm shift means that a different history of contemporary art, based on a different methodology, should be written from then on.

## Conclusion

In the history of art, the three factors, artistic, personal, and institutional, always appear as related. They form a system of art at the national and regional level and determine its specificity. Art is not only a collection of a certain class of works but also the context of their creation. The history of contemporary art is a comprehensive presentation of these relations.

Contemporary art built its system of functioning in the unfavourable conditions of a totalitarian state and its authorities unsupportive of new art trends. The key to the continuation of the development of contemporary art in Poland and the other V4 countries was the foundation of the unofficial art institution. It was created as a result of the coexistence of the three factors mentioned above: the production of art linked by the common definition of radically different contemporary art, in this case based on Conceptual art with a particularly large contribution of Action art, practiced in various ways by a wide circle of artists, and their works presented in the distribution system, i.e., the grassroots Conceptual gallery movement and other artist-run initiatives. It was accompanied by a circle of viewers who shared an interest in such a kind of art which meant that the un-official art institution was socially grounded. Thus, an art system was created that met the artistic, institutional, and social conditions necessary for the development of new trends. It was a political force that the authorities in Poland had to reckon with. In the other V4 countries, contemporary artists were severely repressed for creating Conceptual works.

The un-official art institution was based on international exchange. This was one of the main factors contributing to the legitimisation of contemporary art (before, it was the historical avant-garde that was based on international exchange). It was a model of the functioning of art so strongly embedded in its structure that even the cutting-off of international contacts during the martial law period did not destroy it, and immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a revival of Performance art festivals occurred.

The history of the development of contemporary art in Poland in the period from the second half of the sixties to 1989 and its consequences presented here demonstrates that art created at a given time is not a monolith that can be summed up with a common definition. The dynamics of art development processes has to be captured by the method of distinguishing among the art practices of a given time, classes of works with common features, and encompassing them by means of a common definition. Radically different progressive practices distance various groups of artworks from other parallel practices. The trends highlighted in this study determine the definition of the contemporary art of the discussed period. Art is a continuity but a continuity of changes.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Totalitarianism, form of government that theoretically permits no individual freedom and that seeks to subordinate all aspects of individual life to the authority of the state.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totalitarianism>

<sup>2</sup> The name of the group is also translated as Workshop of the Film Form.

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Tadeusz Kantor, *The Letter*, happening, January 1967, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw. Photo by Eustachy Kossakowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



Tadeusz Kantor, *Panoramic Sea Happening*, 1967, Osieki / Łazy. Photograph by Eustachy Kossakowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive,  
<https://artmuseum.pl/>



Tadeusz Kantor, *An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*, happening 1969, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw. Photo by Eustachy Kossakowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>





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2

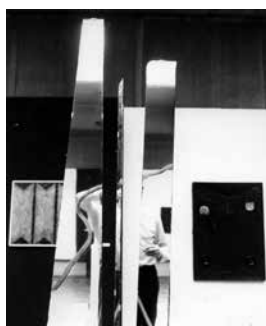


3



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1. Włodzimierz Borowski, *Arton XXIV*, 1963. Photo by Włodzimierz Borowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>
2. Włodzimierz Borowski, *Arton XXV*, 1963. Photo by Włodzimierz Borowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>
3. Włodzimierz Borowski, *Arton XXVI*, 1963. Photo by Włodzimierz  
Borowskicourtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>
4. Włodzimierz Borowski, *Arton XXIII*, 1963. Photo by Edmund Witecki  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



Włodzimierz Borowski, *1st Syncretic Show - Mirror Manifesto - Manilus*, 1966, BWA Gallery, Lublin  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



Włodzimierz Borowski, *4th Syncretic Show –The Offering of a Furnace*, 1966,  
Puławy (symposium of artists and scientists in Nitrogen plant). Photo by Eustachy  
Kossakowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



Jerzy Beres, *Oracle II*, happening, February 1968, Krzysztofory Gallery, Kraków.  
Photo by Eustachy Kossakowski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



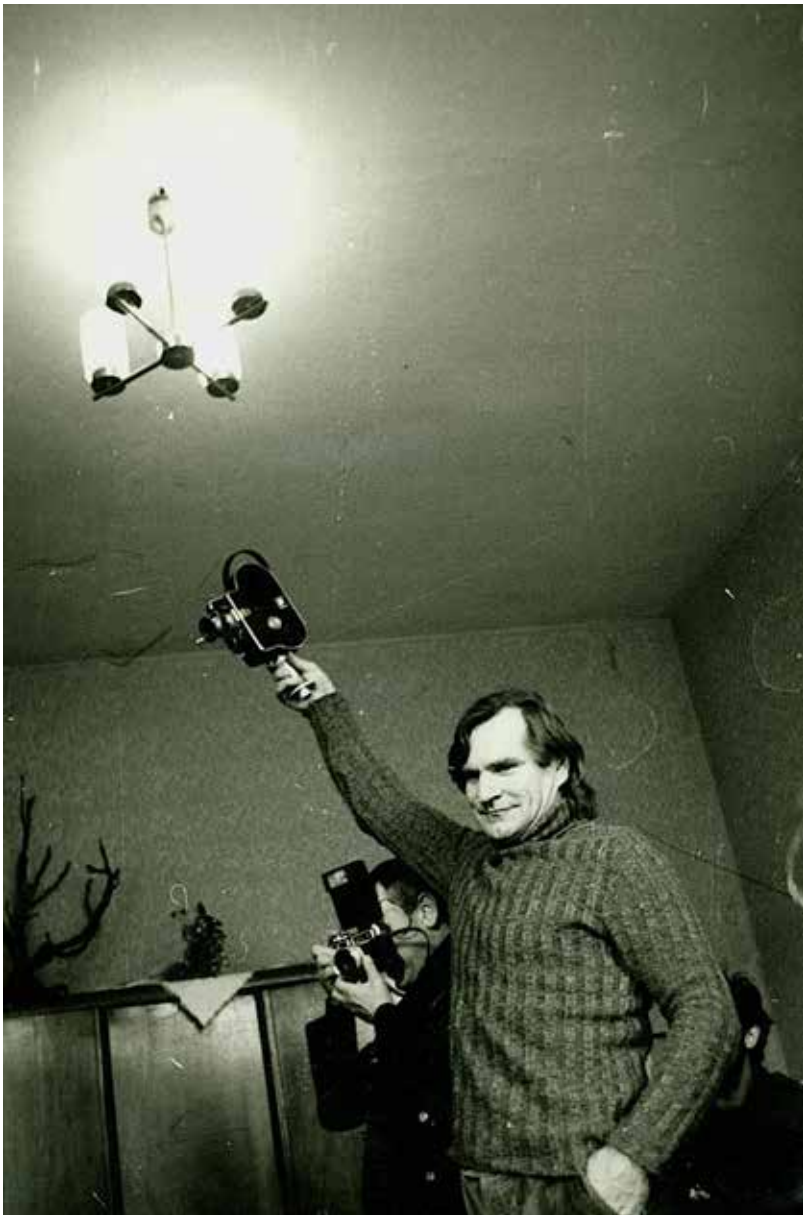
Jerzy Bereś, *Dialog with Marcel Duchamp*, 1981, BWA Gallery Lublin. Photo by Andrzej Polakowski  
Courtesy Labirynt Gallery Lublin Archive



Józef Robakowski, Exchange Gallery, a private residential apartment and permanent gallery in one, founded in 1979 together with Małgorzata Potocka. Gallery closed its doors in 2022.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



Józef Robakowski, from the series of performances for the film, *Exercise for two hands*, or *Mechanical-biological recording*, 1971-78.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive

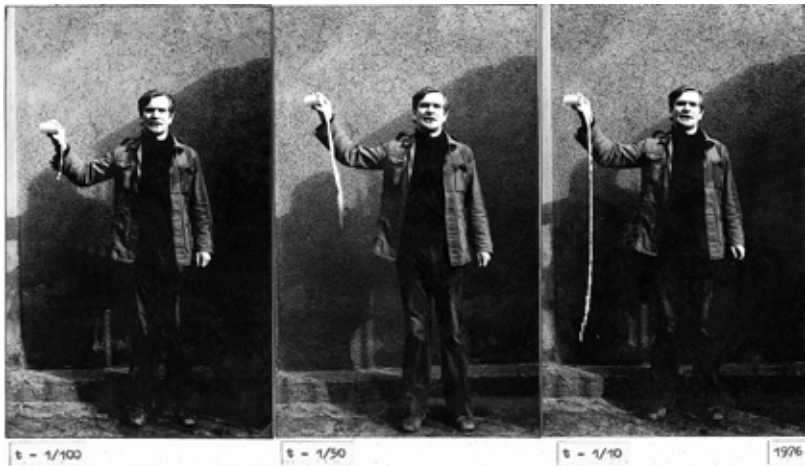


Józef Robakowski, with the camera detached from the eye...





Józef Robakowski, photograph from the *Abyss* series, depending on the lighting and exposure time, there are overexposed or underexposed parts in the photograph, 1978. Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



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1. Józef Robakowski, performance for photography, based on different exposure times of the same event, 1976.

2. Józef Robakowski, a series of photo portraits of fellow artists, created on the basis of rephotography from the TV screen of film recordings recorded by Józef Robakowski, *Vital Portraits*.

Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive

3. Józef Robakowski, a series of ostensive photographs consisting in pointing out objects and thus conceptually taking possession of them, 1972.

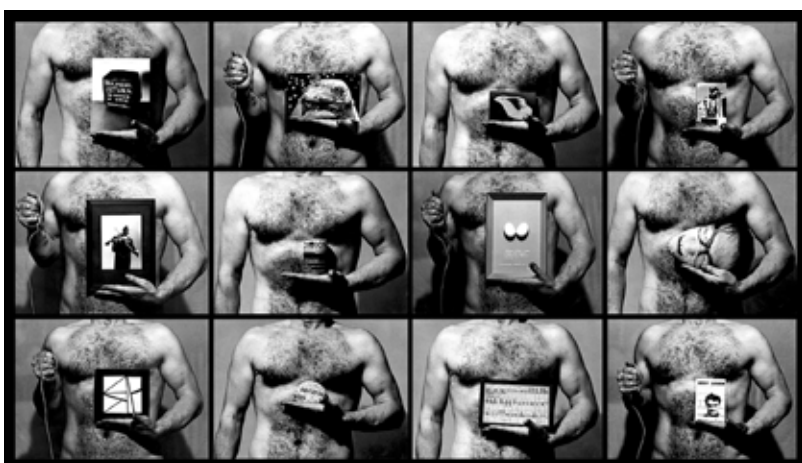
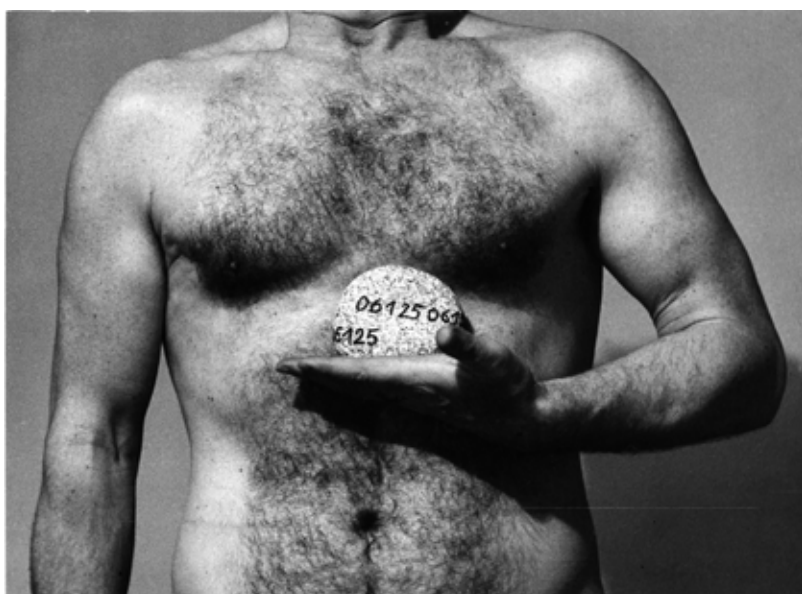
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



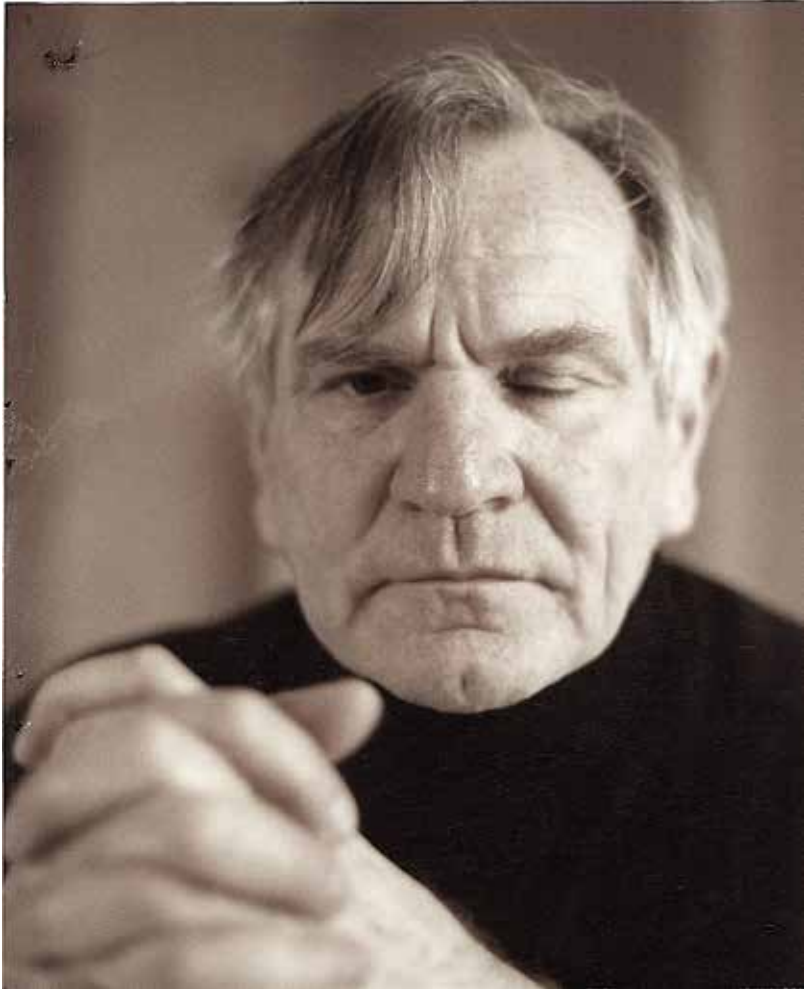
Józef Robakowski, *Art is power*, a series of rephotographs of the image from the TV screen, 1984-85.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



Józef Robakowski, *Selfie* is a series of photographs of Józef Robakowski's self-portraits with the TV screen and the current broadcast, 1982.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



The Exchange Gallery built its collection on the principle of exchange with artists. The *Fetishes* photo series presents Józef Robakowski's Body art photographs with works by other artists from the gallery's collection.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive



Józef Robakowski, portraits from the series with one eye closed, as a manifestation of being a filmmaker who looks at reality through the camera lens.  
Courtesy of the artist & Exchange Gallery Archive

**GALERIA „TAK”** | BYDGOSZCZ  
WARSZAWA  
WROCLAW - POZNAŃ

**Nielstniejąca przecinek galeria przytakująca**

**Galeria „Tak” przytakuje wszystkim  
poczynaniom artystycznym**

**Tak przecinek tak przecinek tak przecinek  
Przecinek tak przecinek tak przecinek tak**

**Czas zrobi swoje przecinek**

**Galeria „Tak” prosi o zgłaszanie  
Wszelkich poczyznań artystycznych**

**Przecinek w celu przytaknięcia przecinek**

**Przecinek**

**TAK**

**Przecinek**

**Galeria „Tak”  
Bydgoszcz  
przy Śniadeckich  
POLAND  
Kierownictwo  
być może artystyczne**

**Anastazy  
Wiśniewski  
Leonard  
Przyjemski**

**Komitet Doradczy  
nie został  
jeszcze powołany,  
a składa się  
z wyblinych twórców**

© 1970 Leszek Przyjemski

PROJEKT GŁÓWNY: 1970 Leszek Przyjemski, anastazy Wiśniewski.

Leszek Przyjemski, Galeria TAK, poster, 1970



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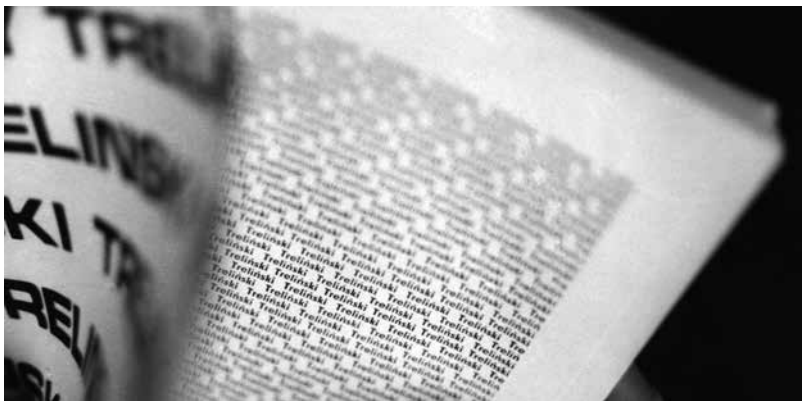
1. Leszek Przyjemski, *Mój ulubiony krajobraz / My favorite landscape*, poster, 1971.  
 Courtesy of the artist

2. Leszek Przyjemski, *Gablota nr 423 / Vitrine no.423*, 1978.





1



2

1. Jerzy Treliński and Andrzej Pierzgalski, 80x140 Gallery and A4 Gallery, Klub ZPAP, Łódź, 1972. Photo by Andrzej Pierzgalski.  
Courtesy of the artist

2. Jerzy Treliński, TRELIŃSKI, art book. Courtesy of the artist



Jerzy Treliński, Action during the May 1 parade, from the series *Autotautologies - About Myself - Nothing*, Łódź, 1974. Photo by Tadeusz Piechura.  
Courtesy of the artist



Jerzy Trelński, *Flags*, from the series *Autotautologies - About Myself - Nothing*, Łagów, 1976. Photo by Jerzy Trelński. Courtesy of the artist

Jerzy Trelński, *Dinner*, from the series *Autotautologies - About Myself - Nothing*, Pawłowice, 1975. Photo by Jerzy Trelński. Courtesy of the artist

Jerzy Trelński, *Clothes*, from the series *Autotautologies - About Myself - Nothing*, Zielona Góra, 1975. Photo by Andrzej Gieraga. Courtesy of the artist



Zbigniew Warpechowski, *March*, 1984

DVD Format: 9:00

Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>

Zbigniew Warpechowski, *Draw*, 1984

digitized VHS, 10'33"

Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>



Jan Świdziński, *There is only one side of photography*, action with a photograph of Van Gogh, 1976.  
Courtesy of the artist



Jan Świdziński, *Thoughts at breakfast*, BWA Gallery Lublin, 1990.  
Courtesy Labirynt Gallery Lublin Archive



Jan Świdziński, from the series *Empty Gestures*.  
Courtesy InterAkcje, Piotrków Trybunalski, 2008



Natalia LL, *Consumer Art*, 1975  
digitized 16 mm film, 16'01"  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Archive, <https://artmuseum.pl/>





1

1. Ewa Partum, *Stupid Woman*, performance  
November 20, 1981.  
Dziekanka Gallery, Warsaw.  
Photo by Tomasz Sikorski  
Courtesy Museum of Modern  
Art in Warsaw Archive,  
<https://artmuseum.pl/>



2. Ewa Partum, *Change. My Problem is a Problem of the Woman*, 1979, digitized 16 mm film, 7'16".

Courtesy Museum of Modern  
Art in Warsaw Archive,  
<https://artmuseum.pl/>



3. Ewa Partum, *Hommage a Solidarność*, 1983, digitized VHS, 14'04".

Courtesy Museum of Modern  
Art in Warsaw Archive,  
<https://artmuseum.pl/>

2

3



Konger - Galeria Krzysztofory, Kraków, 28.03.1984



Artur Tajber



Tomasz Sikorski, *Resistance*, London Video Arts & Air Gallery, August 27, 1981. Artist's private archive, courtesy of the artist. Elements of the performance: reading the text entitled „Resistance” / drinking a lot of drinks from cans / simultaneously pointing at various things in the room and saying their English names / finale: emptying the bladder into the pants.



Photo by Józef Robakowski, Exchange Gallery Archive



Photo by Tomasz Komorowski

*Lochy Manhattanu (The Dungeons of Manhattan)*, exhibition installation, Łódź, May 18-June 18, 1989



Grzegorz Klaman  
*Subiektywna Linia Autobusowa (The Subjective Bus Line)*, from 2002,  
photo by Michał Szlaga.  
Courtesy Wyspa Progress Foundation Archive



Grzegorz Kłaman  
*Warsztat Lecha Wałęsy (The Lech Wałęsa Workshop)*, from 2010,  
photo by Michał Szłaga.  
Courtesy Wyspa Progress Foundation Archive

**Paweł LESZKOWICZ**

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

**CIRCLES OF FRIENDS:  
NOTES ON THE QUEER  
HISTORY OF ART UNDER  
COMMUNISM IN CENTRAL  
EASTERN EUROPE**

The text examines how the Polish, Hungarian, and Czechoslovak counterculture and contemporary art in sixties to eighties opened space and possibility for queer artists to express their different sensibilities and embodiments and to project an alternative vision of love, subjectivity, eroticism, and gender. This study constitutes a part of a bigger research project consisting in tracing the homoerotic expression in art behind the Iron Curtain in Central and Eastern Europe, and the crucial role of counterculture and art spaces with regard to such subversions. The focus is on Polish queer art during the People's Republic of Poland with a comparative perspective applied as well as tracking of similar developments in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Performance art plays a central role in this study as two Polish gay artists Krzysztof Jung and Krzysztof Niemczyk have performed (with) their naked and eroticised bodies; their actions revealed fascination with the male body as an aesthetic, sexual, and rebellious subject. The artists found in the countercultural art communities of Warsaw and Cracow an atmosphere which allowed them to explore their male nudity and sexuality as a basis for oppositional Performance art. In Cracow of the sixties, under the umbrella of avant-garde art and a bohemian subculture, Niemczyk created a series of naked street actions, located between the hippie movement and 'gay Situationism.' In the seventies, Krzysztof Jung was affiliated with the Warsaw countercultural gallery Repassage. In its alternative space he conducted a number of events which raised such taboo issues as male beauty, the amorous relation between two men, or a deep interrogation of love and desire. Niemczyk's and Jung's actions constitute examples of a queer counterculture in the communist system and can be analysed today in political as well as intimate terms. Their pioneering approaches were supplemented by a total performative and theatrical achievement of Wojciech Misiuro's dance spectacles in Tri-City (Trójmiasto: Gdańsk-Sopot-Gdynia) in the eighties. The three authors pioneered art as a form of sexual dissidence, a topical vision in the context of the oppressive heteronormative system dominant in Central and Eastern Europe before and after 1989.

Alongside Performance art, let us analyse paintings by Łukasz Korolkiewicz, Zbysław Marek Maciejewski, Wojciech Ćwiertniewicz, and photographs by Ryszard Kisiel, who have queered masculinity in their new representations of relationship and identity. The artists contributed to the development of the ground-breaking art of the sexual revolution



in Poland in the seventies to eighties. Similarly influential were three women artists working with multimedia and sculpture, namely, Natalia LL, Izabella Gustowska, and Barbara Falender. From today's perspective, the approach they took in their new images of female homoeroticism and same sex erotica could be called 'queer feminist.'

Selectively, similar developments in the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian art worlds are emphasised with focus on Tamás Király, El Kazovsky, Libuše Jarcovjácová, and Karel Laštovka. The research into the queer story of Central Eastern European art is still in process and the text summarises new discoveries in the field of sexual and artistic cultures behind the Iron Curtain.

Let us explain briefly the geographical and political terminology that is used in this study. Due to the fact that it deals mainly with the art from the countries of the Visegrád Group, i.e., Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the term Central Eastern Europe is often applied. In appropriate contexts the name Central and Eastern Europe also appears to emphasise the entire cultural and legal territory that came under the influence of Soviet-born communism during the Cold War, and which was not the capitalist West (Murawska-Muthesius 2021, 1-30). The historical scope of the text concerns the period after World War 2 until the end of communism in 1989, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thus, such terms as communism, socialism, Eastern Block, but also the totalitarian system - which are commonly mentioned in the literature on the region behind the Iron Curtain - are used (Fowkes 2020, 7-13). The countries discussed here, mainly Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, are referred to as socialist countries, as this is how they identified themselves during the period. For historical reasons, the name Czechoslovakia is used, as at that time it was one country, only divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

## Queerness in Art and Law

Let us begin with defining the meaning of the term 'queer art' applied in the relevant historical survey. 'Queer' is both an identity category and a critical modality and as such it cuts across established modes of representation. Therefore, I point out queer works of art but also queer the history of Polish art by emphasising only the artists and artworks which dealt with LGBTQ+ issues at the time when the acronym was not yet formed. The contemporary term is used to understand the historical art from the second half of the twentieth century.

Today, 'queer' signifies gender and sexual nonconformity against the heteronormative and gender binary system of power, against heterosexuality

as a norm. Importantly, 'queer' opposes normativity with regard to both sexuality and gender. But there is no singular model of queer art, identity, or life - there is plurality and fluidity, yet always beyond heteronormativity (Getsy 2016, 12-23). Thus, queer art represents sexuality or gender outside the heteronormative categories of sexual orientation, gender identity, and love. It might concern transgender or no-binary subjectivity or express male or female homosexuality/non-heteronormativity. Hence, queer art refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) themes. Yet, according to the contemporary methodology, queer art in its fluidity does not have to be created by LGBTQ+ artists exclusively. While, on the one hand, queer art is considered a product of LGBTQ+ people, on the other hand, it represents and depicts queer acts or identities that could be made both by an insider or an outsider (Reed 2011, 11-35). 'Outsider' refers here to people who identify as straight. For example, a series of portraits of LGBTQ+ youth shot by a heterosexual photographer can be considered queer as well. To complicate the matter even further, in contemporary art there is a whole genre of queer feminist art created by feminist artists who contest the gender and sexual norms and figurations from both feminist and queer perspectives (Jones 2015, 5-10).

In the following analysis, all the categories of queerness and queer art as encountered in the process of the queering of the history of Central Eastern European art are applied. Moreover, the traditional and scientific word 'homosexuality' is often used, as it was a dominant term to describe non-heteronormativity in the Eastern Block. Furthermore, the queer artists whose LGBTQ+ identity is known, documented, or openly declared are pointed out. It would be particularly significant for gay men, as they have contributed the most to the queer history of art in this part of Europe.

The queer history of Central and Eastern European art in the twentieth century has not been written - there are numerous individual case studies, but a linear narrative of queerness in the art of this region is still lacking and there are major lacunae of knowledge. The work is only beginning and in many seemingly comprehensive histories of Central and Eastern European art the subject is still marginalised or hardly mentioned. The main exceptions are books by Piotr Piotrowski, i.e., *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (2009) and *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (2012), who considers it a serious political and artistic issue connected with the striving for freedom in this part of the world so strongly affected by totalitarianism. In my own curatorial and academic work, I have been involved in the removal of the heteronormative filter, which rejects alternative sex, gender, and love stories, a filter very powerful in Central and Eastern Europe where the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights continues till today, particularly in Russia, Poland, and Hungary.

Surprisingly, homosexuality has never been criminalized under the law of independent Poland. After regaining independence in 1918, the country applied the rules of the French Napoleonic Code which placed no ban on homosexuality. The former criminalization of homosexuality imposed in Poland by the legislation of the three partitioning countries, namely, Prussia, Russia, and Austria, was rejected and a new, more medical approach was introduced. The new 1932 Polish criminal code abandoned laws prohibiting homosexuality. After World War II, the liberal interwar law was kept making Poland the only country in the Eastern Bloc not to have introduced the Soviet criminalization of homosexuality of 1933. But that legal advantage did not in any way change the society's and the authorities' negative attitudes. In general, homosexuality continued to be a social taboo or considered a pathology, registered mainly in medical or criminal contexts, linked with certain subcultures on the margins of society. Even though homosexuality was legal, since the sixties police occasionally rounded up gay men and registered their names in so called 'pink lists' which culminated in the massive Operation Hyacinth in 1985-87 when around 11.000 men were listed. Moreover, gays and lesbians were represented in the pop culture of the communist period as humorously grotesque characters. On the flip side, queerness was visible and prominent in high culture, in literature, visual arts, and theatre, expressed seriously but often in a coded or metaphorical way. Homosexuality became a subject of public discussion in the seventies, when journalists openly addressed the 'silent social issues,' such as alcoholism, drug use, and dissident sexualities, for the first time. It was also the decade when counterculture was blossoming in Poland in connection with hippies, rock music, student clubs, alternative galleries, happening/performance, and other forms of experimental art: so-called neo-avant-garde art.

Significantly, the legal and artistic situation was similar in all the Visegrád countries. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1961, and so the culture could function in a relatively liberal legal atmosphere, as in Poland. Gay men were occasionally investigated or harassed by the secret service, but not imprisoned like in the remaining countries of the Eastern Block, where the cruel Soviet criminalization law ruled. Thus, artists would experience more freedom to express sexual and amorous themes outside heteronormativity, though one should bear in mind that pornography (genital figuration) was censored and art censorship often targeted frontal male nudity. After the decriminalization, homosexuality was controlled by the medical approach - the theory of illness was still present - but the socialist sexology was becoming increasingly progressive and prepared to accept that sexual and gender diversity could exist in communist societies and people had

a say in how they led their intimate lives (Sokolová 2022, 65). This legal and cultural permissiveness in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia contrasted sharply with the punitive sexual politics in the USSR, Bulgaria, and Romania. The Eastern Block was very diverse in its approaches to non-heteronormativity, almost like Western Europe, where, in numerous countries, homosexuality was decriminalized only in the seventies.

As queerness, though legal, still belonged to the margins of society in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, it found its natural place in the subcultural network of people and cultural institutions. Especially Performance art functioned at the intersection of neo-avant-garde art and a social counterculture and so was a fruitful ground for queer expression. It is Performance art and its photographic and filmic documentation that captured the complex nature of sexual and gender identity and explorations of individual embodiments in Central Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Performance art was also very interdisciplinary blurring the boundaries between theatre, fashion, and design. During the socialist period, all aspects of design, including fashion, faced less scrutiny from the authorities as non-narrative media – similarly, performance as an ephemeral genre was less susceptible to control. These media then were the most innovative and offered more possibility of experimentation, including crossing the limits of gender and sexuality in both group and individual actions (Bryzgel 2018).

## The Male Sexual Power of Performance Art

In the official culture of the People's Republic of Poland the full male nude was excluded from the realm of art as pornographic, obscene, and ugly. The censorship of sexuality left its imprint on the dominant aesthetic formation of socialist modernism in which the male nude was degraded, prudishly concealed, and censored. Most men and women artists during this period conformed to its obligatory castration, degradation, desexualisation, and marginalisation. It was the dominant female nude that affirmed the communist patriarchy and channelled sexual imagination. Starting in the sixties and seventies, however, some artists used the eroticism of the naked male body as a cultural contestation – especially performance artists associated with the Repassage Gallery: Grzegorz Kowalski, Wiktor Gutt, Jerzy Słomiński, and, particularly, Krzysztof Jung, used male nudity subversively.

Krzysztof Jung (1951-1998) worked within the milieu of Warsaw's countercultural Repassage Gallery. In Poland, in the seventies, mushroomed so-called 'authorship galleries' which hosted un-official art activities. Such galleries, although funded by the state, had a margin of

freedom and depended on the individual visions of their curators. The galleries offered the possibility for art to be slightly on the outside of the official cultural policy. Countercultural ideas about corporeality and human subjectivity were consistently pursued by the Repassage Gallery (1971-1981), founded in Warsaw in 1971 by the married couple Elżbieta and Emil Cieślak. The gallery was located in the Warsaw University's building, functioned under the umbrella of the Student Union Organization, and was often run by artists from the Department of Sculpture of the nearby Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. It was closed upon the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981.

Repassage Gallery specialised in Performance and Body art as an exploration of human freedom and authenticity. It was a place where art was practiced as a therapeutic psychodrama against the false ideology of the external state reality. It combined political, psychological, and sexual understanding of art practice and gallery space. Carnality and sensuality were used to discover an alternative form of existence and a true contact with oneself and with others. In this community Jung found a safe haven for his existential and erotic experimentation.

Jung stands as a precursor of Polish gay art. While his drawings of male nudes from the eighties demonstrate clear homosexual longings, it was his earlier installations and performances that introduced the audience to a new vision of sensitivity, sensuality, and masculinity. His installations and performances at Repassage Gallery, preserved only in photographs, reveal fascination with the nude body, especially the male body as an aesthetic subject. His performances raised the issue of an amorous dialogue between two male partners and getting naked and free from oppressive bonds.

Starting with his first actions in 1967, Jung's performances featured naked men that tore apart threads, the webs of threads which the artist had woven around them, like a spider: *Change For Wojtek Karpiński* (1978), *Creation through Others and Horizon of Freedom* (1980), *Trace. Dedicated to Konstanty Jelenski* (1989). In all those actions, weaving a net, staying within it, and tearing it was crucial. Bound men and sometimes women liberating themselves in Jung's performances acquired a variety of meanings. The actions were perceived at the time as striving for a deeper physical and spiritual connection and being and were not conceptualised from a queer point of view, even though the collaborators were aware of Jung's gay identity and that he performed with men whom he loved or desired.

Nevertheless, from a contemporary queer perspective, his actions might relate to the destruction of a rigid web of masculinity, liberating it from the closed communist, patriarchal, and heterocentric gender system and closets. His performance art can be interpreted in political (anti-communist) as well as sexual (anti-heteronormative) terms. For Jung, the

beauty of the male body, including the body of the artist himself, became a Performance art medium. In the official culture, beauty and masculinity were two strictly opposed ideas. Jung's homoeroticism salvaged the attractive male body in the art of the People's Republic of Poland, affirming its shape, its sensations, and eroticism. Additionally, his performances depended on friendships with people in the countercultural gallery; he performed together with friends and for friends. This network of friends was a counterculture in the totalitarian state.

*The Shared Performance / Conversation* at the Repassage Gallery (1980) featured three people: Jung and two of his friends, Dorota and Wojciech. The two male lovers, Krzysztof and Wojciech, dressed in black, were sitting in a dark room surrounded by the audience. They were stitching their shirts and pants together to become one, looking each other in the eyes for a long while. Finally, they undressed and went out of the room, leaving the stitched clothes behind. The two men also modelled for another Repassage artist - Grzegorz Kowalski's series of homoerotic photographs *In the Mirror* (1980). Kowalski's wife, the neoclassical sculptor Barbara Falender, also commemorated the relationship of Jung and Wojciech in the series of sculptures *Ganimede* (1984) for which the men posed naked. She was fascinated by the beauty of the gay couple and carved them in marble as a mythological pair; Jung as passive abducted Ganimede and Wojciech as tightly embracing him Zeus. The erotic sculpture is semi-abstract. Falender often used classical mythology to express male homosexuality under socialism.

Jung's performances and drawings carry a deep psychological reflection on love, including same sex love. The artist's personal engagement made them unique and courageous, an inspiration for other artists to explore eroticism. A non-homophobic reflection on a relationship between two men offered by his 'artistic theatre' became a real experience in the Repassage Gallery circle of friends as part of countercultural experience.

In search of the queer legends of Polish art one could go back much further – to the sixties. Before Jung's performances in Warsaw, Krzysztof Niemczyk (1938-1994), an outsider and provocateur, revolutionised the everyday reality and avant-garde art scene in Kraków. After years of oblivion and rejection, his myth was revived in Anka Ptaszkowska's book *Treaty on the Life of Krzysztof Niemczyk for the Benefit of the Young Generation* (2007).

Niemczyk was a charismatic poet, writer, musician, painter, and action artist who turned his life into art and paid a high price for it. Krzysztof from Kraków was not as lucky as Krzysztof from Warsaw in his safe haven of the Repassage Gallery. The world of art marginalised Niemczyk from the seventies onwards. For a while, however, in the

sixties, he was accepted by the artists' community gathered around the Krzysztofory Gallery ruled by Tadeusz Kantor. But Niemczyk quickly turned too radical for the traditional Cracow avant-garde who mainly focused on painting. At that time, such a rejection was tragic because the umbrella of art events protected unconventional behaviour and lifestyle. When the protection of an art institution disappeared, the artist was persecuted by the police and put in a psychiatric hospital for his fascinating street actions in Cracow in the late sixties.

Niemczyk's homosexuality is known from the memoirs of others and the artist's own letters. As it was for most men of his generation in Poland, homosexuality was apparently not a happy experience to him. Niemczyk's orientation was widely known in hypocritical and traditional Cracow, and he was condemned for it. It intensified the artist's non-conformism and rebelliousness, giving a provocative edge to his art. Exhibitionism fuelled Niemczyk's scandalising actions and his propensity for nude photography. He took nude or highly stylised self-portraits. In his actions, the artist challenged the conventions of everyday street reality by getting naked on impromptu occasions. Like Anita Ekberg in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, he frolicked nearly nude in the fountain in Cracow's city square, flashing his naked bottom to the passers-by. Flashing the buttocks was Niemczyk's most frequent form of public exposure. Fortunately, black-and-white photographs of those unique actions have survived. They show the artist taking off his pants and exposing shapely buttocks in the middle of a street to the surprised on-lookers, and smiling to the camera, posing for it. Today, these photographs are comic and moving. Niemczyk introduced into the public space a different (anal) aspect of male sexuality and corporality, non-heroic, non-phallic, humorous, against the grain of Cracow's avant-garde art pomposity, and in defiance of the puritan and mundane socialist reality. The artist used his own nudity and exhibitionism as a means of artistic expression in a public space.

Niemczyk's face can be seen in many portraits taken by different photographers in the sixties and seventies. It is covered by suggestive make-up alluding to antique or archaic theatre masks. In many photographs the performer looks like a Satyr. The emphasis on a staged, symbolic portrait/self-portrait points to his very strong, uncanny personality. His works also include a series of enigmatic pornographic photographs taken in 1968-1970. He was arrested by the police for their possession. They were meant as an inspiration for his grand oeuvre, the novel *The Courtesan and Chicks*, a legendary unpublished work of the post-war Polish literature, which only came out posthumously in 1999 in Paris. The myth of Niemczyk also includes his death in solitude, his poverty, and rejection in the seventies and eighties, as well as his violent love affairs, including his relationship with the painter Jacek Gull.

Niemczyk played a role in the hippie movement, although, as an extreme individualist, he was never part of it. The legendary Polish rock star, Kora Jackowska, recalled that all his ideas made a huge impression on her and were like a gasp of fresh air in the stale socialist climate of the seventies. His actions inspired her as a young woman, stimulating her imagination. Niemczyk's queer myth was reinforced when Allen Ginsberg, roaming the Eastern Block at the turn of the sixties, signed a wall in his apartment.

Today, historians describe Niemczyk's actions as artistic interventions comparable to the French Situationist movement of the sixties. The similarity lies in the way he created situations in urban space interrupting its norms and iconosphere. However, the artist did not identify with the current concepts of performance or happening. To continue the French connection, it is interesting, in my view, to recall the concept of mapping the city space through homosexual desire, developed by Guy Hocquenghem, the theoretician of the gay movement of the 1968 France. By striking a pose and exposing erotic nudity in selected locations in Cracow, Niemczyk marked and mapped the city with his homosexual body.

The two performers, Jung and Niemczyk, pioneered art as a form of sexual dissidence through the energy of male nudity. This movement was continued in modern dance inspired by Performance art and erotic experimentations. A real break-through came with the art of Wojciech Misiuro and his Theatre of Expression in Tri-City, established in 1986. It appeared at the very special time of the great political change of the late eighties, at the end of the existence of the People's Republic of Poland. The very successful dance theatre combined the best of the alternative theatre of the eighties with a prophetic vision of sexed-up capitalism.

Misiuro's project was multidisciplinary and encompassed dance, Body art, performance, the rock scene, and visual arts. Most interestingly, it put on the pedestal the beauty of the nude male body and subjected masculinity to all possible gender and sexual metamorphoses. It was a theatre of the nude male and sometimes female body in a dynamic motion on the stage. The director replaced traditional dramatic actors with 'athletes' - in particular, with beautiful men. They were selected for their attractive and fit bodies and trained in expressive choreography similar to gymnastics and acrobatics. Performances were given to the accompaniment of opera or rock music and included no dialogues - only the language of the super-body at the intersection of dance, pantomime, and sport, decorated in elaborate fetishist costumes. New postmodern fashion was an important part of those spectacles. The theatre's logo presented a shapely male chest.

The Theatre of Expression used mythical and literary themes of European culture, connecting male eroticism with cultural sophistication, as demonstrated by the performance titles: *Dead Can Dance*, *Dantonians*, *Idols*



*of Perversion, Cantata, Tango, City of Men, Passion.* Majority of the dance/performance shows were produced in the late eighties and early nineties, reflecting the spirit of political transition and the joy and freedom of a new democracy, which included more open sexual expression. The theatre earned a scandalising homosexual reputation and many performances were targeted by censors. The male body was both active and passive, it was bisexual, an object of female and male desire in danced scenes. Misiuro showed his actors play with masculinity and perform masquerades of gender: male actors wearing carnivalesque costumes turned into transvestites and women, women and men acted out sadomasochist psychodramas reversing gender roles. Two shows are particularly known for their queer content, namely, *Idols of Perversion* (1991) featuring various genderbending, and *City of Men* (1994) with a spectacular homoerotic display of men (Tomczyk-Watrak 2003). Male nudity and homoerotic subjectivity, restrained for the most part during puritan communism and preserved only in coded gay art, exploded at the time of the collapse of the system as a symbol of the new beginning. Geographically, it is symbolic that the Theatre of Expression culturally and erotically revolutionised Tri-City, the metropolis where the conservative Catholic, yet politically revolutionary Solidarity movement of the Gdansk's shipyard was challenging the totalitarian system of the Eastern Block.

## Queer Feminist Intimate Politics

Izabella Gustowska's photo-series *Victim I-III* (1988/89) was created at the very end of the communist system in Poland as well. Gustowska is a pioneering feminist, intermedia artist, and curator from Central Eastern Europe, who started her career in the seventies. The artwork *Victim I*, exhibited on the permanent display at the National Museum in Poznań, is one of unique trailblazing portraits of a female same-sex couple in the art from behind the Iron Curtain, and so it played a prominent role in the major exhibition *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (2009), curated by Bojana Pejić.

The exploration of female figuration and various dimensions of femininity is a recurrent theme in Izabella Gustowska's art of photographic and filmic portraiture and self-portraiture. In her search for multiple and complex images of femininity she is a precursor of the representation of female intimate relationships and togetherness in the art of the Eastern Bloc.

The *Victim* series is based on the photographs of two real Dutch women, the artist's friends - a couple who posed for her. The central work of the cycle *Victim I* is a double female nude characterised by a certain degree of pathos, drama, and mystery. The imagery references

Christian iconography and is a variation of a female Pietà inspired by Michelangelo's masterpiece, a sign of queer erotic and spiritual lineage in art history. Naked female partners are leaning on each other locked in an embrace with one half-lying on the lap of the other. The artist inscribed a love scene between two women into the motif of Mary and her dead son, as a result of which the emotional and sensual nature of the scene becomes more profound. The well recognisable iconography of suffering and closeness may not only be indicative of intimacy, but also of the difficult homophobic and taboo circumstances of the period. Hence, the faces are hidden under the protective veil of privacy. This traumatic aspect is further emphasised in the composition of *Victim III* where one naked lover carries the other on her back, like a burden. Despite a certain tragic component, the female bodies are rendered in vivid red-pink colours which convey the eroticism and energy of the female partnership depicted in *Victim I*. The powerful physicality of the couple is additionally emphasised by the suggestion of a red throne on which they are sitting, and by the unique technique used by the artist.

Gustowska experimented at the time with combinations of photography, graphic arts, painting, and sculpture, and *Victim I* is an example of her so-called 'painterly objects' based on photography. The objects-images are anthropomorphic in form, three dimensional, and larger than life-size, creating an impression of monumentality, evoking power. Photographic canvas covered with photosensitive emulsion were stretched on frames, filled with a synthetic layer, and, finally, subjected to painting procedures of colouring. The technique consists in a sculptural materialisation of photography and painting. The surface bulges out, like a soft cushion. As a result, the work resembles a soft relief, optical and haptic at the same time, opening to more sensual-tactile modalities of femininity.

The year when *Victim I* was created was a significant one for freedom, love, and democracy. It is a transitional piece from transitional times - 1989 was the year of a great systemic shift in Poland and in the East, with the difficult beginnings of democracy ensuing. Already in the early nineties, Poland witnessed an open debate concerning the rights of the so-called sexual minorities. Gay and lesbian organisations as well as publications existing on the fringes of the public sphere in eighties operated freely and blossomed. But, at the same time, the old communist system was being replaced by the rising nationalistic religious fundamentalism restricting women and queer rights. Thus, *Victim I* was as meaningful in 1989 as it is in 2023, with the ongoing ineffectual debates about legalization of same-sex partnership in Poland. Yet, Gustowska - in an affirmative, erotic, and psychologically insightful fashion - portrayed such relationships as early as in the eighties!

Paradoxically, today's ultra-conservative Poland is the only country of the former Eastern Bloc where homosexuality has never been criminalized, and Polish femininity played an iconic cultural role in lesbian imagination in the region, as the country also has a certain pioneering role in the history of queer feminist art and film, shared with Hungary. Two very well-known and charismatic Polish actresses Grażyna Szapołowska and Jadwiga Jankowska played a tragic female couple in the cult erotic movie *Another Way* (1982) by the Hungarian director Károly Makk, which was widely distributed behind the Iron Curtain in the eighties. Gustowska's *Victim* series was also shown at numerous exhibitions during the final days of socialist Poland, heralding upcoming dramatic upheavals in queer rights and culture.

Therefore, one can discover a more profound kind of alternative politics of privacy and intimacy in the artist's oeuvre of that time. Her woman-centred art is a witness to a history different from the grand events associated with the anti-communist *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement whose patriarchal and religious ethos erased women's opposition. In her multimedia portraits of women, Gustowska has created a unique record of the psychohistory of private life, an intimate queer female history of the decade of the systemic changes. Thus, her vision is equally relevant today, in the years two thousand and twenty, when Poland once again approaches a period when a withdrawal into privacy and human intimacy enables survival, and same sex love is still an act of private revolt at the time of right-wing populism and religious fundamentalism.

Furthermore, since the end of seventies, Gustowska has consistently realized a series of trailblazing exhibitions and conferences dedicated to the works of Polish women artists: *Women's Art* (1980), *Encounters - Presence* (1987), *III Encounters - Presence III* (1992), *Presence IV - 6 Women* (1994). The events were organised by the ON Gallery belonging to the Fine Arts Academy in Poznań, where the artist worked. These immense projects are an accomplishment in the earliest documentation of women's creative work in Poland after 1945.

Natalia LL (Lach-Lachowicz) (1937-2022) from Wrocław was another very prominent new media feminist artist and curator of the older generation. The *Women's Art* exhibition, organised by her in 1978 at the experimental Jatki PSP Gallery in Wrocław, is considered to be the earliest display of international feminist art in Poland (Jakubowska 2018, 135-148). From the late sixties, she specialised in a critical media analysis of erotic figurations of femininity in photography and film, yet still creating images of strong erotic quality. Her early explorations of female sexuality established a strong trend in film and photography in Polish art which fully developed in the nineties inspiring radical new discussions in the field of the art criticism and theory addressing the female body and its liberation/oppression.

It needs to be emphasised that in her artistic analysis of pornography, Natalia LL explored lesbian themes as early as in seventies. Her series of photographs *Velvet Terror* (1970) is especially influential. In large size colour photographs, the artist is posing as a dominatrix with a whip - in some of the photos she is naked, erotically adored, and orally stimulated by another naked woman at her feet. The lesbian scenes seem to be a part of the artist's investigation of heterosexual pornography and the male gaze - there is no intimacy, and they have a cold sexual aura of commercial erotica exploited for the purpose of a powerful sexual self-portraiture. Unfortunately, the lesbian part of *Velvet Terror* became known and properly printed only in the years two thousand and twenty, thanks to the curatorial work of Warsaw's feminist Local 30 Gallery. Yet, the work itself, created in 1970, resembles art from New York, or Paris, not the communist Eastern Bloc. Natalia LL was traveling internationally in that decade, making many new artistic contacts and artworks, e.g., about early Pride parades in NYC. Thus, her artistic journey and oeuvre is another confirmation of the fact that the Iron Curtain was very porous when it came to art influences and mutual connections. The history of European queer art should include both parts of divided Europe as things were developing simultaneously and the sexual revolution was happening also in Central Eastern European art, where limitations applied mainly to the freedom of exhibition.

## Bohemian Figurative Paintings

The school of figurative painting developed at the Fine Art Academies in Cracow and Warsaw in the seventies reflected the lifestyle of the generation of the sexual revolution in its reduced but nevertheless present Eastern Bloc's version. They were mainly portraits and self-portraits of young people, friends in informal domestic, or clubbing settings, with erotic or amorous allusions. Real gems of erotic and artistic subversion in the People's Republic of Poland emerged in that decade when painting and drawing inspired by photography were in fashion. Łukasz Korolkiewicz's and Zbyszek Marek Maciejewski's large photorealistic and figurative canvases feature homoerotic allusions: they are portraits and nudes of young men, scenes of cruising, as well as the artists' self-portraits when striking camp poses. Sometimes, the painterly tendency expressing the return of representation in contrast with abstraction dominant in Polish socialist modernism was called a new figuration or photorealism. Through the new countercultural figurations, the artists conveyed their authentic private lives and fantasies, beyond the straitjacket decorum of the official social and cultural norms.

In the late seventies, Łukasz Korolkiewicz was creating photorealistic and melancholic paintings suggesting homosexual relationships or individuals. The protagonists of the paintings are mostly young men shown in domestic interiors or cityscapes in ambiguous homoerotic situations. In the paintings *At the End of the Night*, *Hammock* (1977), and *Love* (1977) two men are portrayed in intimate scenes of desire. In *Hammock*, one of them is naked – the glistening musculature of his back is noticeable. He is lighting a cigarette for his older partner lying in the hammock. In the iconic *Love* shown in *Gender Check*, sitting behind a set table, they are ostentatiously embracing, presenting their affection to the viewer. Some aspects of self-portrait are present here. In the photographs from this period, the painter is posing cuddling up to his nude models. It seems that the artist used photorealism to document the lives of men existing on the margins of the official reality. Homosexuality appeared in the socialist media only with degrading connotations, while here male couples and desire between men are presented in beautiful, large scale, official portraits. Is it the artist's mischievousness, his iconographic originality, the inspiration drawn from his friends' lives, his perversity towards the official ideology, or perhaps his curiosity about a certain subculture, an element of his own biography? These questions remain a mystery. The fact remains that through the portraits of a group of friends, a unique artistic insight into the fashion, moods, types of masculinity, and the atmosphere of the homosexual and artistic milieu in Warsaw in the seventies is offered. Korolkiewicz was part of an artistic group of painters called Śmietanka (the Cream) who specialised in the figuration of youth and the counterculture under socialism. The group also included Andrzej Bielawski, Andrzej Bieńkowski, Jan Dobkowski, and Ewa Kuryluk. Their dispersed paintings still hold a queer and erotic potential waiting to be decoded.

Zbysław Marek Maciejewski (1946-1999) was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow who starred in homoerotic film etudes by the famous theatre director Krystian Lupa, in the seventies. Maciejewski is a forgotten artist who did not fit into the official schema of the caustic Conceptual neo-avant-garde that dictated the history of late modern art in Poland. This was partly due to his sexual orientation (the heterosexual filter was effective), and partly because of his traditional figurative style. His figurative paintings depict the gay artist and other bohemians of the era. As early as in 1971, Maciejewski drew and painted the series *Three Graces*: male nudes seen from behind. In his vision, the mythological Graces were young muscular men whose hips touched. His colourful, joyous, swinging, jazzy paintings are unique for that time. They went against the grain of the mundane socialist life and art overwhelmed by ugliness and trauma. Central to them is the figure of a cool young man,

possibly the artist, relishing pleasure, relaxation, fantasy. In his *Self-portrait with a Putto* (1978), the nude painter is lying on the grass smoking a cigarette, a bottle of vodka at his side as well as an antique putto, a homo-signal. A real *dolce far niente*. One would like to lie down by the artist and enjoy the greenery of the garden he often painted (Leszkowicz 2010, 24)

Maciejewski's gay art includes images of St. Sebastian, cinema stars, male nudes on the beach, and the fascinating series of paintings of a naked man in a circus arena surrounded by tigers - a symbolic painterly treatise on desire. According to the seventies convention, the presented male body is sketchy and somewhat distorted, but his muscular beauty is obvious. The male genitals are blurred as they were a taboo in the aesthetics of the day, considered as bringing art down to pornography. Unfortunately, such was the internalised effect of censorship. Still, inspired by Young Poland - the Polish version of modernism at the turn of the twentieth century - and by photorealism, Maciejewski managed to overcome the dark and gloomy abstract veil that many contemporary Polish homosexual artists cast over their very highly coded paintings - the artists who never dared to be truly out. They resorted to hardly legible biographical codes (Józef Czapski) or metaphysical and religious allusions of martyrdom (Jacek Sempoliński). Both these outstanding painters unfortunately devoted part of their work to the unintelligible. Sempoliński is an interesting artist who painted the male body as a Christian nude. His painting is often analysed in terms of *sacrum* in art. Homoeroticism does not contradict that but takes the spirituality to a new level and saves it from its trivialisation by the church. On the other hand, Christian iconography was an oppositional subject in the secular communism and in the case in question connects smoothly with even more taboo sexuality.

Sempoliński was a life partner of the famous Polish art historian Wiesław Juszcak, yet their same sex relationship remains unexplored and was mostly known of among friends only. It is a great loss for the history of amorous freedom in the Polish twentieth century culture as well as a testimony to the oppression gay men had to endure in their modernist intellectual closet, and how distant most art was from freedom of expression in the dark times of totalitarianism. Subliminal homoerotic coding is hidden in numerous male figures created by men and remains enigmatic forever. It stands in stark contrast to the spectacular expression of heterosexual male desire in countless female nudes where the male gaze is never masked. Thus, art reflects the dominance of the heteronormative system and the irony of artistic freedom. Open expressions of gay desire from that time are most precious and there are a few of them, especially from the transformative decade of the eighties. Probably, the most significant and now slightly forgotten again are paintings by another painter from Cracow, Wojciech Ćwiertniewicz.

His first paintings with gay themes - couples, portraits, nudes - date back to the early eighties when he debuted and started to focus consistently on the genre of the male nude, which he has continued ever since. He was inspired by the British queer pioneer David Hockney and his work represented the Polish version of neo-expressionism. In 1986, he participated in the important exhibition *Expression of the 80s*, curated by Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, which proclaimed the return to painting in Polish art after a decade of Conceptualism. It marked the beginning of postmodernism in local art. Ćwiertniewicz showed there for the first time some of his canvases from the series *A Cycle with Carlos* (1984-1987) consisting of almost fifty paintings. It is one of the most extensive homoerotic cycles in the European art of the eighties. They are colourful and large-format acrylic paintings depicting sensual portraits of men in lush tropical nature, inspired by the artist's stay in Portugal and his fascination with a beautiful man, the eponymous Carlos, portrayed in a natural paradise-like setting of relaxation, or in the scenarios suggesting gay cruising grounds (Markowska 2015, 197-210). The openly homoerotic landscapes are full of joy, desire, and liberation, are optimistic and sensual, so it is no wonder that they were shown for the first time in the Tri-City (Sopot), which as a port metropolis has always been a symbol of greater freedom. Art inspired by the free world had to emerge in a free city where sailors always brought news from exotic travels - this news included gay magazines from Western Europe. Therefore, the Tri-City is also one of the most important centres of gay activism and fanzines in the Eastern Bloc.

The key figure is Ryszard Kisiel, a pioneering activist, photographer, and the founder of a queer zine called *Filo*, the first issue of which came out in 1986. The stories of *Filo* and Kisiel's tell the early days of the LGBTQ+ movement in Poland and Central Eastern Europe (Fedotov 2012, 308). *Filo* was often illustrated with Aubrey Beardsley's art and photographs of men by Kisiel, and featured personal ads for queer men and women, socio-cultural and historical texts, interviews, reviews of art, film, literature, and particularly valuable, educational information on HIV/AIDS. Kisiel was able to publish the magazine independently as he worked in a printing and photocopy shop in Gdańsk, where he could copy paper. In order to avoid censorship, he distributed *Filo* in less than 100 copies - according to the 1981 censorship law, all published documents below that number were free from control. The magazine was distributed to friends and by mail; it was a typical publication of the so-called 'third circulation' niche that was so important for independent thought behind the Iron Curtain. Kisiel was inspired by Western gay magazines he saw thanks to foreign sailors. Above all, he was activated by his arrest under the Operation Hyacinth (1985-1987) as well as his good knowledge of the gay milieu and culture, not only in Poland, but also in the Eastern Bloc

(Szulc 2018, 143-148). He travelled extensively over the region and, as a passionate photographer, took hundreds of photos of gay spots in Poland and the surrounding countries. Moreover, Kisiel documented gay men's private sex parties, often featuring drag queens, in his beloved Tri-City. His precious documentary images come from the eighties but only started to be shown in public spaces in nineties and achieved more international renown in the years two thousand and twenty, partially due to his close collaboration with the contemporary Polish artist Karol Radziszewski, who specialises in the queer archives of the region. (Radziszewski, Szymański 2021, 123-125). Kisiel's photo-documents of his adventurous travels to other socialist countries confirm that the queer community was clandestinely present and already vibrant everywhere in the totalitarian realm, particularly in Prague and Budapest.

## Hungary and Czechoslovakia

For the purposes of a comparative perspective, it must be emphasised that some form of an early, unofficial LGBTQ+ movement was starting in all the Visegrád countries in the mid-eighties. Small groups were mushrooming in big cities all over the region which had witnessed the underground development of queer communities since the sixties, especially when homosexuality was legalized in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the early sixties. Currently, there is a strong interest in the contemporary archival art and film documenting the gay and lesbian life under communism (Leszkowicz 2018, 67-95). Especially Budapest with its abundance of baths was considered a gay Eldorado of Eastern Europe in sixties and seventies as queer gathering places were quietly tolerated and drew men from other Eastern Bloc nations (Tin 2008, 160).

Perfect examples of the hopeful process of remembrance and early activism are two films by the Hungarian filmmaker Mária Takács. *Secret Years* (2009) is a documentary about the secret lives of lesbian women in Hungary under and after communism, and *Hot Men Cold Dictatorships* (2015) about the world of gay men during the communist times. According to Takács, the former regime tried to keep lesbians and gays silent and hide them, thus, the purpose of her films is to recover their lives through interviews with people of the older generation. In *Hot Men Cold Dictatorships*, young men visit 'the elders,' find their secret service files, and act out their personal experiences. The stories are not only about oppression but also the joy of the queer life behind the Iron Curtain, including erotic memories about trips to nudist gay beaches in Yugoslavia. In *Secret Years*, eleven Hungarian women aged between 45 and 70 discuss their experiences as lesbians in *the Hungarian People's*



*Republic* and now. Both films explore the waves of repression, openness, and, finally, a new conservatism that has defined Hungarian society in the recent past and influenced the queer community. Takács's documentaries are the live archives of the real people who participated in her project to tell their multigenerational stories of survival, love, and desire through the twentieth century history.

Moreover, in the Hungary of the eighties, there occurred unique queer developments on the underground art scene around spectacular experiments with group performances, stage design, and fashion. Hungarian scholars point out the sexually and gender-related subversive input of two artists who dealt with new articulations of embodied subjectivity, Tamás Király (1950-2014) and El Kazovsky (1948-2008), (Muskovics 2018, 1).

Tamás Király was the only avant-garde fashion designer in the socialist Hungary. Beginning in the late seventies, he called himself 'a clothing sculptor' and collaborated with the punk fashion boutique New Art Studio in Budapest. The boutique was important for many artists for whom he designed various extravagant costumes. It had window displays created by the artist with live models. It was from there that he started his famous, fabulous performances known as 'fashion walks' - the first one of many was organised in 1981. His models and friends sported flashy clothes designed by Király when participating in these walks through the centre of Budapest. The spectacular tours were a visual shock countering the socialist gloominess of the streets and the official grey clothing industry. Király gathered neo-avant-garde artists, male and female models, and the budding queer community around the performative fashion underground scene as well as collaborated with many LGBT+ individuals.

His fashion aesthetics could be considered an example of Hungarian postmodernism still under state socialism, as he blurred the boundaries between fashion design, performance, and visual arts. Király was influenced by the European new wave music, as if the Iron Curtain did not exist. His own look, featured on the posters of his shows, was inspired by such bands as The Cure or *Siouxsie and the Banshees*.

Moreover, his design and city fashion walks critically appropriated ideological symbols, where the most famous was a communist red star dress designed and widely shown by the artist. Many of the fashion shows called 'dreams' were held at the famous music venue Petőfi Music Hall with the accompaniment of young progressive bands. In the scenes from *Boy's Dreams* (1986), female models in spectacular attires are accompanied by bodybuilders. Király created a dreamland that expanded bodily imagination and totally broke through the socialist decorum of identity aesthetics. In the eighties, he held thematic fashion shows in Budapest, Berlin, and New York, and was known in the West - the magazine *Stern* called him the 'Gautier of Eastern Europe.'

Similarly outrageous, Russian-Hungarian El Kazovsky was one of the most influential and well-known contemporary artists in Hungary. In current terms, he was also openly transgender but called himself 'transsexual.' He was born in Russia and was assigned female at birth in Leningrad but as an adult considered himself a homosexual man. His own self-identification he described as follows:

My case is quite special and in many respects the life I was born into is built around the fact that I am transsexual. ...Transsexuals who feel that they are women are perfectly visible, striking even, because in our culture 'womanhood' always makes a display of itself. ...My situation is different, because I am a man living in what, for me, is a peculiar female body and to complicate matters even further, I am a homosexual man who is attracted to very girlish-looking young men, whom I, in fact, see as women, and whom I love as women (Rényi 2015, 10).

This acknowledgement shows that the artist was never oppressed in Hungarian culture and openly expressed his transness while being celebrated with many major art prizes. The fact is that he was the most important and prominent transgender artist not only in Hungary but also in the entire communist and post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, active from the seventies.

Regarding the Russian origin of the artist, who migrated to Budapest with his mother at the age of sixteen, he stylized his masculine dominant performance on his beloved nineteenth century novels by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Imaginatively, he wanted to be an aristocratic army officer. The other major inspiration that influenced his persona was the counterculture of the seventies and eighties in music and fashion, particularly the rebellious punk movement, and the androgynous, oversexed, and explosive characters of David Bowie and Sid Vicious. In fact, the latter's slim and fragile body influenced the epicene figuration of Kazovsky's paintings and performances (Stryker 2020, 278). The artist's queer art was also inspired by his friend Derek Jarman's films.

Kazovsky's opus magnum is *Dzhan' Panopticon, or Game about Objectification* (1977-2001), a long series of Dionysian performances with many actors and elaborate stage design. Éva Forgács called them 'a love letter in the genre of Performance art' as the cyclical performances were ceremonial celebrations commemorating the short but joyful love affair that the artist had with a young delicate Turkish man in the seventies. Around this event Kazovsky created an entire fetishist and symbolic theatre of performances and sculptures based on Ovid's story of Pygmalion and Galatea, where the artist played the role of Pygmalion who attempts to

give a soul to the feminine-male body. Beautiful youthful male bodies/idols were always admired and featured in this art (Rényi 2015, 2-5).

Kazovsky created pictures, sculptures, installations, performances, and stage design which dealt with the theme of ambiguous eroticism and desire. Especially from the eighties, his metaphorical paintings reflected the artist's colourful and expressionistic style and interest in the ancient Greek subject, beauty ideals, and the androgynous body. Similarly to other queer artists who fostered postmodernism in the region, Kazovsky represents the postmodern culture behind the Iron Curtain. He created a self-referential and constantly repeated iconography based on a very private mythology, not related to the surrounding social or political world; yet his openness about the defiance of gender roles, a self-constructed identity, and the expression of queer desire made his well-known persona influential on the politics of sexuality in the Hungarian culture of the late twentieth century. Kazovsky is today celebrated as a forerunner of transgender art in the region.

It is uncanny how Tamás Király's and El Kazovsky's theatrical multimedia performances compare to Wojciech Misiuro's Theatre of Expression in Poland. All the three artists, exactly at the same time, explored on stage, through performance, fashion, design, the subject of new postmodern eroticism, gender ambiguity, and queer themes. On the one hand, they had a grassroots, local, 'Eastern' character, and on the other hand, were inspired by Western pop and high culture, which testifies to the permeable character of the Iron Curtain and the power of international artistic and musical exchanges. There are no borders for imagination, music, dance, and sex.

Still, the persona of Kazovsky as a pioneering self-conscious transgender artist is unique on a European scale. Although the issue of transvestitism was not absent from the cultural scene of Central Eastern Europe, it was a subject that appeared and was entertained in some comedies, e.g., the famous Polish movie *Man - Woman Wanted* (1973,) directed by Jerzy Dobrowolski, functioning as a major comic relief. Yet, it was also dealt with as a serious intellectual subject in the neo-avant-garde art created by straight men who specialised in performative self-portraits. An especially strong example here is Zbigniew Libera and his early series of self-portraits in female poses, make-up, underwear, and stockings, entitled *Someone Else* (1986-1988). The famous Romanian performer Ion Grigorescu's photographic and filmic experimentation with his naked body, particularly the film *Male and Female* (1976), focused on the ambiguity of gendered embodiment as well. The problem with Libera's and Grigorescu's work is that it became known only after the political transformation as they had belonged to cryptic small enclaves of the new avant-garde art under socialism, while the gender-bending performative

spectacles of Király, Kazovsky, and Misiuro were very popular and influential at the time of their creation, defining the cultural and sexual milieu of the entire late socialist subculture.

These three male-identifying artists managed to break through the heteronormative filter and censorship at the time of their creative activity. But as the case of the Czech woman photographer Libuše Jarcovjáčková shows, the queer and feminist art from the socialist period is often properly discovered, exhibited, and researched only in the twenty-first century. Jarcovjáčková's photographs taken between 1970 and 1989 in communist Czechoslovakia were finally featured in an illuminating exhibition and the publication *Evokativ* at the Arles Photography Festival in 2019. In Czechoslovakia, the incredible photo archive of her circle of friends was little known and not shown, it was private, even though the artist was working for decades documenting a non-official side of the socialist life of Prague through her self-portraits and portraits.

Her style is personal, mixing the raw with the poetic, capturing clubbing, night life, sex, alcohol, love, depression, and hopelessness without restraint. Her images of people express personal joy and sadness during the dark period of political oppression and a lack of civil liberties in the totalitarianism. Her subcultural portraits of human eroticism and despair show intimate freedoms of the everyday life on the margins or in the domestic enclosure secured from the outside surveillance. Her art is a testimony of being fully alive in a dead system. As she says, 'the protagonists of my photos are all people close to me: my husband, male lovers, female lovers, friends, and random acquaintances who wanted their portraits taken and invited me to their apartments.' It is no surprise then she has been dubbed the 'Czech Nan Goldin.'

In her portraits, one can discover queer individuals or relationships from the past. The focus is often on the female experience of friendship and sexuality. Her most insightful pictures are the ones taken at T-club, an underground gay club in communist Prague. Jarcovjáčková experienced and recorded T-club's boisterous parties and the accompanying sense of liberty and alternative community. The images offer a glimpse into the lives of a non-heteronormative community under socialism, which does not look very different from its Western counterparts (Pyzik 2019).

Many of the celebrated unofficial underground photographers from the former Eastern Bloc are male – Jarcovjáčková's personal documents offer a queer feminist revision and supplement. To some degree, her photographic witness of queer parties behind the Iron Curtain could be compared to Ryszard Kisiel's photo archive of the gay cruising in the region, but in Jarcovjáčková's case there is a female gaze and perspective on such subversive experiences. These examples clearly show that the queer clubbing scene was already developed in the eighties in big cities in Central Eastern Europe.

Moreover, in Czechoslovakia, the Prague art world early played an important role in providing safe spaces and outlets for a form of queer community that gathered in salons, often the studios of gay artists such as the architect Tomáš Fragner and, foremost, the painter Karel Laštovka (1938-1986). In the sixties to eighties, in the art/queer salons visual culture was created, romantic love affairs were forged, therapeutic help was found. Like in Poland, figurative painting enabled homoerotic expression. Laštovka painted nudes and portraits of people who attended the salon. His symbolic figurations often suggested an erotic and ecstatic male figure, yet he also authored many portraits of women friends. Art as an oasis for a more liberal way of life and more sexual variety can be found in other bohemian and artistic communities in the Eastern Block. The art salons of Prague can be compared to the Warsaw's circle of artists around the Repassage Gallery or the group Śmietanka that Łukasz Korolkiewicz was part of.

The examples discussed above show that queer culture was dispersed but significant for the creative milieu behind the Iron Curtain, despite the social oppression and intolerance. On the other hand, disturbingly, the scholar of Czech queer art Ladislav Zikmund-Lender seems to argue that the collaboration of many prominent homosexuals running Czech queer salons with the state apparatus meant that the communities around them were spied upon but protected from the secret service and accepted by the state power. Homosexuality was not a crime anymore but still a major taboo and a social underground, which found its platform of expression in the art world (Zikmund-Lender 2019, 6). Thus, the state surveillance was very much present. As the pink police files in Poland show, the power outside the art world was not always soft, and the control of creative communities could be subtle and permissive but nevertheless consistent. All the experimentations in representation and life were conducted in the shadow of the repressive system always ready to strike or to spy. Queer art was part of the dissident culture under communism, therefore it had to fall under a certain level of state scrutiny. One must remember the totalitarian context and appreciate even more the people who managed to circumnavigate it through an alternative visual culture and communities. Significantly, the new discoveries are appreciated only in the years two thousand and twenty under the influence of the increasingly mainstreamed and trendy queer theory in the field of art history and curating, but for decades after 1989 nobody cared. Finally, the queer history of Central and Eastern European art is being slowly written and visualized. During the socialist period, it belonged mainly to circles of friends comprising artists whose art is testimony to the alternative lives and difficult private freedoms in the authoritarian system.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Dzhan' is an ancient Persian word for soul. In modern Turkish it is a name for both boys and girls.

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**illustrations<sup>®</sup>**





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1. Krzysztof Jung, *The Shared Performance Conversation*, 1980, copyrights Museum of Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and Dorota Krawczyk-Janisch

2. Barbara Falender, *Ganimede II*, 1987, marble sculpture, copyrights Barbara Falender

3. Krzysztof Niemczyk, *Bathing in a fountain on Cracow's main city square*, late sixties, copyrights Anka Ptazkowska and Ha!art Publishing House

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6. Natalia LL, *Velvet Terror*, 1970, photo-series, copyrights lokal\_30 and Natalia LL Archive



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7. Łukasz Korolkiewicz, *Isolation*, 1980, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy artist and Monopol Gallery

8. Zbysław Marek Maciejewski, *Self-portrait with a Putto*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, copyrights National Museum in Warsaw

9. Wojciech Ćwiertniewicz, *A Big Meadow* (from the cycle *With Carlos*), 1984-1986, acrylic on canvas, copyrights Wojciech Ćwiertniewicz



10a



10b



11

10a. Ryszard Kiesel Kruzing, exhibition at the Gdańsk Municipal Gallery, 15.6-15.7.2018, photo Michał Szymończyk, copyrights Gdańska Galeria Miejska

10b. Ryszard Kiesel Kruzing, exhibition at the Gdańsk Municipal Gallery, 15.6-15.7.2018, photo Michał Szymończyk, copyrights Gdańsk Municipal Gallery

11. Tamás Király, *Boy's Dreams*, 1986, fashion show in the Petőfi Hall, Budapest, photo courtesy of Iliász Dávid Király



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12. El Kazovsky, *The Good Shepherd's Hours*, 1998, oil painting, copyrights Róbert Alföldi

13. Libuše Jarcovjáková, *T-CLUB*, 1983-1985, copyrights Libuše Jarcovjáková

14. Karel Laštovka, *Bez názvu*, 1975, painting, copyrights Karel Laštovka









# Vladimíra BÜNGEROVÁ

Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava

TOGETHER, BUT  
SEPARATELY?  
GROUP EXHIBITIONS  
IN SLOVAKIA  
FROM 1968 TO 1989

The title of this text refers to a well-known section of an exhibition titled *60/90* (1997) by Stano Filko and Boris Ondreička, which presented the dialogue of artists of the sixties and nineties generations. It raises the question of whether joint exhibitions were presentations of individual personas or whether they were actually shaped by a collective spirit and cooperation, partnership, open communication, acceptance, but also transmission, or in contemporary language – shared ideas.

This study maps the turning points in the Slovak art scene in the years 1968-1989 through the lens of historically significant exhibitions of official and un-official art with the common feature of a collective or group character and the presentation of progressive tendencies in art. Among the selected exhibitions there are various types of presentations, such as international biennials, thematically, curated exhibitions, independent short-term collective performances and a multi-annual cycles of thematic exhibitions, which will allow us to look at the development of the studied phenomenon through presenting a few of these shows. The phenomenon of a group exhibition as the central domain of research will be used for the explanation of organizational changes in exhibitions, curatorial subjects, spaces, and individual partakers. The aim of the research is not only to convey the story of the gradual exclusion of neo-avant-garde art from official exhibition halls at the time of normalization, the diversion/ departure of non-conformist artists from the gallery to apartments and various other non-gallery spaces under the influence of political events and the sharpening of the totalitarian regime, but also to introduce key works of art, personalities and the social character of the un-official scene. The exhibition, as the main framework for the transformation of the history of art, will provide an image of the context in which the transgressions of the boundaries of traditional art towards action, Conceptual art, installation or environment were presented.

## ***Danuvius* 1968**

As a result of the democratization processes in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the sixties *The International Biennial of Young Artists* in Bratislava positively influenced the direction of cultural policy and opened up new possibilities of artistic exchanges and cooperation not only between the countries of the socialist bloc, but also created direct

links to current Western European and international art. Thanks to the network of contacts between artists and theorists, with the support of institutions and the state, a generous presentation of contemporary art took place, which, with its programming, wanted to follow up on similar biennial exhibitions in Europe and overseas. The main idea of the official, state-organized biennial was a selective confrontation of young local art with international art. The attention was focused on artists of the emerging generation with an age limit of up to thirty-five years and their fresh works from the last two years. It is important to note that this was the first and at the same time the last widely conceived confrontation of the work of young artists on the territory of the socialist state. Although it was primarily supposed to be a display of painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing, it was not limited to traditional media. It initiated the creation of large-scale environments and works that transcend traditional ideas about art. The same principle of pluralism was also applied by the organizers in the selection process, which was open to all contemporary tendencies without any opinion limitation.

In the history of post-war Czechoslovak art, *Danuvius 1968* marks a breakthrough event. For the art scene, it represented the hope that it would be a regular opportunity for an international presentation. Despite the fact that the planning of the next continuation in two years was underway, *Danuvius* remained the first and at the same time the only, symbolic year of 1968. During the preparation of the exhibition at the Bratislava House of Arts, the Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia. Due to the invasion, the organizers postponed the opening date, prominent personalities of the younger generation (Alex Mlynářčik, Jana Želibská and Karol Lacko) refused to participate (as a protest), the organizers and artists even considered whether the biennial made sense at all during these dramatic political events.

*Danuvius* has become a symbol of a freely created platform, enabling the encounter of various art opinions from around the world. The generously conceived show presented works of 71 Czechoslovak artists and 49 international artists from 16 countries other than the Soviet Union. The main curator and organizer of the event was Lubor Kára, who prepared it with an extensive committee of other art historians and artists (Bohumír Bachratý, Miroslav Cipár, Eduard Heger, Jozef Jankovič, Milan Jankovský, Andrej Miklis, Iva Mojžišová, Juraj Mojžiš, Milan Paštéka, Vladimír Popovič, Andrej Rudavský and Alexander Trizuljak).

An international jury composed of renowned personalities – Zoran Kržišnik as chairman, Werner Hoffmann, Pierre Restany, Jindřich Chalupecký and Karol Vaculík as members – awarded the Grand Prix to Jozef Jankovič for the *Great Fall* (1968). The other four prizes were won by Getulio Alviani, Radomir Damjanović-Damjan, Dieter Krieg and

Miroslav Šutej in no particular order. Five acquisition prizes were also awarded – to Stano Filko, Adolf Frohner, Alena Kučerová, Gianni Pisani and Martial Raysse. From the international participation, we recall two significant representations – the collection of geometric abstract paintings by the American Frank Stella and Christo's monumental installation for the exterior, designed from coloured barrels was ultimately not realized due to an insufficient sum of foreign currency.

The iconic work of the biennial reflecting the events around the Prague Spring became the *Cathedral of Humanism* (1968) by Stano Filko. It belongs to a series of his environments, and in it, he created space within space, formed by a structure with suspended, sliding walls made of transparent materials, textile curtains, hanging objects and mirrors. The base and the space for the movement of the spectators who could enter it consisted of mirrors placed on the floor, creating reflections and light effects with the vitality of an infinite and active space, so that there was no physical or mental gap between the visitor and the environment (Filko 1971). Two parallel projections of slides took place as part of Filko's *Cathedral* – portraits of political figures of the reform wing and their images among people or in ordinary situations. The environment was an impressive experience in this difficult period, and to this day it belongs to legends only known from several photographs and the memories of people who saw it.

Another important work of the biennial was *The Great Fall* (1968) by Jozef Jankovič. It was a 'forest' [group] of giant, elongated upper and lower limbs in the colors of the Czechoslovak tricolor – white, blue and red. Using the dynamic composition of an impact [the fall], the great tragedy of man and society, the sculptor originally did not intend to express the crisis of Czechoslovakia after the occupation, yet this interpretation is attributed. It was originally intended to express a more universal message for human society, inspired by the myth of the fall of Icarus.

In particular, reviews at the time highlighted the advent of an era of environments, interactivity, Eastern European versions of Pop art, and neo-constructive tendencies. During the normalization, all these 'novelties' of a more liberal society have been pushed into the un-official zone, or the regime has prevented their development by not supporting and not accepting them in galleries and collections. In collective and individual memory, *Danuvius* as an organizational and scale-wise 'mammoth' event, and a symbol that even in socialism under certain conditions free culture and art was possible – persisted as an important moment of turning to democratic principles. Later, during the normalization, it was even used as a model example of anti-socialist, dangerous influences spreading in art, which would be erased from the history of Czechoslovak art.

## *Polymusical Space*

Outdoor sculpture exhibitions in Piešťany were founded in 1967 and took place every year as part of a wider pan-European movement to place sculpture in the natural environment and in the city centres as more independent and authentic than being the 'artistic completion' of new buildings. Works of art for outdoor exhibitions and symposia were freed from function and thematic or spatial and material limitations – they were created with more liberty, relatively more freely, without external assignments. During the summer tourist season, part of the city was transformed into a gallery and gradually into a permanent exhibition of modern sculpture. In 1969, Lubor Kára, the organizer of important presentations with an international overlap, came up with a new, almost impressingly conceived idea. The concept of Piešťany exhibitions started by Kára was supposed to continue in the following years, but due to political reasons, like *Danuvius*, it ended with its first year. These exhibitions continued without progressive forms of art, without artists transcending traditional ideas, and also without Kára's unique curatorial (then commissioner's) vision. Lubor Kára, in his innovative concept, proposed that under the title *Sculpture, Object, Light, Music*, the project should present contemporary tendencies in the synthesis of various disciplines of art (Kára 1970), not only visual art, but all muses, including music, film, theatre and literature. Legendary site-specific installations have been exhibited there, many of them as temporary pieces closely connected to the place of their creation. Further objects, more traditional sculptural works, but also various types of Action art – happening, performance, or signally Conceptual art. In a democratic and pluralistic way, the trend of the exhibition was anchored in the spirit of a more liberal setting of the society of the previous decade of the sixties.

Lubor Kára prepared the *Exposition Fund – Principles*, proposing how to ensure investment contributions for the production of the art (Kára 1970) and drew up the document *Friendly Cooperation of Industrial Factories and Enterprises* – proposing a tight connection of artistic production with industrial production in the category of experiment, development and promotion of factories. With his extraordinary organizational skills, Kára also provided support for strategic institutions from ministries to major manufacturing companies and industrial plants, which were involved in the creation of complex artistic ideas in terms of production and finances. Without broader cooperation with industry, it would not be possible to complete several proposals, as some materials and technologies have been used historically for the first time. The expertise of technologists, craftsmen, masters, engineers has become an integral part of artistic creation. *Polymusical Space* meant not only the

synthesis of all muses, but also the synthesis of modern industry, science and technology.

From around sixty exhibited works by forty exhibitors, we first focus on an environment by Ivan Štěpán. According to its concept, it ideally represents an artistic synthesis, and it was one of the most technically demanding contributions. After the end of the exhibition, it remained preserved and operated by the administration of Piešťany spas for several years to provide visitors with an attractive audiovisual experience. Štěpán's *Optipolytón I - Testing Space, Sound, Light, Space* was created as a separate architecture, pavilion built on a cylindrical floor plan, decorated as an audiovisual environment with artificial coloured lights and sound controlled by a simple program. Štěpán used different types of materials – plastic and glass dominated among these. In the accompanying text, he wrote that the architecture allowed the audience a maximum panoramic view of the action on the inner circumference of the cylinder, interpreted by hemispherical bulges in which the light source and the reflection segment alternated rhythmically. According to him, the environment was designed for wide use in the synthetic concept of individual constants (sound-light-space), integrated into a continuous arrangement, as well as for the experiment of the participant's psychological reaction (Štěpán, 1970). In simple terms, it was an audiovisual concert hall for reproduced or live music, with the sounds reacting with coloured lights – a kind of light music for a limited number of spectators. Štěpán's environment is one of the first attempts to create a demanding multimedia work in our environment.

Action artist Alex Mlynárčik, as part of the intentions of his 'great game,' prepared the action named *Junialés* (June Festival) - a summer feast on a propeller near the bank of the Váh River, where he offered for sale his 'originals' - traditional dishes in non-traditional colours and combinations bearing a certificate and granting a choice as to whether they will be served to visitors as food or as a work of art. Typical feature of his great celebrations was that they were accompanied by music, dance and unbound enjoyment. However, he also received a critical reaction from other artists, Juraj Bartusz and Vladimír Popovič, who inscribed the access paths to the ship with coloured sprays and a warning that "One Third of Humanity is Starving."

Land art installation of Jana Želibská *Silkworm* consisted of several hanging objects – cocoons on a deciduous tree, and it was an example of her systematic interest in nature and ecological problems. As a proto-feminist artist, Želibská was intuitively the pioneer in our environment to deal with gender issues, and we could also read this somehow mysterious work from the point of view of eco-feminism. The enlarged objects imitated cocoons moved in the wind referencing

the artist's interest in the repulsive and at the same time fascinating – insects and its metamorphoses, which she dealt with in her early printmaking work.

Stano Filko prepared two unforgettable environments – *Breathing – Celebration of Air and Water Pumping*, in which, with the help of a complex system of pressure glass tubes on the river bank, he created the pumping of water from the river to the lake – a concrete pool, where the water flowed, gradually warmed and passed through the tubes turned into water, static, stoically calm and meditative. One of the meanings was to draw attention to the preservation of water and, in the case of his breathing balloon, celebration of air, expressing homage to these natural elements. The sad end of the apotheosis of water occurred when it was flooded by the Váh river pouring from its own banks, perhaps as a tragic response of nature to the cycle of issues around the relationship of civilization to nature.

Vladimír Popovič created the monumental *Great Rubber Rifle*, accompanied by a shadow-game composition on the staircase of the Magnolia hotel building, provocatively expressing his attitude to pressures of normalization and official politics. By official intervention, the object was removed.

The successful start and significance of *Danuvius* and the *Polymusical Space* were not followed up by the subsequent direction of Czechoslovak cultural policy of the normalization, even those who participated in their creation and organisation were later facing persecution, exclusion from union structures, academic and pedagogical positions and other restrictions like sanctions and bans on activities. Artists of experimental, neo-avant-garde art moved to a non-public, private and un-official space, to apartments, studios, nature or later to the premises of more tolerant institutions of the non-gallery type, some emigrated.

## ***First Open Studio***

In the meantime, with several obvious signs of the upcoming tightening of ideological control over art production, the *First Open Studio* took place on November 19, 1970. This semi-public meeting of visual artists was initiated by the youngest generation of recent graduates, or even students, who began to perceive the limited possibilities of free expression, the lack of opportunities and spaces for exhibiting, meeting and open communication. Therefore, they decided to find their own space where they could freely present their work, an independent place and a time of understanding. The idea arose among artists and friends,

Rudolf Sikora and Viliam Jakubík, Sikora being the owner of the house No. 32 on Tehelná Street in Bratislava and Jakubík as its temporary tenant. In cooperation with other approached artists, both established and newcomers, they decided to prepare a group exhibition in a small house in the former working-class district. The number of participating artists gradually increased to nineteen via the organisers' call.

The original date of the exhibition crossed out with a pen on the printed invitation suggests difficulties the organizers had with an impending risk from the state security and union authorities intervention, which they, as they admit, naively wanted to avoid by moving the exhibition one day earlier (Čarná 2020). A very important reason why the young artists decided to organize this one-shot two-day exhibition was the desire to get to know the members of the older, more established generation of artists Alex Mlynárčik, Václav Cigler, Miloš Urbásek and Milan Dobeš, who already had several important international presentations. It was this intergenerational dialogue that was an essential and mutually enriching, hitherto unprecedented step in the meeting and mutual knowledge of two generations, one with roots in the sixties and the other only starting in the seventies. It led to further collaborations and actions in the following years of the normalization.

The creative contributions of the artists, some of them numerous, were created as results of collective but also individual approaches. They counted on the participation of the viewer and physical temporality, which concluded with gifting, handouts, or a call for cooperation. There was a clear criticism of the notion of traditional artifact, they worked directly with the space of the small house with a small yard and front garden, with its specific spaces and features, even its typical material resources (Büngerová 2021). The artists encountered the house as a particular situation, be it chimneys, bathroom fittings, shabby walls or a moldy chamber. On a small area, they were able to present a whole range of forms of new, alternative art – music and poetry, action forms, Body art, site-specific installations, spatial interventions, object art, light art, using non-artistic materials and objects, principles of accumulation, play and cooperation. The atmosphere of the period was well captured by Marián Mudroch's ephemeral contribution – *Direct Attention to the Chimneys of the House*, using blue and red smoke in the white sky to create a Czechoslovak tricolor as a beacon of hope and freedom (Sikorová 2000). Subversive references to political events can also be found in the works of the artist trio Viliam Jakubík - Vladimír Kordoš - Marián Mudroch, especially in the *Self-Service (Atmosphere 1970)*, in which they literally preserved the air as canned goods marked with the inscription – *Unbreathable*. In his *Tribute to Cesar Baldaccini*, Vladimír Kordoš ironically commented on socialist consumerism, or rather a typical



deficiency of goods during socialism. He collected (at that time) rare cans from a western drink from the trash bins of a famous Bratislava hotel and created a famous compression – he recorded the whole process of washing and squeezing and sound accompanied the resulting object creating a tribute to the sculptor of the New Realism. In addition to these dadaist, playful forms, quite different contributions were made, for example, by Peter Bartoš, who created the Body art action *Activity with the Mass of Balnea*, in which he drew attention to the healing ability of nature, both mentally and physically. Other notable works include the *Pool – Memory of Dalmatia* by Rudo Sikora or the environment by Jana Želibská under the name of *Amanita Muscaria – The Possibility of Frugality for the whole year 1971*. The fundamental values of the message of the First Open Studio are openness and freedom, the importance of maintaining personal relationships, friendship, tolerance, communication, circles of trust and understanding.

## ***Archaeological Monuments and the Present***

Special categories of group exhibitions during the normalization included presentations outside the official state galleries, using different institutional bases, such as various cultural centres, or exhibition halls of research institutes. This framework includes a series of exhibitions *Archaeological Monuments and the Present* in the first half of the eighties with extensive catalogues (1982 *Archaeological Monuments and the Environment*, 1983 *Archaeological Monuments and the Present*, 1984 *Archaeological Monuments and the Present*, 1985 *Monuments and the Present*) prepared by the Municipal Administration of Monument Care and Nature Conservation in Bratislava. Thanks to the 'enlightened' individuals who knew alternative art like art historian Viktor Ferus and archaeologist Ladislav Snopko, thematic presentations were created, mixing various artistic approaches, types of art from architecture to visual art, including neo-avant-garde tendencies, even infused with the works of official artists. The intention was always to open a discussion about new approaches to archaeological and architectural monuments in the summer months of the ongoing events in Bratislava. Artists have been given the opportunity for reflection equally with architects, historians and experts from other scientific disciplines. According to the authors of the concept, the past should lead to an understanding of the present, and "the concept of the project created space for the implementation of interdisciplinary overlaps between different types of art, as well as art and science. Last but not least,

the project was a model example of sophisticated strategies through which a state-run institution managed to create a platform to present the work of top representatives of the Czech and Slovak unofficial scene” (Geržová 2006). The year 1983 stands out from the series of exhibitions, for example, when they established a ‘research’ subject - the interpretation of a fragment of an archaeological find, especially ceramics. Each participant received a different shard from different areas, and individually responded to its formal associations and meanings within the framework of their artistic programs. Of all the participants, let’s mention Peter Bartoš, Matej Kern, Julus Koller, Vladimír Kordoš, Otis Laubert and Rudolf Sikora.

## ***Basement***

The group exhibition *Basement* took place in April before the revolutionary events of November 1989. For Slovak art, it programmatically discovered a new medium – the site-specific installation presented in non-gallery, cellar spaces in a tenement apartment building on Konventná Street in the centre of Bratislava. The exhibition was initiated by artist Peter Meluzin, who prepared it in cooperation with curator Radislav Matuščík. This ‘action’ involved several artists of the older non-conformist generation of the sixties (action and conceptual artists: Milan Adamčíak, Július Koller, Jana Želibská) and the emerging generation of artists, who after the change of the social climate in 1989 formed the mainstream of new media artists of the nineties (Peter Meluzin, Peter Rónai, Matej Krén, Viktor Oravec, Milan Pagáč). Today, we recognize the exhibition as an important development milestone, a breakthrough performance of artists with a new visual opinion, behind which there was a reaction to the artistic events of the transavantgarde and the paradigm of postmodernism. In the *Basement*, the artists responded to the re-emergence of painting with another new medium – an installation that Slovak art had not previously known in a similar version. This large, deliberately bombastic exhibition with elements of a mystification game meant a sharp, visionary turn. Also, *Basement* (Suterén) followed up on the unofficial action group Terén (Terrain) (1982–1987), which can be found in a hidden reference in the title of the exhibition itself. According to Meluzin, we should perceive the exhibition primarily as an event presenting material, but temporarily existing works. One of the main goals of the project was to prove that even action and conceptual artists are able to create an artifact and start a new artistic movement in a significantly different direction.

The exhibition’s duration was only 14 days and the artists prepared 22 (!) new installations and objects. A typical artistic element of ‘basement installations’ was artificial light, either in the form of neon or other lighting

fixtures. Graduates of Václav Cigler's Studio Glass in Architecture – Viktor Oravec and Milan Pagáč, performing as an artistic pair, used mirrors and glass in various forms (sheet glass, raw glass, laboratory tools) in their installations. This material, together with artificial light, created spiritually immaterial works. Multimedia artist Milan Adamčiak prepared two acoustic interactive installations. All installations from the *Basement* were tied directly to the space, existed in a limited time and also the theme, the selection of objects directly reflected the basement space. Temporary works ultimately remained only as the visual documentation (photographs, film recordings). The artists tried to create a 'total installation' composed of several separate installations in one space, with an effort to bring new themes and new perspectives into the art through non-artistic reality (Büngerová 2010). The word basement refers to the basement, 'undeground' character of the exhibition, which arose partly secretly and 'semi-officially,' but already in a more liberal, relaxed atmosphere before the upcoming events of November 1989.

Koller created two installations *Basement Cultural Situations (1988-1989)*, based on a ping-pong table and 'painting' – blind frames – with stretched dotted textiles. The one featuring a concreted middle section of a gaming (ping-pong) table required a fairly extensive interior modification. Koller absurdly and ironically played with the memory of objects, their functionality and its transformation into an individual original mythology. Peter Rónai created an implementation based on his *Motif Seeker* – an empty frame made of waste plastic installation tubes.

When we attempt to consider objects or installations exhibited in the *Basement* in more detail, we would find that the approaches were considerably individual. Koller continued his own mythology, Želibská created light objects from neon and (as the only one) also from nature. Oravec – Pagáč reached for the mirror, glass and their various forms. They were primarily interested in the material, not in objects as such, even when they accumulated them or assembled them in space into new 'architectures.' Adamčiak took objects from his private space (for example the bedroom) and combined them with other found objects from plastic to textiles. Krén and Meluzin mostly worked with objects of 'urban nature' (Pierre Restany) or civilization: there were Krén's cardboard boxes – a waste product of trade and market mechanism, as well as Meluzin's tools, waste bins and other things found in garbage dumps. Although the artists also reached for waste, they tried to disguise its shabbiness to change it into new objects with paint and thus reveal the 'beauty of waste' with a new surface and space, a new constellation.

*Basement* was also a criticism of institutions like galleries and art museums, which at that time did not offer an opportunity for a similar type of creativity. A comparable project was not feasible on the grounds of the

official galleries. In conclusion, I recall the brilliance and unprecedented enthusiasm of the 'basementists' in their joint work on the event – an exhibition that significantly influenced not only the art of the nineties in Slovakia, but also contemporary art, in which now the medium of installation is already a well-established, respected and up-to-date medium.

For the history of visual art in general, group exhibitions as temporary exhibiting communities have represented and still represent a remarkable model of connection, communication, knowledge, confrontation, as well as places of established cooperation, friendships and communities. Focusing on the social dimension and also on the results of these time-limited coexistences is an attempt to give a plastic report on how the transition of modern to postmodern art in the seventies took place – from open to closed society, in which the building of islands of positive deviation, as spaces of support, acceptance and tolerance, played a dominant role for the existence of free and independent creation of art.

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**illustrations<sup>®</sup>**



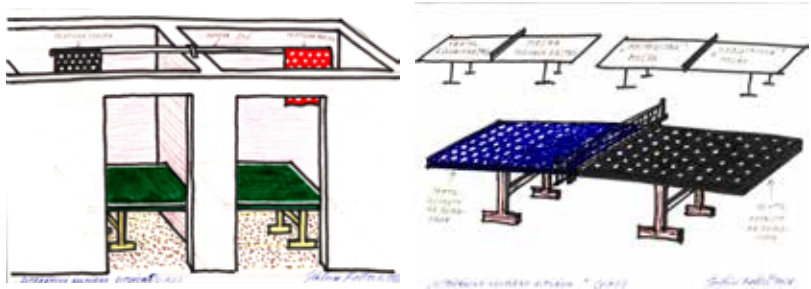
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1. Stano Filko, *Cathedral of Humanism*, 1968. Collection of the Central Slovak Gallery in Banská Bystrica. Photo: archive of SGBB

2. Viliam Jakubík, Vladimír Kordoš, Marián Mudroch, *Selfservice - Atmosphere 1970 - Not Breathable, 1. Open Studio*, Bratislava, 1970. Private Collection. Photo: archive of the artists



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2

1. Július Koller, *Basement Cultural Situation 1*, 1988. Artist's inheritance.  
Photo: Archive of the artist

Július Koller, *Basement Cultural Situation 2*, 1988. Artist's inheritance.  
Photo: Archive of the artist

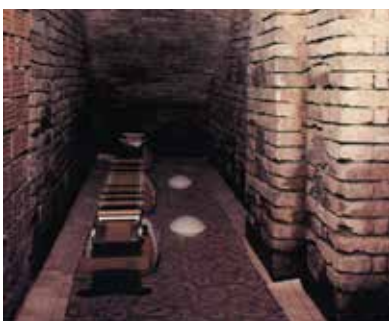
2. Július Koller, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Artist's inheritance.  
Photo: private archive



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1. Igor Peter Meluzin, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Artist's inheritance. Photo: private archive
2. Igor Peter Meluzin and Matej Krén, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Photo: private archive
3. Milan Adamčiak, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Artist's inheritance. Photo: private archive
4. Viktor Oravec, Milan Pagáč, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Artist's inheritance. Photo: private archive





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1. Matej Krén, *Dole - Well*, Basement, Bratislava, 1989. Courtesy of the artist.  
Photo: private archive

2. Igor Peter Meluzin, installation on *Basement*, 1989. Artist's inheritance.  
Photo: private archive

3. Rudolf Sikora, *Topographic Pool*, 1. Open Studio, Bratislava, 1970. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist



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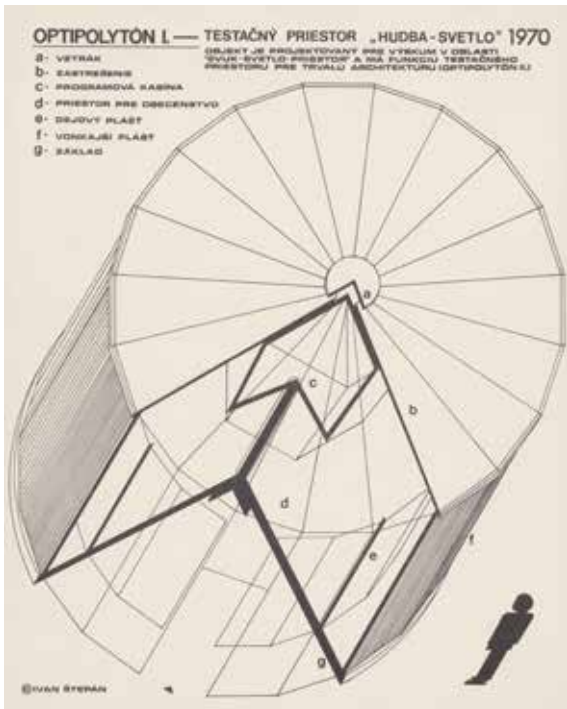


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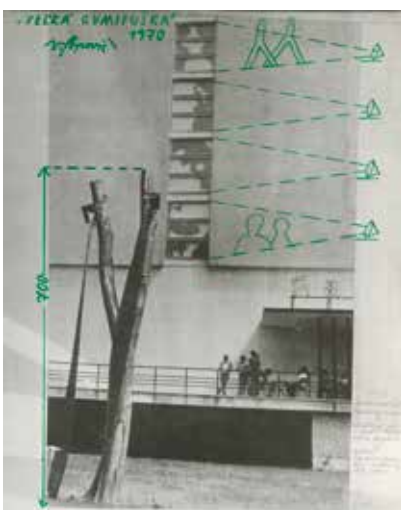
1. Jana Želibská, *Amanita muscaria – possibility of saving throughout the entire year* 1971, 1. Open Studio, Bratislava, 1971. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
2. Otis Laubert, *Snowman's Tongue*, 1. Open Studio, Bratislava, 1970
3. Vladimír Kordoš, *Hommage to Cesar*, 1. Open Studio, Bratislava, 1970. Collection of Museum of Modern Art in Olomouc



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1. Jozef Jankovič, *Great Fall*, 1968. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
2. Ivan Štěpán, *Optypolyton I*, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
3. Vladimír Popovič, *Big Rubber Band*, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
4. Peter Bartoš, *Activity with Mud Balnea, I. Open Studio*, Bratislava, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
5. Milan Dobeš, *Pulsating Rhythm*, 1965. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

# Ján KRALOVIČ

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EXHIBITION  
AS A FORM  
OF CULTURAL  
AND ARTISTIC  
RESISTANCE

## Social and Political Context

Methodological strategy for the selection of unofficial artistic activities from the sixties to eighties in Slovakia is focused on the format of an exhibition. The medium of the exhibition allows me to reveal the patterns of artistic presentations as well as the dynamics of creating relationships between artists and their works in the format of group and solo exhibitions. Due to the determined time span including periods of restriction and impossibility of unrestrained presentation, exhibitions in alternative, semi-public spaces, in exteriors, in nature as well as private apartments or art studios also took place. These exhibitions reflect means of escaping to an environment allowing free artistic presentation without significant censorship interventions. The selection follows the principle of transforming the exhibition frameworks and concepts and also reflects broader socio-political phenomena.

The social and political context of the sixties, especially in the second half, was a gradual easing of political pressure and a partial liberalisation of conditions. New trends in cinematography (New Wave), theatre (Theatre of the Absurd) or literature have emerged (e.g. publication of previously banned or censored writers, expansion of cultural, artistic and literary periodicals). From the point of view of ideological and social interest, an effort was born to transform the existing social syntax and to place greater emphasis on the individual experience, the existence of humans. In the field of philosophical thought, a stream of revision of Marxism has begun, subordinated to the effort to free oneself from the apologetic role against the ideology of the Communist Party. Existentialism and phenomenological philosophy were promoted, which became known through translations published in the second half of the sixties. Intellectual stimuli were motivated on the basis of less restricted possibilities in the field of publication outputs (fiction, poetry, scholarly, scientific, artistic literature). In the more relaxed circumstances, there was a wider arena for polemics, relativization of the social and cultural and artistic expansion of the time, and opportunities for discussion and opinion restructuring aroused.

The transformation process culminated with the arrival of pro-democratic politician Alexander Dubček as the chief secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. From a political point of view, space was opened for reforms that resulted in

a short period of the so-called Prague Spring. The demand for 'socialism with a human face' as well as reform efforts in the sphere of the structure of the Communist Party and the economic system were violently interrupted despite the positive response of Czechoslovak population. The entry of the Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 was a deep blow. The time preceding it was evaluated by normalization structures as a crisis development conditioned by bourgeois and socio-democratic views. The period from 1965 to 1970 ending in 1971 was one of the most significant intervals during the socialist regime from the cultural and artistic perspective. In Slovak environment, the shift was manifested by a break from the domestic 'folkloristic' traditions in art, a departure from the usual artistic schemes to more liberated and more subjectively articulated expression. The starting point was the process, action and experience of an event as well as comprehensive spatial solutions of the work of art and overlaps between different artistic media.

'Seventies' as a term representing revision measures has gradually spilled over into the next decade. It was not until the mid-eighties that a more significant social and cultural development occurred (e.g. Perestroika, the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the emergence of a young generation of visual artists, etc.). The period 1970–1979 is not a homogeneous entity, several phases can be traced in this course of time. The time until the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (1971) was still marked by an atmosphere of the previous decade, and in the area of artistic activities, several significant exhibitions were organized at this time (*Polymusical Space*, 1970, *Festival of Snow*, 1970, *Open Studio*, 1970), as well as happenings and collective events (Alex Mlynářčík: *June Celebration – Festive Feast*, 1970; *Day of Joy/If All the Trains in the World*, 1971, *Edgar Degas Memorial*, 1971, *Eva's Wedding*, 1972 or Jana Želibská's *Betrothal of Spring*, 1970 and others). The following years became a period of restrictive measures, censorship interventions and cadre-political purges. For the area of artistic activity in Slovakia, the II. November 1972 congress of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists, which publicly condemned progressive artists and critics of the previous decade from formalism and conscious disorientation of the visual community, established the method of Socialist Realism as the only creative method of socialist art. The profiling of the unofficial art scene was a natural consequence of the need to realize non-trending ideas about art.

The first half of the eighties was marked by negative socio-political influences from the previous decade. Society has come to what can be described as 'realistic socialism.' Gradually, the lack of prospects began to take on clear contours of what was to come. An important event in the pan-European development was the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev

to the post of General Secretary of the Soviet Union Communist Party. This ushered in a period of 'Perestroika' – the rebuilding of the totalitarian regime on the basis of more democratic principles. The activities of civic initiatives, environmental and protectionist associations were revived, as well as human rights activities and Christian communities. From the point of view of the cultural situation, the period after 1985 was hit by the 'new wave' bringing not only neoexpressive forms in the sphere of visual arts, music or theatre, but also the profiling of different platforms of opinion defining themselves against the normative oppression of the state. The new postmodern situation has shaped its more heterogeneous version by absorbing the influences of media culture and technological progress. The unofficial exhibition scene was gaining more and more alternative spaces for presentation, and towards the end of the decade new artistic groups, exhibition projects and festivals were created.

## Artistic Alternatives – Searching for Spaces For Realization (Interior – Exterior)

The end of the sixties meant relaxation and freedom for the artistic and cultural realm, and also in the sphere of the presentation of art. During this period, an extensive international exhibition of emerging art (artists under 35 years old) *Danuvius '68* was organised and intended as a biennial. *Danuvius '68* was a selective presentation. The artists were approached on the initiative of the exhibition commissioner Lubor Kára and the organizing committee. In August, the Warsaw Pact troops intervened violently and the fate of the exhibition was threatened. Eventually, the organizers agreed to postpone and the exhibition finally took place (October 18–November 21, 1968). Three Slovak artists protested against the violent occupation: Alex Mlynárčik, Karol Lacko and Jana Shejbalová-Želibská. By withdrawing works from the exhibition as well as obstructions regarding the postponement of the date, *Danuvius '68* amassed the dimension of a political and civic protest, a signal appealing to freedom as the basic starting point not only for creating art, but also for a fulfilling everyday life. Despite the complications, *Danuvius '68* was an exceptional and extensive international exhibition. It was a show aimed new audience stimuli: a shift towards intermedia, interactivity, experimental techniques and materials. There were works in which the emphasis was placed on the participation of the viewer (Ivan Štěpán), introduced a new form of the sculptural (anti)monument, which took the form of a grotesque-existential feeling rather than pathetic uniformity (Jozef Jankovič), created an overlap of the object into a complex and synaesthetic environment – the environment (Stano Filko) or kinetic sculptures (Anton Cepka), indicating freedom



from historically conditioned definitional frameworks of individual media (Kralovič 2014, 39-43).

The establishment of new art forms was also helped by one official gallery institution: Cyprián Majerník Gallery, which thanks to its profiling was called the Gallery of Youth. It was already founded in 1957, but highly progressive exhibitions introducing new artistic forms of the environment, Project-art, performativity into Slovak art mainly appeared in the years 1967 to 1971. Environment *Possibilities of Uncovering* (1967) by Jana Želibská, *External Environment* (1968) by Stano Filko, records of events and projects by Petr Bartoš as part of the exhibition *Saloonik* (1967) or *Environment II.* (1971) by Juraj Meliš's now belong to the canons of Slovak neo-avant-garde art. The gallery managed by the Union of Slovak Visual Artists continued to operate after 1971, but the exhibition program was more conventional (Müllerová 2010).

Július Koller reacted in a playful way to the space of the Gallery of Youth. In March 1970, he created an environment for the game directly appealing in an exhibition named *J.K. Ping Pong Club*. In the gallery space, he placed a table-top with the possibility of free sports play for participating spectators and hung sports flags with his own initials on the walls. The relationship between (sport) play and (artistic) creativity is transposed in Koller's work. The artist created a 'cultural situation' that is no longer created by art in the traditional sense by mediating through an artistic material, but by activity, a participatory activity that makes everyday life unique.

In the second half of the sixties, opportunities for outdoor activities were available, especially sculptural symposia (Vyšné Ružbachy, Moravany nad Váhom, Košice). Since 1967, an exterior exhibition in Piešťany took place titled *Sculpture of Piešťany Parks*. In 1970, the concept was profiled and on the initiative of Commissioner Ľubor Kára, the show took on the character of an intermedia festival under the title *Polymusical Space 1970: Sculpture, Object, Light, Music*. The exhibition took place under the auspices of an official institution – the Union of Slovak Visual Artists. It focused on the borderline positions of art, intermedia art and integration of individual artistic genres and disciplines. In addition to more traditional sculptural pieces, it presented installations working with the park's natural environment, happening activities, light and acoustic objects. Writers and musicians were also involved in the program of the exhibition, so the *Polymusical Space* was an event based on cooperation and 'an opportunity for experimental work and for testing the relations of works of art with the environment of the city and nature' (Kára 1970, n.p.). For all of them we can mention the works of Stano Filko *Pumping Water into the Pool* (1970), where a set of pipes drains water from the Váh River and fills an abandoned pool or his pneumatic sculpture – more

than 6 metre-tall balloon which regularly inflated and deflated named *Breathing* (1968-70).

In 1970, a large-scale outdoor group event of artistic interventions based on the homage principle called *First Festival of Snow* was prepared and organized by a group of artists. *The First Festival of Snow* took place on the occasion of the World Ski Championships in the High Tatras, at Štrbské pleso. According to the statement, the festival represented the first manifestation of interpretation in visual art as an expression of a new dimension of thinking. The motif of ephemerality in connection to the used material – snow – is an expression of artistic statement that breaks away from commercial binding. This event was a mark of completion of the textual Manifesto on the interpretation in Visual Art written by Alex Mlynárčik and Miloš Urbásek in June 1969. “Interpretation in the visual arts is a new creative dimension. It opens other spaces as fruitful exits from the so-called authentic gestures, which we have so far been anxiously adhering to. It is the creative realization of a project or the re-realization of an existing work of art. (...) Interpretation is the antithesis of epigoni meaning sterile acceptance” (Restany 1995). The event developed a motif of quotation, appropriation or ‘live games,’ which were notably present in Mlynárčik’s work. According to the documentation, 37 works were announced and created by four artists: Milan Adamčiak, Robert Cyprich, Alex Mlynárčik and Miloš Urbásek. It is possible to mention the work *Roads* by Petr Brüning, interpreted by Mlynárčik, with red pigment sprayed on the snow road, where the geometric pattern resembled Brüning’s paintings from the late sixties, drawing from the motifs of vertical traffic signs. In a playful intervention, Miloš Urbásek painted huge figures of snowmen in bright colours as *Homage to Niki de Saint Phalle (Nanas)*. Robert Cyprich carried out an event in which he created two parallel lines 50 km long by cross-country skis as a tribute to the Land art project of Walter de Maria and, perhaps, the work of Milan Adamčiak, in which he created snow sculptures of fish as a tribute to René Magritte on the surface of the frozen lake Štrbské pleso. The actions also echo the art of French New Realists, whose work, especially through the activities of Alex Mlynárčik, influenced the work of Slovak artists, and drew attention to the importance of working with found materials and emphasized the process as a playful activity. *The First Festival of Snow* was an event that foreshadowed the connection of art to sports activities, which in the seventies and eighties became a frequent form of attracting the principle of play and playfulness into the field of artistic activities (e.g. Július Koller: *Ping Pong Club JK*, 1970, Robert Cyprich: *Hip-Hop*, 1974, Július Koller - Peter Meluzin: *Edvantýč* [Advantage], 1980, Peter Meluzin and team: *U.F.O.otball*, 1981, etc.) or as a terminological mimicry (*Bratislava Artifact Shift Championship*, 1979-1986).

For artists, the beginning of the seventies often meant leaving the exhibition institutional premises and implementing activities in nature or even in an urban environment. Among the most significant and organizationally demanding were the happenings of Alex Mlynárčik. In the years 1970-1972, he carried out several extensive and structured events: *Juniáles* [June Festival] (1970), *Day of Joy – If All the Trains in the World* (1971), *Edgar Degas Memorial* (1971), all bringing a sense of joyfully spent time into creation of art and faith in positive socio-cultural aspects of art. From the important events of Mlynárčik's early seventies, *Eva's Wedding* (1972), was composed as a 'staged play' based on a painting by Ludovít Fulla, intervening in the urban environment. *Eva's Wedding* was not only a staging of the plot based on the aforementioned painting, but it was a real wedding of two young people. A situation that represents a milestone in the existence of humans was selected deliberately. The 'performance' is composed in two acts and eight images with a prologue and an epilogue. 'Live play' was filled with various ceremonies and symbolic acts that drew on traditional Slovak marriage rituals. *Eva's Wedding* was a double celebration: a celebration of love in the form of a real wedding and a celebration of the reality of life. Mlynárčik used the principle of an amplified readymade – reviving and extending the wedding as a collective event with the intention of enhancing the specific feeling of the participants.

## Private Apartment Exhibitions and Presentations in Semi-Public Spaces

Artists meeting in private apartments and studios has always been a natural way of molding and consolidating of the art scene. In this text, I will mention exhibitions that understood the residential or studio space as an asylum or as an alternative to the impossibility of showing work in the official galleries. Already with the onset of structural abstract art in the early sixties, presentations begin appearing in private spaces, only open for a narrow circle of viewers. The artists of the free association of *Bratislava Confrontations* presented their works for the first time in 1961 in the studio of Jozef Jankovič in Bratislava – Petržalka, and two other exhibitions took place in non-gallery spaces – in the studio of Andrej Rudavský (1962) and at the apartment of music theorist Ivan Mačák (1963). Only after these events the structural abstraction in art was established and presented in official exhibition spaces. However, the core of this text will focus on the period of Normalization and the search for forms and spaces for presenting the unofficial and experimental art.

Naturally, the nature of so-called 'normalization' institutions did not allow the presentation of artists and works in which the aesthetic and ideological canon of the time was not taken into account or they were indifferent to it. Artists whose interest was transferred to Conceptual or Action (performative, Body-art) oriented positions were excluded from the possibilities of official presentations. The apartment or studio became an asylum that allowed some to convey the positions of art that were inaccessible to the public.

At the beginning of the seventies, there was a significant onset of a young generation of artists on the scene. Their introduction was the exhibition *Open Studio* (November 19, 1970) by Rudolf Sikora on Tehelná Street in Bratislava. Various artistic expressions - object, installation, performative and Conceptual tendencies were combined to form the basis of the future un-official art scene. The *Studio* was also a reaction to the failure of the next edition of the *Danuvius'70* biennial exhibition. It was a manifestation of open ideas and an effort to discover new paths of art, ways of its full integration with reality (Sikorová 2000, 10-30). Last but not least, it was significant in relation to the increasingly limited possibilities of exhibiting in official spaces, it was a creative participation and confrontation in the environment outside exhibition halls and announced the gradual withdrawal of artists into private and semi-official spaces. *The First Open Studio* was an exhibition connecting two generations of artists in a creative confrontation. The exhibition was attended by 18 artists: Milan Adamčiak, Peter Bartoš, Václav Cigler, Robert Cyprich, Milan Dobeš, Igor Gazdík (art theorist), Viliam Jakubík, Július Koller, Vladimír Kordoš, Ivan Križ-Vyrubiš, Otis Laubert, Juraj Meliš, Alex Mlynárčik, Marián Mudroch, Rudolf Sikora, Ivan Štěpán, Dezider Tóth, Miloš Urbásek and Jana Shejbalová- Želibská.

After the *First Studio* had its opening and the situation with normalization worsened, artists and scientists regularly met at the house of Rudolf Sikora. The meetings were aimed at discussion, philosophical rethinking of questions related to science, humans and the environment in which they live. Rudolf Sikora, Stano Filko, Miloš Laky and Ján Zavorský were artists who related the problematic issues of the present to the wider spatio-temporal context of the past and the future. Their regular Tuesday discussions gave rise to several Conceptual projects presented in the form of posters and prints. The the first one, titled ?+... (1971) was a result of cooperation of Július Koller, Stano Filko, Rudolf Sikora and theorist Igor Gazdík. Since 1971, Sikora has continuously addressed environmental issues, often in conjunction with social and economic notions and issues of planetary sustainability, as well as a broader cosmic view of the future of the Earth. In the form of posters and challenges, he distributed them to friends and 'published' them on the wall of his studio (e.g. *Time...Space I -*

IV.) Another activity were the so-called 'symposions': *Symposion I.* (1974) and *Symposion II. – Frozen Information*, the documentation of which was stored in a metal box and buried in the forest above Bratislava (24. 1. 1975).

Three artists, Stano Filko, Miloš Laky and Ján Zavarský, who started to work on the idea of a joint piece: *White Space in White Space* have emerged from the circle of artists participating in meetings at Sikora's. In their manifesto entitled *White Non-Material Space in Pure White Infinite Space* (1973/74), which they distributed in locally and internationally, the artists announce 'abandonment of the reality in question,' interest in 'pure sensitivity' and 'unlimited expansion in infinity.' The installation consisted of white cylinders, white canvas and felt in an effort to completely suppress artistic manuscript, where the white layers applied with the roller were understood as representations of the de-subjectification of art towards universal, not purely artistic, testimony. *White Space in White Space* was installed on February 18, 1974 during the night in the premises of the House of Arts in Brno. The space was provided to the artists by the curator Jiří Valoch and the installation was presented without spectators, only for photographic documentation. The texts of the Russian supremacist Kasimir Malevich, whose collection of texts was published in a Slovak edition in 1968, were undoubtedly an inspiring source for reflection. The artists are concerned with speculative evocation of intangible space using monochromatic colours and materials that make the space metaphorically present in their properties and through the installation arrangement.

After Rudolf Sikora was evicted in 1975 and the house at Tehelná 2 Street was intended for redevelopment, the meeting of some artists moved to the apartment of Dezider Tóth on Moskovská Street 1. The host named it *Depository*. Live informal discussions, but also several presentations of artworks took place at the apartment on the 4th floor. Between 1976 and 1977, the solo exhibitions of Juraj Bartusz, Milan Bočkay, Klára Bočkayová, Juraj Lipták and the first solo exhibition of Dezider Tóth were held here, and his elaborate cycle of *Scores* was presented here as well. The apartment was also the location of completion and presentation of the album *Symposion III/76* dedicated to Miloš Laky. As part of the *Depository*, Dezider Tóth also organized the apartment theatre *Bag of the Pomimo Collective* (with Dušan Grečner). Police summonses and interrogations ended any possibility of these meetings in the autumn of 1977 (Tóth and Meluš 2011).

Since 1978, the initiative of organizing exhibitions began not only in residential, private premises, but also in institutions that were not directly intended for art, but allowed a more extensive presentation. From the initiative of mathematician František Mikloško, an exhibition was held in April of the same year at the Institute of Technical Cybernetics of the

Slovak Academy of Sciences on Dúbravská cesta road in Bratislava (Milan Bočkay, Klára Bočkayová, Daniel Fischer, Otis Laubert, Marián Meško, Igor Minárik, Dezider Tóth). In the same year, Mikloško, along with the same names, organizes an exhibition in Smolenice and for the next year another of the exhibitions in the lobby of the Institute with a similar circle of artists (amended with Ladislav Čarný, Ľubo Ďurček, Marián Mudroch and Rudolf Sikora). The exhibition attracted the attention of the State Security. The continuation of this presentation activity was an exhibition at the Institute of Applied Cybernetics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, especially after 1985. The *Meeting of Science and Art* (Research Institute of Animal Production in Nitra, 1980 – the exhibition was initiated by Andrej Rudavský, the commissioner was Zuzana Bartošová-Pinterová) was a significant and extensively conceived sculptural exhibition.

The format of apartment meetings with a deliberately ironic title referring to the sport terminology of *the Bratislava Artifact Shift Championship* was organized regularly from 1979 to 1986 by the artist Dezider Tóth in the apartments and studios of one of the participants of the *Championship*. The status of the event included the condition of a nine-month thematic shift of the participating artist, lasting from March 8 (International Day of Life) to December 6 (St. Nicholas). During this period, each participant was to create a 'shift' (or paraphrase, interpretation, application, appropriation, quotation, etc.) of any work of any artist known from the history of art, containing the given topic to which the reinterpretation was related. The themes selected by the event organizer were conceived as broadly defined frameworks that allowed variability and heterogeneity of artistic thinking: 1979 – Sensuality, 1980 – Touch, 1981 – Duplication, 1982 – Secrecy, Mystery, Otherworldliness, 1983 – Connection, 1984 – Myth, 1985 – Light, 1986 – Transformation. The nine-month long thematic *Shift* (a symbol of the length of human pregnancy) concluded with a meeting in the apartment of one of the participants with a mutual presentation of the works. A total of 26 artists mainly from the Bratislava art community took part, and more than 160 works were created for the event (Kralovič 2017). The variety of media outputs of the presented works was intriguing, and it was conditioned by the participation of artists from various fields from painting (Milan Bočkay, Klára Bočkayová, Rudolf Fila, Daniel Fischer, Marián Mudroch) through printmaking and illustration (Dušan Nágel, Jozef Jaňák, Svetozár Mydlo), photography (Ľuba Lauffová, Ivan Hoffman) to Action and Performance art (Vladimír Kordoš - Matej Krén, Július Koller, Peter Meluzin and others).

In 1980, Jana Želibská organized a performative show of original works – costumes in her apartment on Fraňa Kráľa Street in Bratislava.

*The Small Fashion Show (Soirée I)* was a chamber performance – a show for a narrow audience. Among them were prominent Czech theorists and art historians Jindřich Chalupecký, Milena Slavická, theoretician and artist Róbert Cyprich, artists Alex Mlynárčik and Dezider Tóth and Želibská's partner Martin Ličko. The structured libretto of the event included a welcome, presentation of individual models of dresses, jewellery and objects, a discussion and a closing party.

In 1981, the conceptual artist Lubomír Ďurček set aside a passage room at his apartment on Kuzmányho Street in Bratislava, where he occasionally presented his works. He named it *Interspace*. It was a 'territory' that was private, but at the same time it was also a space for a certain opening, publication of his 'drawer' works. Often, works (e.g. artist books, concepts, records) were put away in the room and the visitor had to have the courage to view them. The concept of *Interspace* operated until its demise in 1991.

Some of the activities also took place in the premises of educational institutions. An example is the photo performance realized by Vladimír Kordoš and his friends and colleagues, focused on the interpretation of well-known works from the history of art, which he realized in the premises of the Bratislava Secondary School of Applied Arts at on Palisády Street. Among the important collective happenings were football matches organized by Peter Meluzin. In 1981, he organized U.F.O. tball (a football match between TJ SÚPERBOYS ŠUP and U.F.O. Lamač). It was a conceptually phrased, structured and playfully ironic happening, the culmination of which was a real sports game – a football match. The interior happening was also an event initiated by Vladimír Kordoš and Matej Krén: *After All, a Person is Not Crazy to Get Wet* (1983). The event parodies the carefree atmosphere of summer sunbathing moved into the interior of the gym. It was a staging of an event in an unfitting context, which became an absurd acting etude parodying the frequent performance of activities without real justification during socialism.

In 1977, Otis Laubert organized an exhibition of his own works and the works of other artists in the improvised private premises of his sister's apartment on Moskovská Street. The first was the exhibition of drawings (1977) and the presentation of collages under the name *Four Seasons*. In 1978 he organized a photographic presentation of Juraj Lipták and in 1979 an exhibition of the photographer Dušan Dukát. He also presented his own works from the cycle *Interpretations (Three-dimensional Interpretation)*. Later, during the eighties, he continued to prepare private presentations in his own house on Železničiarska Street in Bratislava. He cleared one room of the apartment and turned it into a 'gallery.' He named it using an ironic playful title *Branch of the Guggenheim Museum*. Laubert prepared a presentation of collected items under the title *Medals (1986)*,

the exhibition *Telovka* [Body Representation] (1987), an exhibition of assembled clothing *What to Wear*, works on the theme of map *From East to East*, an exhibition of black and white drawings and collages *Blekenvajt* [Black and White] (1988) or a demonstration of the work of prematurely deceased friend Igor Kalný. Other presentations were the mono thematic exhibition *Flower* and a group exhibition with several artists of the unofficial scene named *If (What Would Happen If We Went This Way)*. He also exhibited large-scale installations *Aucajder* [Outsider] (1985) and *Hyperkoláž* [Hyper Collage] (1988) and realized the performances *Gašparko* [Harlequin] and *Šaman* [Shaman] (1988). Laubert's private presentations often had the character of games of mystification (Kralovič, 2017). This motif was also related to the name of the space, referring to the branch of the famous museum.

Since 1983, Marta Stachová and Ľubo Stacho have organized exhibitions of their colleagues, friends and acquaintances in their two-room apartment on Sibirská 52 Street under the title *Permanent Action - Gallery in the Prefab House*. Photos from the opening or exhibitions were sent as New Year's greetings ['PF's'] to a wider range of artists. The exhibitions were documented in detail and the photographs also included the context of ordinary family life of Stacho family. It was not a stark documentation of the art, but rather photography that mediates the atmosphere in the family or spontaneous moments from the openings of exhibitions. For seven years, 27 artists were shown at the Stacho family base (Kralovič 2017).

A unique Conceptual project was the *Ganek Gallery*, an initiative of a fictional gallery located in a real place - a plateau under the Ganek mountain in the High Tatras. The gallery project was elaborated in detail in 1980 by the organizing committee of the Ganek gallery - artists Július Koller, Milan Adamčiak, Peter Meluzin, theorist Igor Gazdík and mountaineer and photographer Pavel Breier. The gallery became a symptom of the times; it was a test project, a form of cultural situation and its intention was not to exhibit art, but to symbolically mediate communication with extraterrestrial civilizations and provide the possibility of alternative ways of communication. The gallery was a platform for exchanging and developing imaginative speculations. These were justified in writing in detail in the deliberately ironic language of the bureaucratic apparatus. The initiator of the concept, Július Koller, created visual representations of the gallery from assembled reproductions published in the magazine *Vysoké Tatry*. The artists also wrote a manifesto, statutory and organizational principles and established an advisory committee of the gallery (Grúň 2014).

Smaller communities or initiatives were also scattered in other parts of Slovakia. Among the notable was the Košice circle around the



writer, philosopher, mystic and musician Marcel Strýko. The informal music group *Forest Singers*, the organization of apartment seminars and the publication of the samizdat magazine *The Thirteenth Chamber* were the activities that shaped the nature of the unofficial scene in eastern Slovakia. Strýko communicated intensively with the underground scene in Prague (Ivan Martin Jirous, Egon Bondy, František Stárek, Mirek Vodrážka and others). Meetings, exhibitions and discussions were held at Strýko's Košice apartment, but also at the cottage in Slánská Huta, which became an asylum mainly for musical performances (Strýko 1996).

In November 1987, a private exhibition of a group of artists (Jozef Amrich, Anna Bartuszová, Juraj Bartusz, Alexander Eckert, Ondrej Jurín, Peter Kalmus, Andrea and Peter Lipkovič, Zbyněk Prokop, Viktor Ševčík) took place in the artist Peter Lipkovič's apartment on Mlynská Street in Košice. The photographic documentation captures the installation of works completely covering the walls of the apartment and creating a heterogeneous mosaic, which was already a symptom of rearrangement and diffusion in the artistic approaches to making work and its presentation, which have become typical of postmodern expressions (Beskid 1993).

A more extensive group event, based on artistic presentations and activating installations in public space, was to be the *3 Sunny Days (3SD)* festival at the Medical Garden in Bratislava. Due to a ban, the event did not take place. *3SD* followed the previous actions of the group *Temporary Society of Intensive Survival* around activist Ján Budaj from 1978 and 1979. Several concepts, events, exhibitions of paintings, as well as civic and ecological activities were prepared for the festival. Their structure was mapped by a samizdat almanac, which was prepared for the event, but was eventually scrapped, and its amended version was only released in 1988. *3SD* were to connect several relatively isolated art groups, theatrical artists with artists and contribute to connecting communities creating alternative culture with the public.

At the beginning of the eighties, many activities were developed even in natural or urban environments. *Terrain* was an alternative informal association of artists, which performed several actions between 1982-1984, concentrating mainly in nature or responding to ecological and social facets. The idea of the association was invented in 1981 as the initiative of Peter Meluzin, Július Koller and art historian Radislav Matuščík. Interventions in the natural and suburban environment, events and spatial installations were created within the framework of four symposia: in the summer of 1982, in the winter of 1982-83 and in the spring and autumn of 1984. Samizdat collections with profile texts by art historian Radislav Matuščík were published from four Land art or Action art meetings. A separate event was *Terrain V - Funeral of*

Terrain organized by Peter Meluzin. The last activity was *Tribute to the Dead Terrain* initiated by the suspension of Artprospekt P.O.P group, conjectured and realized from the participants' contributions by Lubomír Ďurček in 1985-87. The activities of the association managed to integrate the majority of artists who concentrated on the subject of Action art in the early eighties, as well as Earth art, Conceptual art, environment and installation (Matušík 2000).

From the exhibition cycles of the eighties, we consider *Archaeological Monuments and the Present* significant, which took place annually between 1982 and 1986, at the Municipal Administration of Monument Care and Nature Conservation. The events were organized by Ladislav Snopko and Viktor Ferus. The possibility of a creative shift of historical fact have become a fundamental dramaturgical input into the concept. There is a direct connection between historical or archaeological artefacts and their interpretative creative grasp.

A multiple-genre artistic presentation, connecting the unofficial art and music scene, was presented by the project *Touch and Connections* (1985-1989), which was organized by Ladislav Snopko and Zuzana Bartošová. The selection of artists followed the coverage of the pluralistic form of artistic tendencies (Michal Kern, Rudolf Sikora, Milan Paštéka, Ivan Csudai, Klára Bočkayová, Igor Minárik, Juraj Bartusz, Vladimír Havrilla, Igor Kalný, Jozef Jankovič, Július Koller) and at the same time dramaturgically connect them with musical production of mainly alternative genres (Iva Bittová, Marián Varga, Jiří Stivín, Bez ladu a skladu, Zuzana Homolová, Dežo Ursiny, Krásné nové stroje etc.). The format implemented in the District Cultural and Social Centre Vajnorská in Bratislava had 12 sequels and a catalogue was issued for each event (Snopko - Bartošová, 2002). In the eighties, *Touch and Connections* represented an increasingly emerging tendency towards multigenre events. Ladislav Snopko also organized one-day rock festivals *Čertovo kolo* (Pasienky Hall, Bratislava) in 1987 and 1988, during which the works of young Slovak and Czech artists were also exhibited in the sports hall. Almost scenically installed large-format paintings were a radical demonstration of the generation of 'wild' painters.

The end of the eighties also brought the first more complex festival performances, enabling a mutual artistic confrontation. The event focused on action and performance was the festival of Action art held in Nové Zámky. The festival organized by *Studio Erté* from 1987 to 1989 under the name *International Festival of Alternative Art* and since 1992 known as *Transart Communication*, brought a wide range of Action art, but also accompanying activities like concerts, lectures, discussions (Hushegyi 2000).

In 1987, the *Youth Salon* was organized at the House of Technology in Bratislava, and a year later, the *Salon '88* as an exhibition legitimizing the artistic programs of the coming generation in a new postmodern situation. The exhibition *New Slovak Image* (1988), in the premises of the Czechoslovak Radio under the supervision of Zuzana Bartošová, was a professional attempt to review current artistic tendencies. In the eighties, more extensive sculptural symposia *Exteriors I – III* (1987–1988) were also held, which also had their two sequels in the post-Velvet revolution period. The first *Exterior* was realized on the initiative of the sculptor Daniel Brunovský in the mini golf area near Štrkovec Lake and brought a bold presentation of young artists entering creative positions that deliberately disrupted the classical definition of the genres of sculpture and painting (Daniel Brunovský, Stano Bubán, Simona Bubánová, Katarína Kissoczyová, Stano Černý, Jozef Bajus). Syncretism, work with location-specificity and expressive concept of the works were also characteristic for *Exterior II* realized in the park of the Kysuce Gallery in Oščadnica (May 1988) and for the third edition of the exhibition in the Janko Kráľ Gardens in September 1988. Alternative exhibition presentations at the end of the eighties include *Art Feast* in Čunovo (1988) in the premises of the house under construction by Jozef Šramka or the *Meeting of Czechoslovak Artists – Prešparty* in Prešov (1988).

In April 1989, a two-week unofficial exhibition *Basement* conceived by the artist Peter Meluzin took place in the basement of a house on Konvetná Street in Bratislava. Action artists – grouped in the first half of the eighties within the free association *Terrain* – reacted to the flowering of neoexpressive painting and defined themselves against the trend by implementing a project that was focused on spatial installation. The role of the curator was taken up by Radislav Matuščík. The exhibition required long-term preparation, cleaning and adaptation of the premises and, finally, a demanding installation of the pieces. The activities resulted in site-specific objects and installations by the artists Peter Meluzin, Milan Adamčíak, Július Koller, Viktor Oravec, Milan Pagáč, Peter Rónai, Matej Krén and Jana Želibská. *Suterén* (Basement) can be considered as the first exhibition focused on installation in Slovak art. A color catalog was printed by ČSTK Bratislava in cooperation with the MO SZVU in Bratislava (local organization of the Slovak Union of Visual Artists) (Matuščík 1989). The websites (<http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/suteren-the-basement-collective-exhibition/> and <https://www.webumenia.sk/cs/clanok/suteren-1989>) contain useful information on the *Suterén* exhibition.

In May 1989, the 'East Slovak' artistic circuit organized the festival *Little Big Bang* (ObKaSS III. – Vajnorská, Bratislava) as a confrontation of creative practices in contemporary art. The festival in a varied dramaturgical composition indicated the intermediate overlap of the

un-official art scene (Peter Kalmus, Michal Murin) with an alternative theatre (*Balvan, Vizita, Disk*) and musical performances (*Dunaj, Rays of Engineer Garin, Majkl's Uncle, Dia Ark*).

In the political realm, at the end of the eighties, consolidation was fading and there was an 'end to immobility' happening. After the initial scepticism, the society began to move forward. The 'power of the helpless' (Václav Havel) began to be fully reflected, which was also manifested by societal networking and organizing, resulting in the revolutionary events of November 1989. The cultural space was increasingly filled with samizdat and (semi-)official literature from the philosophical, religious or spiritual and artistic spheres. 1989 was a step out of the shadows, the end of a historic period. Fragmented events and hitherto ignored or unknown facts begin to penetrate history (art). Not only metaphorical but also real dismantling of borders was a call for retrospective reflection in the political and social sphere and at the same time a process of revision of white spaces on the map of artistic practice.

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1. Marián Mudroch, *Convergence II*, 1979. Collection of The First Slovak Investment Group. Photo: archive of PSIS

2. Rudolf Fila, *Birth of Venus*, 1971. Collection of The First Slovak Investment Group. Photo: archive of PSIS



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Igor Peter Meluzin, *Art Tady* (Art Today), 1981. Artist's inheritance. Photo: Archive of the artist



1. Depozit in the Flat of Dezider Tóth, Bratislava, 1976. Property of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
2. Klára Bočkayová, *Last Supper*, 1980. Property of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
3. Milan Bočkay, *Yellow verticals*, 1986. Collection of Považská Gallery of Art, Žilina. Photo: Archive of PGU
4. Milan Bočkay, *Paper XXXVII*, 1980. Collection of Považská Gallery of Art, Žilina. Photo: Archive of PGU
5. Gallery in Apartment of Ľubo Stacho and Marta Stachová, Bratislava, 1984 (from the exhibition of Albín Brunovský). Property of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
6. Vladimír Kordoš, *Return of Prodigal Son (After Rembrandt)*, 1980. Collection of Ernest Zmetak Art Gallery in Nové Zámky. Photo: Archive of GUEZNZ





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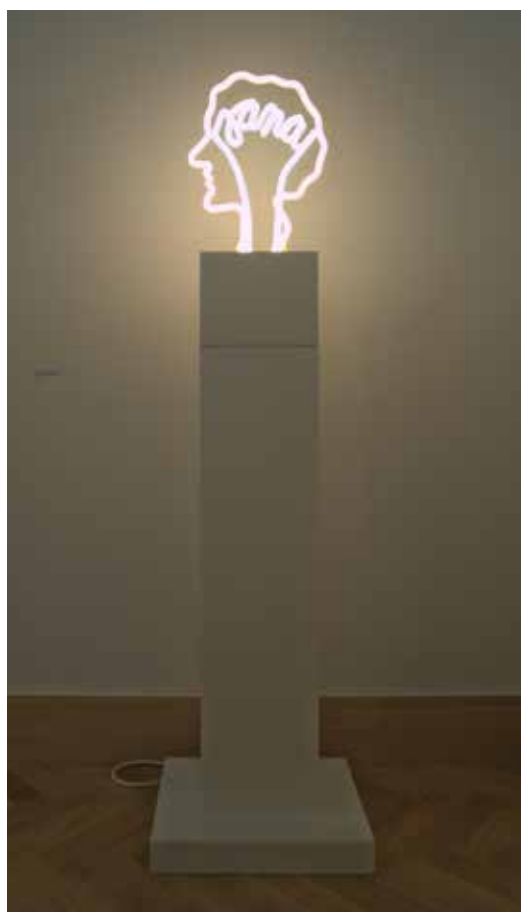
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Jana Želibská, *My Name is Written on Me Only*, 1985. The First Slovak Investment Group. Photo: Archive of PSIS



1. Jana Želibská, *Small Fashion Show (Soirée I.)*, 1981. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
2. Ladislav Čarný, construction from the *Three destructions*, 1985. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
3. Igor Kalný, performance to the *Body-like work*, 1986. Artist's inheritance. Photo: Archive of the artist
4. Igor Kalný, *Body-like work*, 1986. Artist's inheritance. Photo: Archive of the artist
5. Július Koller, *Czechoslovakia*, 1968, Collection of The First Slovak Investment Group. Photo: Archive of PSIS

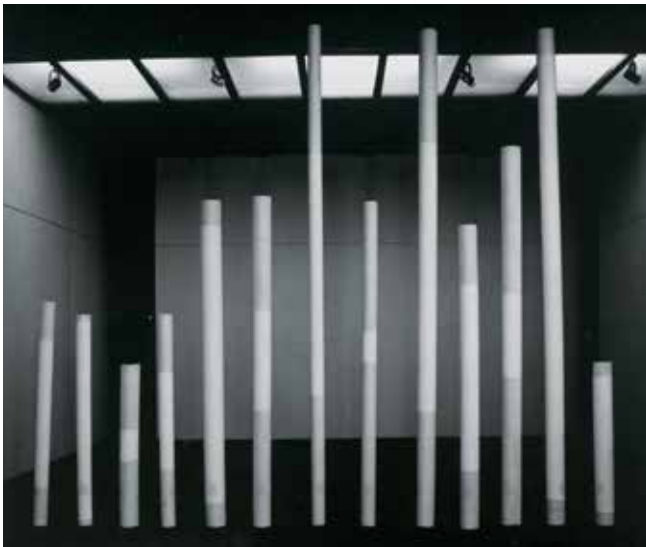


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1. Otis Laubert, *Shaman*, 1988. Property of the Artist. Photo: archive of the artist
2. Otis Laubert, *Hypercollage*, 1988. Property of the Artist. Photo: archive of the artist

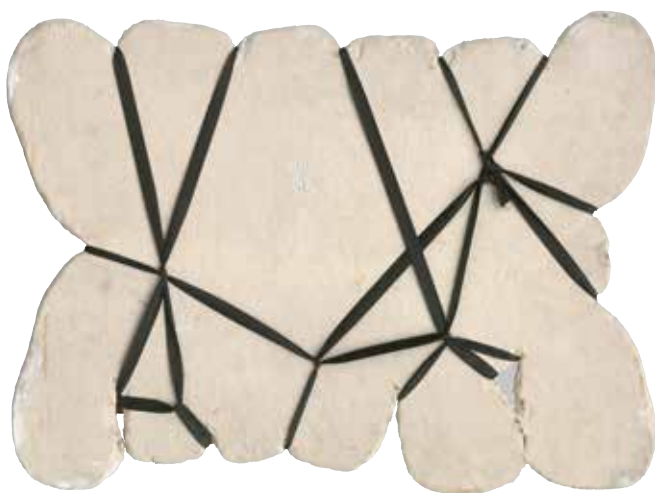


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1. Stano Filko, Miloš Laky, Ján Zavarský, *White Space in White Space*, 1973–74.  
Collection of the Central Slovak Gallery in Banská Bystrica. Photo: archive of SGBB
2. Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, *Happsoc I*, Bratislava, May 2-8, 1965 (complemented edition 1975). 1965/1975 Collection of the Central Slovak Gallery in Banská Bystrica. Photo: archive of SGBB



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1. Peter Bartoš, *Occupation*, 1972. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

2. Alex Mlynárčik, *Eve's Wedding*, 1972. Documentation Miloš Vančo. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG.



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3. Igor Minárik, *Without Title, Symposion III/In memoriam Miloš Laky*, 1976. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

4. Rudolf Sikora, *No! No! Yes?*, 1980. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

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Dezider Tóth, *My Library*  
– *My Window*, 1982.  
Collection of the Slovak  
National Gallery. Photo:  
Archive of SNG

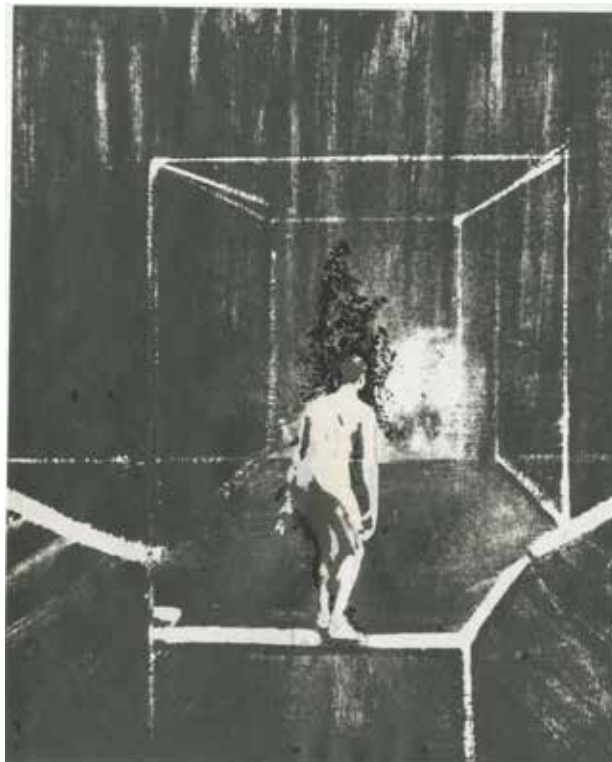


1. Ján Budaj and Temporary  
Society of Intensive Survival,  
*Air Transport is the  
Cheapest*, 1978. Collection of  
the Slovak National Gallery.  
Photo: Archive of SNG

2. Marián Mudroch, sketch  
for the work *Touch (E.  
Muybridge - F. Bacon)*  
realized as part  
of the *Bratislava  
Championship in Moving an  
Artifact*, 1980



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1. Dezider Tóth, *Cathedral (Hommage to August Rodin)*, 1980. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
2. Július Koller, *Ganek Gallery*, 1981. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG



# Daniela ČARNÁ

Ernest Zmeták Art Gallery in Nové Zámky

FORMS OF LAND  
ART OF THE SIXTIES  
AND EIGHTIES  
IN CONCEPTUAL  
AND ACTION ART  
IN SLOVAKIA

The beginnings of ecological thinking in art have roots in artists' orientation towards or rather return to nature. This can be traced more or less in parallel with the formulation of environmental problems by scientists from the late sixties. Creating the connection between humans and nature throughout the history of art can be notably traced in the genre of landscape painting, which reflected this ever changing and evolving relationship related to the ideas of that particular time. However, in the period under this review, we may discuss a certain generational interest of artists in the topics of preserving the environment, although the concept of ecology in the sixties was not as frequented as today (the history of the notion dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century). In 1968 the Club of Rome, an international association of scientists, politicians, and businessmen, was formed to develop global forecasts and influence public opinion. In 1972 its members published the renowned study *Limits to Growth* (also named *Crossing Limits*), which originated as material for the *United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm* (1972). It represented a turning point in the perception of global environmental protection issues and in the same year it was translated into Czech and distributed in the form of samizdat, and in Slovakia also in the form of a Polish edition. In 1969, the *Greenpeace* movement was established, and the year 1970 was declared the Year of Nature Conservation by the European Council. Five decades later, several comparative studies have emerged to verify the *Club of Rome's* conclusions, stating that several of the forecasts have been accurate (Kovář 2016, 1–3).

Efforts to revitalize the environment, pointing to its devastation and irreplaceability, but also to restoring human the relationship with it, have become one of the sources of the emergence of international art movements such as Earth art and Land art, which were created in parallel in different places in the US and in Europe (although not all Land art works contained an ecological dimension, and not every artist was at the same time an ecological activist). In the countries of the Eastern Bloc where the topic of conservation of nature was taboo, the artists' contributions also contained an indirect criticism of the totalitarian regime with its societal control and concealment of the real condition of unresolved problems (it manifested itself, for example, in the withholding of information after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion). In Slovakia, Land art existed within the framework of Conceptual and Action art tendencies, and reactions to nature and the suburban landscape had a firm place in the

work of many artists. For some, the turns to nature were only occasional, but for many, the 'studio in nature' became a lifelong choice and formed (or still forms) the basic lineage of their work. In connection to the work of Petr Bartoš, Jana Želibská, Alex Mlynárčik, Dezider Tóth, Rudolf Sikora, Michal Kern, Juraj Meliš, Daniel Fischer, we can refer to the 'Slovak version of Land art.' It did not always need to be a direct intervention in nature and an artist's physical presence outside, as they used various media and their combinations (drawing, painting, photography, map, natural artefact in the gallery) to interpret their ideas. The actual entries of artists into nature are defined by the temporality and ephemeral character of events taking place over time and in interventions that were subject to natural changes, but at the same time, they were defined by the effort to leave a mark in the consciousness of the participants. Mediation of these events frequently occurred through a photographic record. The outcome was often not only a piece of documentation, but also a work with the visual and aesthetic qualities of the recorded image of nature.

Among the first actions responding to the urban landscape is the action by Vladimír Popovič, in which he released a large paper boat into the waters of the *Danube* river (*Launching the Boat*, 1965). Július Koller photographically recorded a tourist route in the *High Tatra* mountains in the *Orientations* action (from the *Anti-happening Games* series, 1967), Peter Bartoš in the 'walking' action *Scattering Raster in the Snow* (Bratislava, 1969) created a participatory situation on Hviezdoslavovo Square in the centre of Bratislava, where black peat mixed with white snow by the walking of randomly passing people. Many focal artistic events in nature are connected to the year 1970 – they were created under the influence of the fading, relaxed atmosphere of the sixties and before the emerging period of the Normalization. The art theorist Radislav Matuščík also named it the 'year of actions' (Matuščík 1995, 110). In 1970, Milan Adamčiak's *Water Music* took place in the swimming pool of the *Bernolák* hall of residence in Bratislava, the *Polymusical Space I* in the parks of Piešťany (curated by Lubor Kára), the collective events of Jana Želibská's *Betrothal of Spring* in Horné Orešany, *Activity in Sand and Mud* on *Danube* island by Peter Bartoš, *First Open Studio* in the house of Rudolf Sikora at 32 Tehelná Street in Bratislava, where Marián Mudroch presented an action with coloured smoke (*Pay Attention to the Chimney of the House*) and the trio Jakubík – Kordoš – Mudroch created objects – cans filled with air with the inscription 'unbreathable' (*Self-Service, Atmosphere* 1970). At the end of that year, the *Festival of Snow* initiated by Alex Mlynárčik, Miloš Urbásek, Milan Adamčiak and Róbert Cyprich took place in the High Tatras (as an accompanying event of the World Skiing Championship) and a call to respond to the Christmas season of Milan Adamčiak *Gaudium et Pax*, during which the photographically recorded

action of Rudolf Sikora *Out of the City*, realized in Zvolen (published on the cover of Klaus Groh's publication *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* in 1972), and the action *Snow on the Tree* by Dezider Tóth in Dolné Orešany verging on visual poetry (similar to the cycle *Nature Conservation*, from 1970) were created. Finally, many contributions to the theme of nature arose as a response to collective challenges and initiatives, which were an expression of the atmosphere of the times and mutual cohesion. Personal contacts and cooperations of artists standing outside the officially supported Socialist Realism gained their importance especially during the period of 'normalization.' They functioned as 'islands of positive deviation,' epicentres of free encounter, discussion and mutual work confrontation. In addition to apartments, studios and alternative exhibition and non-exhibition spaces, nature was a familiar and 'inconspicuous' meeting place. It represented not only an escape from the city and civilization, a 'Henri Rousseauian search for a lost paradise,' but also 'a form of protest signalling the danger that this civilization brings' (Šmejkal 1990, 16). In domestic conditions, the turning towards nature can be perceived as an indirect form of reaction to the political situation (Orišková 2002, 133), its effort to downplay and overlook serious environmental issues, as well as an escape from the suffocating atmosphere of non-freedom, which in nature lost its determining power.

In the aforementioned actions, it is possible to follow two lineages of approaches to nature, one aimed at participation and initiation of cooperation, and the other more introverted, in which the artist's solitude in nature plays its role and only an additional confrontation with the viewer, possible thanks to the mediation of (Conceptual) photography. Despite the fact that it was naturally also related to the more introverted personality of some artists (Michal Kern, Dezider Tóth, Peter Bartoš), in the seventies and eighties it prevailed in the majority of all artists forced to isolate themselves in studios by the regime. Let us mention larger events, gatherings, celebrations and rituals carried out in nature (Alex Mlynárčík, Jana Želibská, Artprospekt P.O.P.), individual events of observation of nature, its processes and phenomena (Peter Bartoš), introverted communication and intimate relationship with nature (Michal Kern, Dezider Tóth, Daniel Fischer) or reflections of ecological problems (Rudolf Sikora, Juraj Bartusz, Juraj Meliš). For some artists, nature was a permanent centre of interest, others confronted it rather occasionally, using its specific language and space to leave playful, poetic, peculiar or ironic messages (Július Koller, Ľubomír Ďurček, Milan Adamčiak, Miloš Urbásek, Otis Laubert, Vladimír Kordoš, Matej Krén, Marián Mudroch and others). Many artists, people living mostly in Bratislava, perceived the natural environment as a place of self-reflection, where they escaped from the alienated and grey environment of the city.

The seventies were characterized by the aforementioned move of artists into privacy or seclusion, and for some, nature actually became their studio. Michal Kern, who decided to work outside the artistic community of Bratislava, in the seclusion of the Liptov region, after his beginnings associated with Constructivism and the contemporary fascination with the 'second nature,' fully developed his artistic program in nature, to which he remained faithful throughout his life (the first action *Game of Dice* was carried out in 1975 and he devoted his work to creating intimate actions, but also reflecting local ecological themes until his premature death in 1975). Before the mid-seventies, Daniel Fischer also began to address the topic of nature, since the mid-eighties through paintings as mimics being created directly in nature. During this period, the joint activities of artists took the form of so-called 'albums,' which were created on various occasions (*Symposium I*, 1974; *Symposium II*, 1975; *Symposium III. In memoriam Miloš Laky*, 1976; *Czechoslovak Album '76* initiated by Ivo Janouško, presented at the *Biennial of Dissidents* in Venice in 1977; *Tribute to Kassák* initiated by Juraj Meliš in 1987), all containing collections of individual works by participating artists. The album *Symposium II* with a set of works by seventeen artists was 'frozen' at the request of Jozef Jankovič in response to external cultural and political pressures. Enclosed in a brass box, it was buried in the ground on January 1, 1975 in a still unknown location in the forest near Bratislava.

In 1980, Ján Budaj, an activist and member of the alternative scene in Bratislava (on this day the Secretary of Environment in Slovakia) planned to organize a collective event called *Three Sunny Days (3SD)* at the Medical Garden in Bratislava, which would present situations of contact with the visitor, respond to the environment of the city park with site-specific installations and actions calling for involvement. Due to 'top-down' intervention and the attention of the State Security, the seizure and destruction of newsletters, the event could not take place. In 1981, Július Koller initiated the creation of the fictional Conceptual *Ganek Gallery*, responding to the Tatra mountains plain and a popular climbers' destination with the same name, inviting fellow artists to respond. The collective Action art activities of the sixties and seventies were loosely followed up by the *Terrain* group initiated by Peter Meluzin, Radislav Matuščík and Július Koller (1982 until 1984). *Terrain's* aim was to explore and implement an action activity in nature or the 'terrain' in a predefined period of time, with the involvement of other invited colleagues, while '*it was not a parallel to the ecological movement or a neo-romantic alternative*' (Matuščík 2000, 13), nature was not a manifesto to them, but a familiar space, perceived in a broader cultural and social context. Nevertheless, within the framework of the *Terrains*, several significant contributions were made as part of the directions of individual artistic programs, such

as the action *First Snow, First Touch, First Footprint* by Michal Kern (1984). Body art contributions testing the limits of partakers were created by Artprospekt P.O.P. (Ladislav Pagáč, Viktor Oravec, Milan Pagáč), while the theorist Radislav Matuščík sees their starting point in endeavour and initiation compared to the notion of games as entertainment or festivities from the beginning of the 1970s (Matuščík 2000, 95).

After 1989, Land art was presented as part of exhibitions: *Umění akce* [Action Art] at Mánes exhibition space and at the Žilina Art Museum (1991, curated by Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro), *Naturally* in Budapest (1994, curated by Mária Orišková), *Výlomok* [Fraction] (1999, Bratislava City Gallery, curated by Radislav Matuščík), *Umenie akcie 1965-89* [Action Art 1965-89] (2006, Slovak National Gallery, curated by Zora Rusinová), *Z mesta von* [Out of the City] (2007, Bratislava City Gallery, curated by Daniela Čarná, and travelled to the Centre of Contemporary Art in Moscow in 2009), *Seno sláma řeřicha* [Hay, Straw, Cress] (2014, South Bohemian Gallery Jihlava, curated by Lenka Dolanová) a *ČS koncept 70. let* [Czechoslovak Conceptual Art of the 1970s] (2017, *Fait Gallery Brno*, curated by Beata Jablonská, Denisa Kujelová, Jana Písařiková).

From a non-artistic (scientific) point of view, the environmental issues were mapped out in the publication or almanac of the unofficial environmentalist movement called *Bratislava Aloud* (1987), which was organized by dozens of activists and conservationists (it was edited by Ján Budaj, Juraj Flamik, Fedor Gál, Eugen Gindl, Mikuláš Huba and Peter Tatár). *Bratislava Aloud* was symbolically published on June 4, 1987, one day before the International Day of the Conservation of Nature, and its publication and reporting in international media like the *Voice of America* resulted in persecution. It remains to be considered as one of the important milestones paving the way to the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

The artistic approaches to nature at the turn of the sixties and seventies were significantly anthropocentric, with an emphasis on the physical passage to different landscapes. Artists did not seek distant lands, but turned to familiar environments (garden, forest, meadow, lake, mountains, remnants of nature in the city or suburban civilization of the landscape). Rather, their works had the character of minimal interventions or completions of the natural environment, leaving more or less visible and temporary traces of their presence. But above all – and this is the most important point when entering nature – they created an authentic experience that photography could never fully convey. We may also recognize these entries as an invitation for defining our own attitude and dialogue with the environment in which we live. Despite the many reasons for concern, they are a call to halt and transform. For example, by simply accepting this invitation of Michal Kern written in his diary:



Touch a dewdrop with your finger and connect to miracle with purity. This is not a 'scientific' description or a discovery in nature. It's a guide to the experience I had when I invented this situation. To write a proposal for millions of people to touch the dew and live in harmony with the law of nature.

Perhaps it is naive or maybe it is prophetic. Everyone is welcome to verify on their own.

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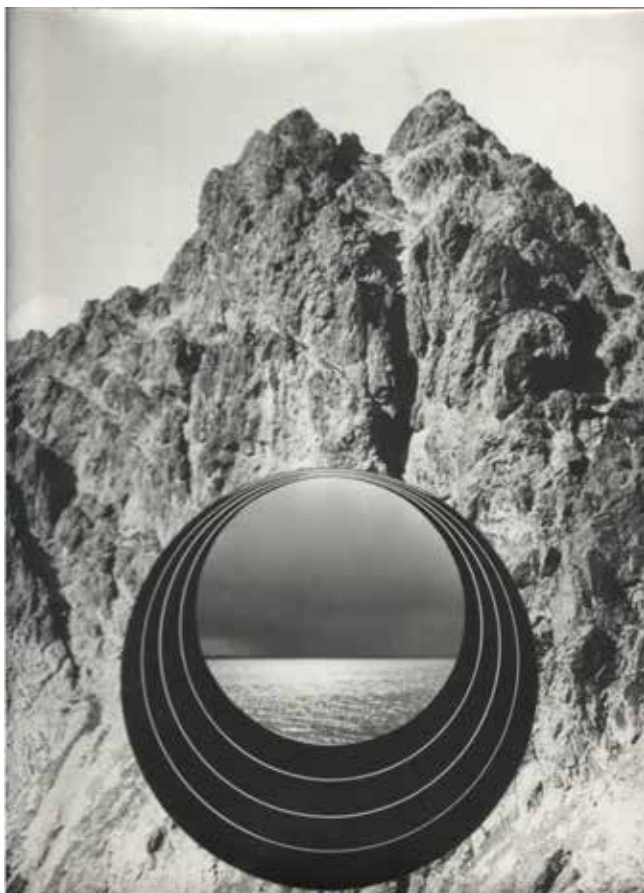
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1. Peter Bartoš, *Dispersion of Raster in the Snow*, Bratislava, 1969. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Archive of the artist

2. Michal Kern, *First Snow, First Touch, First Trace*, 1983. Collection of Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery in Liptovský Mikuláš. Photo: Archive of GPMB

3. Michal Kern, *Project for High Tatras (Let the Slovaks have a Sea)*, 1975. Artist's inheritance. Photo: Archive of the artist



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4. Rudolf Sikora, *Out of the City*, Zvolen, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

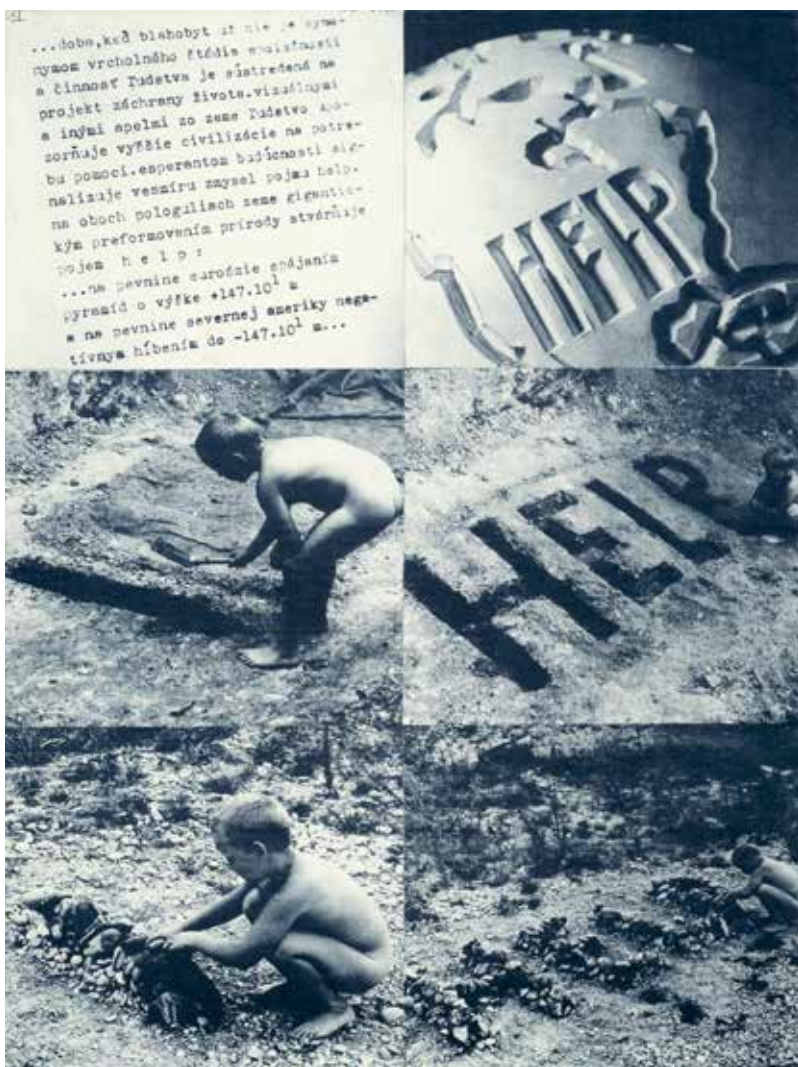
5. Miloš Urbásek, *Last Supper*, *Festival of Snow*, High Tatras, 1970. Estate of the Artist. Photo: Archive of the artist



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1. Juraj Meliš, *Planet Earth*. From the cycle *Help*, 1975. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
2. Jana Želibská, *Betrothal of Spring*, Dolné Orešany, 1970. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Archive of the artist
3. Juraj Meliš, *Help*, 1975-78. Courtesy of Ernest Zmetak Art Gallery in Nové Zámky. Photo: Archive of GUEZNZ



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1. Michal Kern, *Reflection*, 1978. Estate of the Artist. Photo: archive of the artist
2. Vladimír Popovič, *The Boat of Boats*, 1964. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG
3. Vladimír Popovič, *Floating a Paper Boat*, Bratislava, 1965. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Archive of the artist



*Artprospekt P.O.P.* (Viktor Oravec, Ladislav Pagáč, Milan Pagáč): *Cowering*, 1981.  
Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Archive of the artist

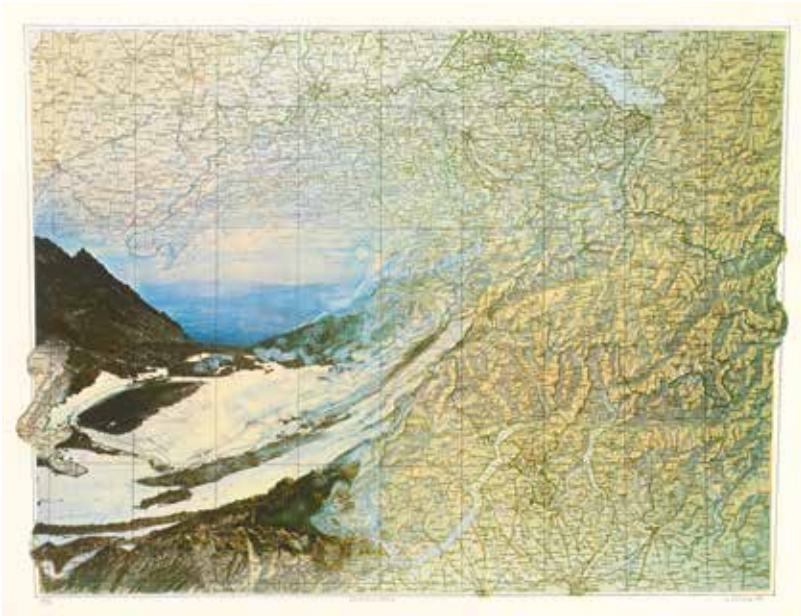




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1. Juraj Meliš, *Environment II. Forest of the Life – Target – Protected*, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

2. Dezider Tóth, *Snow on a Tree*, 1970. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery. Photo: Archive of SNG

3. Daniel Fischer, *Relativization*, 1981. Collection of the Slovak National Gallery



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# CONTRIBUTORS



## Štěpánka BIELESZOVÁ

A History of Art graduate of the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University in Olomouc (1990-1995). She has long devoted herself to the art of Central Europe after 1945, especially in such countries as Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. She was at the birth of the idea of the Central European Forum Olomouc.

Since 1995, she has been a curator of exhibition projects at the Olomouc Art Museum, and, since 2007, also as a curator of the photography collection. She participated in the publication of monographs by the Czech photographers Miloslav Stibor (2007) and Jaroslav Vávra (2011). She is the author of the publication *Civilised Illusion* presenting the Olomouc Art Museum's photographic collection concerning the development of Czech photography from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, expertly edited by her. Her work on several other photographic catalogues and exhibitions (*Michal Macků. Photographs*, carbon prints, glass gels, 2007; *Milena Valušková. Regardless of me*, 2007; *Michal Kalhous. Dobrý den pane sousede*, 2012) as well as on other projects (*Skleník. Chapters from the History of Olomouc Art Culture 1969-1989*, 2009; *Nechci v kleci. Czech and Slovak Art 1970-1989*, 2008) is also significant. Her collaborations include the Caesar Gallery in Olomouc (exhibition *Concrete and Raw. Tribute to Arsén Pohribný*, 2008) and Palacký University in Olomouc (*Adult Education and Training in the Field of Photography*, 2014). She also contributed to the *Czech Photography of the 20th Century* exhibition (Bonn 2009). With the photographer Jindřich Štreit, she has been realizing a series of exhibitions of budding photographers held at the Café Amadeus Gallery in the Archdiocese Museum in Olomouc since 2009. In 2016, in cooperation with prof. V. Birgus, she prepared an exhibition of modern Czech photography (*A Century of Avant-Garde and Off-Guard Photography*, Landskrona 2015; *Na pierwszy rzut oka. Wybór z czeskiej fotografii XX i XXI wieku / At First Sight. Selection from Czech Photography of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, Olomouc 2016), accompanied by an overview publication, for a foreign audience.



Ladislav DANĚK  
Olomouc Museum of Art

Art historian, art theorist and publicist, bibliographer, exhibition curator. In 1979, he graduated from the Department of Education of the Faculty of Arts, Palacký University in Olomouc, and, in 2009, from the Theory and History of Fine Arts Department of the Faculty of Arts of the same university.

From 1979 to 1990, he worked with various dissident artists.

Since 1990, he has been employed as a curator of exhibitions and the sub-collection of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century painting at the Museum of Art Olomouc - Museum of Modern Art and Central European Forum (SEFO), and temporarily worked as a curator of the sub-collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century drawing, photography, and artist's books of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which he has co-founded. He has initiated photo documentation of the Action art section as part of the photography sub-collection.

His professional work focuses primarily on the Moravian branch of the Czech visual art of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the contemporary art scene. As part of a long-term acquisition strategy, he has been involved in acquiring works by Czech, Slovak, and Polish artists, as well as Czech artists living in exile. He has contributed to more than one hundred monographic and collective exhibitions and is the author or co-author of more than ninety catalogues and professional publications.

Selected exhibitions and the accompanying publications he has contributed to:  
Between Tradition and Experiment. Works on and with Paper in Czech Art from 1939 to 1989 (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 1997; International Cultural Centre in Kraków, 2001).

*"Announcement of Icarus' Flight". The 1960s Olomouc Mirrored in Art Culture* (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 1998).

*Distant Closeness. Hungarian Post-war Art from the Collections of Szent István Király Múzeum in Székesfehérvár / Távoli közelség. A háború utáni magyar képzőművészet a Székesfehérvári Szent István Király Múzeum gyűjteményéből* (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

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*No Cage for Me! Czech and Slovak Art from the Collections of the Olomouc Museum of Art from 1970 to 1989* (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 2008).

*Greenhouse. Chapters from the History of Olomouc Art Culture from 1969 to 1989* (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 2009).

*From the Centre Out. Regional Art 1985-2010* (Gallery of West Bohemia in Pilsen, 2014; Kunsthalle Košice, 2015).

*Abstract Art. PL. Abstrakce v polské malbě 1945-2017 / Abstract Art in Polish Painting 1945-2017* (Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

Since 2013, he has co-authored the permanent exhibition *A Century of Relativity. Fine Art from 1900 to 2000 from the Collection of the Olomouc Museum of Art* (author of the second part of *Fine Art from 1947 to 2000*), Olomouc Museum of Art - Museum of Modern Art.

As an art critic, he regularly publishes in the art quarterly *Prostor Zlín* (the 'Představujeme' ('Introducing') column).



**Kata BALÁZS**  
acb ResearchLab, Budapest

An Art History, Hungarian Literature, and Linguistics graduate of ELTE Budapest currently working towards her PhD from the same university. A recipient of various scholarships from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the University of Florence, where she took part in the catalogizing project of Charles de Tolnay's archive and researched the early 20<sup>th</sup> century art focusing on Central European artists and theoreticians in Tuscany (2010-2013).

Apart from the periods spent at the Ludwig Museum as an assistant curator, assistant museologist, and editor / proof-reader, working as a junior researcher grantee at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2009-2012), or taking part in the SSE Heritage Project in the UK (2013), she taught at various schools and universities, e.g., the Belvárosi Tanoda Foundation School (2004-2008), the University of Film and Theatre (2008-2010), the Visart Art Academy (Ecole d'Art Maryse Eloy, 2008-2010), the University in Eger (2017-2019). She also ran courses at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (2014/2015) and the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church (2015/2016). She has been the president of AICA Hungary since 2023 and regularly writes for art journals, gets involved in educational projects and documentary films, and conducts in-depth interviews with artists.

Most recently, her paper was included in the journal *Miejscze* of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warszawa and her essay, co-written with Eszter Ágnes Szabó - in the volume *Art Breaks Free* published by OKiS Wrocław in 2020 (both in English). The latter followed the author's contribution to compiling and editing two special issues of the Hungarian art review *Artmagazin* focusing on the 1980s art. Since 2020, she has worked for acb ResearchLab in Budapest. In her work, a special focus is placed on the art of the 1980s, photography, Performance art, and textile/fibre art.



**Anna FORGÁCH**

A holder of Bachelor's degree in Art and Design Theory and Master's degree in Media Design (2022) from the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest. During her Bachelor's degree course, she spent one semester at HfG in Karlsruhe, where she specialised in exhibition design. She has gained experience as a project assistant at several galleries (e.g., acb Gallery, acb ResearchLab, CHB Berlin, and PSM Gallery Berlin). In 2022, she worked for the KÉPEZŐ Gallery focusing on education through art

which aroused her interest in logotherapy and art therapy. Consequently, she took up studies in Logotherapy and Existential Analysis which strongly support her diploma project.

In September 2022, she moved to Berlin where she is currently working as a photo and video assistant and is also involved in social art projects.



Photo by Annaróza Mészáros

## Róna KOPECZKY

acb ResearchLab, Budapest

She completed her PhD in Art History in 2013 at Sorbonne University with a dissertation that examined the activity of the Zugló Circle (1958-1968), a group of abstract artists in Hungary who considered abstraction as an ethical attitude and a form of artistic protest against the communist regime and Socialist Realism.

She worked as a curator for international art at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest from 2006 to 2015, where she mostly focused on the site- and situation-specific practices of young and mid-career artists from the Central Eastern European region, such as Katarzyna Kozyra, Société Réaliste, or Jasmina Cibic, and on the Conceptual practices of the older generation with retrospective exhibitions of Braco Dimitrijević and Agnes Denes.

In 2015, she joined acb Gallery in Budapest as artistic director. She also actively contributes to the publishing activity of acb ResearchLab with a focus on the Hungarian neo-avant-garde's forgotten, neglected, or ignored oeuvres. She participated in the organization of the first OFF-Biennále Budapest held in 2015 and was a member of the curatorial team for its second edition in autumn 2017. She is the co-founder of Easttopics, a platform and hub dedicated to contemporary art in Central Eastern Europe. She was also the curator of the Tallinn Print Triennial in 2022 in Tallinn, Estonia. In the framework of acb ResearchLab, she concentrates on the period between the end of the sixties to the beginning of the eighties, with a specific focus on painting and Conceptual art. She has contributed to the following books as editor and author, in both Hungarian and English, among others: *Klára Kuchta*, 2021; *Sándor Pinczehelyi*, 2020; *Burnt Geometry - Experiments in Enamel Art at the Bonyhád Factory (1968-1972)*, 2019. During her curatorship in Ludwig Museum Budapest, she contributed to the following volumes: *Judit Reigl: Emptiness and Ecstasy*, 2014; *Endre Rozsda: Time regained*, 2013; and *Braco Dimitrijević: Louvre is my Studio, Street is my Museum*, 2008.



## Zsóka LEPOSA

She studied Art History at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and holds a degree in German translation in the field of art history. Since 2017, she has pursued a PhD in Art History at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (Dissertation: *Abstraction Inside and Outside. Abstraction as an Official Language of Modernism under State Socialism*). She has worked in the art field since 2005, among others, as an editor at the Hungarian National Gallery, a project manager at the NGO tranzit.hu, and a curator and museologist at the Kiscell Museum – Municipal Gallery. She has curated several exhibitions and edited academic publications. Since 2019, she has been living in Iceland working as a project manager of the museum collection and curator at the LÁ Art Museum in Hveragerði in South Iceland.



## László SZÁZADOS

Museum of Fine Arts - Central European Research Institute for Art History (KEMKI), Budapest

An Art History and History graduate of the Faculty of Humanities of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest (1980-1986). From 1988 to 2020, he held the position of Chief Museologist of the Contemporary Collection at the Hungarian National Gallery (HNG) and has been employed as Chief Museologist of the KEMKI

Archive and Documentation Centre since 2021.

Since 1997, he has been an editor of the *Balkon* contemporary art magazine published in Budapest.

He has been a member of the Hungarian Section of AICA since 1999. He has organised and contributed to the permanent exhibition at HNG and several monographic exhibitions:

*Tibor Csiky*, HNG, 1994; *Péter Donáth*, King St. Stephen Museum, Székesfehérvár, 1998 [with Edit Sasvári].

*El Kazovszkij*, HNG, 2015 [with András Rényi, Krisztina Jerger]; *Péter Türlk*, Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2018.

Temporary thematic exhibitions:

*Plastica Dreams*, Kunsthalle, Budapest, 2003 [with József Készman].

*A New Refutation of Time*, 2008.

*World Models*, HNG, 2012.

*Dada and Surrealism / Rearranged Reality*. HNG, 2014 [with Mariann Gergely, Mónika Kumin, Marianna Kolosváry].

*1971 / Parallel Non-synchronism*, BHM Municipal Gallery - Kiscell Museum, Budapest, 2018 [with Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, Enikő Róka, Zsóka Leposa];

*THE SPACE - Alternative Cosmoses*, m21 Gallery, Pécs, 2022.

He is also the author and editor of the accompanying catalogue publications. His fields of research include Hungarian art and institutional history in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Hungarian contemporary art including interdisciplinary areas such as dance and movement art.

More recently, together with Zsóka Leposa, he studied the relationship between the Icelandic art scene and the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in the 1970s (*Are You Glad If You Can Ask Something? Networking between East and North*, LÁ Art Museum, Hveragerði, 2022) as well as researched the history of the symposium movement in Hungary with Kata Balázs.



PL



### Łukasz GUZEK

professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk

In his work, he combines research in the field of art history with art criticism and curatorial practice.

His research interests include the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, in particular, the 1970s art, including Conceptual art, Performance art, Installation art, the breakthrough of modernism/postmodernism in the visual arts, as well as documentation of art understood both as a problem of

art theory and as a practice of archiving, retention, conservation, and care of contemporary forms of ephemeral artworks. His recent research has related to the area of performance studies, while the current research project concerns contemporary art in Central Europe. His methodological interests concern research on ephemeral art, time-based, site-specific, contextual art (contextual methodologies), and art institution. In art criticism, he addresses practical issues (workshop topics) as well as methodological approaches in teaching art criticism. He is a member of AICA (Polish section).

Since 2009, he has acted as the editor-in-chief of the scholarly journal *Art and Documentation* ([www.journal.doc.art.pl](http://www.journal.doc.art.pl)), published by the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk.

Books (in Polish):

*Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji w Polsce* (Reconstruction of Action Art in Poland). Warszawa, Toruń: Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata, Wydawnictwo Tako, 2017.

*Performatyzacja sztuki. Sztuka performance i czynnik akcji w polskiej krytyce sztuki* (Performatization of Art. Performance Art and the Action Factor in Polish Art Criticism). Gdańsk: ASP w Gdańsku, 2013.

*Sztuka instalacji. Zagadnienie związku przestrzeni i obecności w sztuce współczesnej* (Installation Art. The Question of Relationship Between Space and Presence in Contemporary Art). Warszawa: Neriton, IH PAN, 2007.



### Agnieszka KULAZIŃSKA

Centre for Contemporary Art ŁAŻNIA in Gdańsk

A holder of MA in Art History from University of Łódź (2002). She started as a curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art Łaźnia in Gdańsk in 2007, and since 2013 she has worked as the chief curator. Since 2008, she has carried out the project *Cities on the Edge* presenting artists from South America and Palestine, among others. A curator of international projects including an exhibition and projects in public space in the framework of the Liverpool Biennial

(*Under the Bridge*, 2009, *Unwanted Visitor*, 2012) and exhibitions of Polish artists in Berlin and Madrid (*YPA on tour*, 2011). She has coordinated and curated such international projects as *Heroes we Love* (topic: the heritage of the Social Realism art in the post-communist countries) or *Studiotopia. Art, Science and Anthropocene* (topics: art and science, Anthropocene), as well as numerous individual and group

exhibitions. As an art critic, she has cooperated with such Polish art magazines as *Exit. Nowa Sztuka W Polsce (Exit. New art in Poland)*, *Artluk*, *Format*, or *Kwartalnik Rzeźby OROŃSKO (OROŃSKO Sculpture Quarterly)*. In 2010-15, she was a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. She is mainly interested in social impact of art and social reception of contemporary art.



### Paweł LESZKOWICZ

professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań,  
Department of Art History

An academic lecturer and a freelance curator specialising in international contemporary art and curatorial and LGBTQ studies. He is the author of the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* (2010) at the National Museum in Warsaw and numerous queer exhibitions and symposia in Poland and the UK.

He was a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the University of Sussex in Brighton (2011-2014), Senior Fulbright Research Fellow at One Gay and Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries in Los Angeles (2015-2016), and the EU EURIAS Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2016-2017).

Books (in Polish):

*Helen Chadwick. Ikonografia podmiotowości (Helen Chadwick: The Iconography of Subjectivity)*. Kraków: Aureus, 2001.

*Miłość i demokracja. Rozważania o kwestii homoseksualnej w Polsce (Love and Democracy: Reflections on the Queer Question in Poland)*. Kraków: Aureus, 2005. (with Tomasz Kitliński)

*Art pride. Polska sztuka gejowska (Art Pride: Gay Art from Poland)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Abiekt.pl, 2010.

*Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku (The Naked Man: The Male Nude in post-1945 Polish Art)*. Poznań: UAM Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2012.



## Vladimíra BÜNGEROVÁ

A History of Art graduate of the University of Trnava (1995–2000). She focuses on history, theory and criticism of contemporary art, applied arts, and design. She has organised several exhibitions at the Museum of Art in Žilina, the Nitra Gallery in Nitra, the City Gallery in Rimavská Sobota, the Cyprian Majerník Gallery in Bratislava, and the Small Carpathian Museum in Pezinok, where she worked as the curator of the Collection of Fine

Art and Crafts from 2000 to 2005. In 2003–2005, she also worked for the collection of the First Slovak Investment Group. In 2007–2009, she was a curator of the Collection of Arts and Crafts and Design (glass, design), and since 2010, she has been employed as the curator of Collections of Modern and Contemporary Plastic Art at the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.



## Daniela ČARNÁ

She holds a degree in History of Art from the Faculty of Philosophy of the Comenius University in Bratislava (1997–2001) and PhD from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University at Trnava (2010). She is a curator and gallery educator, a member of the Slovak section of AICA. Her areas of expertise are the 1970s and 1980s unofficial art scene, Christian reflection in art, the interaction between

art and child creativity, and art education. She has curated dozens of exhibitions: *Out of the City*, Bratislava City Gallery, 2007; *Mapy/Maps*, Bratislava City Gallery and Slovak National Gallery, 2011; *Michal Kern*, Bratislava City Gallery, 2012; *First Open Studio*, Gallery 19, Bratislava, 2020; *Apartment Exhibitions*, Ernest Zmeták Art Gallery in Nové Zámky, 2022. She established educational departments at the Bratislava City Gallery and the Kunsthalle Bratislava and implemented the nationwide school programme *Art Close Up* (Bratislava City Gallery, 2006–2021) as well as the project *Children as Art Mediators* (Kunsthalle Bratislava, 2017–2021), honoured with the White Cube award. Currently, she works for the Ernest Zmeták Art Gallery in Nové Zámky and the Slovak Radio Gallery in Bratislava.

Books (in Slovak/ English):

*Z mesta von / Out of the City*. Bratislava: Bratislava City Gallery, 2007.

*Igor Kalný*. Prešov: Vydavateľstvo M. Vaška, 2008. (with Jiří Valoch)

*Michal Kern*. Bratislava: Bratislava City Gallery, 2011.

*Mapy/Maps. Art Cartography in the Centre of Europe 1960 - 2011*. Bratislava: Bratislava City Gallery and Slovak National Gallery, 2011. (with Lucia Gregorová)

*Igor Minárik*. Bratislava: Petrus, 2021.

*Ladislav Čarný*. Bratislava: Kruh súčasného umenia Profil, 2022. (with Jana Geržová, and Juraj Čarný)



## Ján KRALOVIČ

A History of Art graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Trnava. In his historical, critical, and curatorial work, he specialises in various aspects of contemporary art. In 2012-2016, he conducted research at the Department of Visual and Cultural Studies of the Research Centre of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, where he currently teaches at the Department of Theory and History of Art. He lectures on the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Slovak art and new media and conducts seminars on the theory and interpretation of works of art. In his current research, he also deals with the issue of visual book forms. He regularly publishes reviews and studies in journals (*Jazdec*, *Ostium*, *FlashArt*, *artalk.cz*, *Profil súčasného umenia*, *Vlna*, etc.).

### Books (in Slovak):

*Teritórium ulica: Umenie akcie v mestskom priestore v rokoch 1965 – 1989 na Slovensku (The Territory of the Street: Action Art in Urban Space from 1965 to 1989 in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: Slovart, Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, 2015.

*Majstrovstvo za dverami: Majstrovstvá Bratislavy v posune artefaktu v kontexte bytových umeleckých stretnutí v 70. a 80. rokoch 20. storočia (Championship Behind Door: Bratislava Championships in the Shift of Artefact 1979-1986 in the Context of Home Exhibitions of 1970s and 1980s)*. Bratislava: Slovart, Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, 2017. A monograph on the exhibitions held in homes and the activities in the 'normalization' period.



*Bridge Over Time.*  
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