

Paradoxical Dissidence
Klara Kemp-Welch

In the 1970s, Július Koller's work had seemed, to the younger Jiří Kovanda, 'absolutely incomprehensible'. What is more, it appeared 'almost embarrassing'. Kovanda asked: 'UFO – 'Universal Futurological Orientation'. Was he crazy? What was he on about?'. From today's post-Soviet perspective though, it seems that both artists were engaging with similar concerns, as Kovanda himself recently acknowledged. But we should not lose sight of the subtleties of the relationship between experimental artistic activity and the socio-political context of Czechoslovakia after 1968.

For what Koller and Kovanda's work of the repressive 'normalisation' period seems to me to share, above all, is a deliberately nuanced, indirect, engagement with this political situation. Each artist was committed to testing the possibilities for operating as a cultural agent, and each in equally abnormal conditions. Each, independently invented his own sequence of exercises through which to analyse relationships and to initiate new encounters: in Bratislava, Koller set in motion 'Univer-



Július Koller
Demonstrative Cultural Situation 1., 2. (U.F.O.)
1989
two black and white photographs on paper
30 x 40 cm each/ framed 31,5 x 42 cm each
courtesy gb agency, Paris and Július Koller
Society, Bratislava

Po-Krik (U.F.O.)
1983
black and white photograph on paper
60 x 40 cm/ framed 62,5 x 42,5 cm
courtesy gb agency, Paris and Július Koller
Society, Bratislava

sal Cultural-Futurological Operations' potentially destined for external participants; in Prague, Kovanda pursued physical contact with a non-existent, secondary audience. Koller and his grandson would defy gravity, standing with their arms outstretched in a playground on the outskirts of town, imagining they were flying into outer-space; Kovanda would hang around in the old town trying to overcome his inherent shyness and chat up a passing girl. Neither of them were willing to accept the finality of limitations.

Irrespective of Koller's heavily criticised activity as an 'academic painter' (an epitaph he ironically applied to his name after being expelled, without explanation, from the Association of Fine Artists in 1973), and irrespective of Kovanda's obvious reticence in comparison with the more overtly political practices of contemporaries such as Petr Štembera and Jan Mlcoch, I propose their actions in relation to theories of political dissidence. Paradoxically, it seems that it may be precisely by virtue of such contradictions that Koller and Kovanda's activities were structurally analogous, if rather differently inflected, to the political stance embodied with such moral force by the figure of the dissident playwright Václav Havel. Inspirational political activist and theorist and author of important plays distributed in Samizdat, signatory of Charter '77 and co-founder of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted, Havel found himself under constant government surveillance and served a series of prison sentences. His commitment to non-violent resistance was to bear fruit when he became the last President of Czechoslovakia in 1989 following the Velvet Revolution, and then continued his Presidency for a further decade as head of the new Czech Republic from 1993-2003.

Writing after his release from a four and a half-year prison sentence in 1984, Havel offered important insights into what he described as the 'the 'naturally mad' world of the dissident.



Installation view of the exhibition with works of Július Koller and drawings by The Steins after Stanislaw Lem
on view July 7-10, 2009 at Ludlow 38

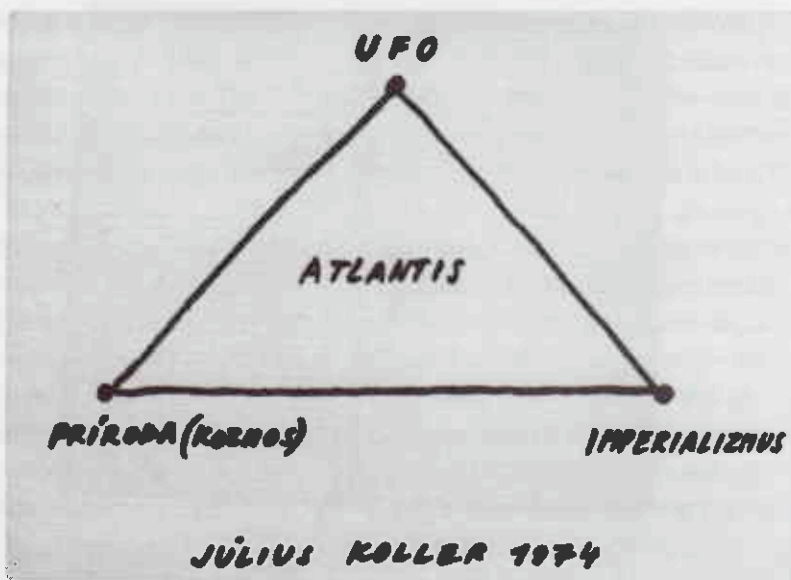
His characterisation of this world runs: 'It is meaningful because, within its limits, it is consistent. It is tactical because it does not let itself be guided by tactical considerations. It is political because it does not play politics. It is concrete, real, effective – not in spite of its madness but because of it. To be sure, it is also this because there is something honest about this 'madness', it is faithful to itself, it is whole and undivided. This may be a world of dreams and of the ideal, but it is not the world of utopia'.

The point is not that artists Koller and Kovanda ought to be re-categorised as dissidents, but rather, that there were many ways of 'living in truth'. Civil society was gradually re-born and activists took the Helsinki agreements of 1975 as a basis for articulating the demands of Charter '77. For his part, J.K. UFO-naut painted question marks and raked the ground into craters at his Pravda Compound tennis court. Unbeknownst to passers-by, Jiri Kovanda turned everyday actions such as scratching his chin and crossing his legs into invisible theatre, and photographed himself smiling, waiting for the phone to ring. Operating in 'the world of dreams and of the ideal' was an important element in their work.

How is it, then, that their activities never quite seem ridiculous? Havel's answer would be that the dreamer only becomes ludicrous when he begins to play at tactics, for it is only then that he finds himself 'outside the credibility of power and outside the credibility of truth'. And although they played many games, neither Koller nor Kovanda played at tactics.

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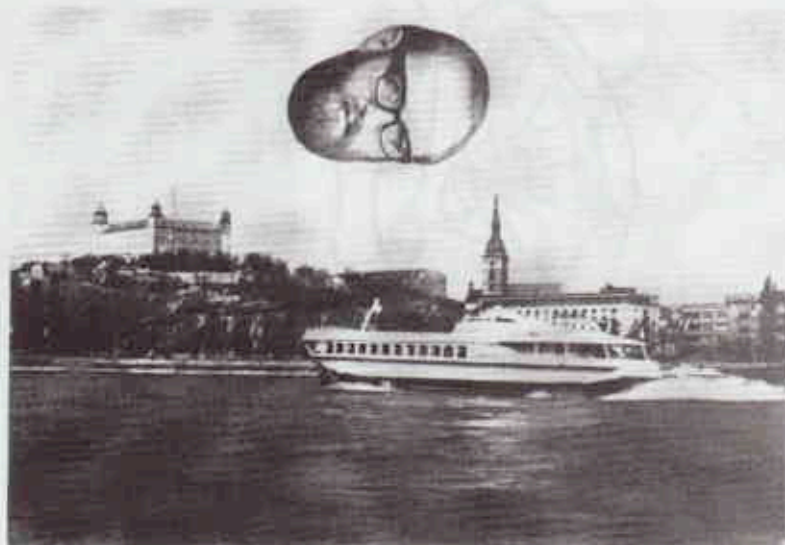
She is completing a book titled: Not Playing Politics. Six Post-Totalitarian Artists 1965-1989



Juliús Koller
Diabolic Triangle (UFO); UFO, Nature (Cosmos), Imperialism, 1974



Univerzálny Futurologický Objekt, 1978
Universal Futurological Object, 1978



Univerzálny Futurologická Orientácia, 1971
Universal Futurological Orientation, 1971