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Július Koller

U.F.O. - NAUT J.K.?

Museum Of Avant-Garde, Zagreb
Marinko Sudac Collection

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BIOGRAPHY:

Július Koller (Piestany, 1939 — Bratislava, 2007)

Koller graduated at the Academy of Arts and Design in Bratislava in 1965, under Dezider Milly, Orest Dubay, and Ján Želibský. Alongside his work in painting/anti-painting he created sculptures/anti-sculptures and anti-happenings in the spirit of Dada and Fluxus, and was also involved in pedagogical work. He is one of the most important protagonists of Neo-Avant-Garde art scene in Slovakia. From the mid-1960s he engaged in collecting objects of cultural significance and collective consciousness, of articles, art books, books on space explorations, UFO-fever, on ancient civilizations etc. He also engaged in amateur documentation, photography, and scrap-booking the documentation and notes on his life. In this period he created a series of anti-paintings and objects as a critique of the “modernist cult of painting and object.” His continual photographic series U.F.O.-naut started in 1970. He was expelled from the Artists’ Society in 1972 because of his untraditional and anti-academic activities (anti-happenings, mail-art). With a few of like-minded friends, in 1980 he founded a fictitious Ganek Gallery on the highest point of the High Tatras, focused on the exploration of cosmos-humanist culture. In the 1990s he founded the New Seriousness art society. He exhibited on many group and solo exhibitions in Slovakia and abroad. After the artist’s works were donated to the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, the Gallery hosted a posthumous retrospective exhibition in 2010 titled *Július Koller Science-Fiction Retrospective*. His works can be found in many notable public and private collections and museums, as well as many other European galleries and private collections.

The Marinko Sudac Collection, based in Zagreb, is a regionally unique collection of Avant-Garde art created in Europe and beyond in the period from 1914 until 1989, or until the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well similar unconventional forms of artistic practices of the period. The Collection encompasses paintings, graphics, drawings, photographs, experimental, documentary, and animated films, sculptures, objects, and ambients. It also includes extensive archives, entire artists' oeuvres, and similar unconventional, often unofficial and margin-alized artistic practices. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, which also marked a symbolic fall of the border between the East and the West, in the 1990s there was an increased interest of the West for the artistic tendencies in the countries behind the what was known as the Iron Curtain. In this context, the transfer of the Marinko Sudac Collection to the sphere of the Virtual Museum of Avant-Garde created an interdisciplinary platform focused on collecting, researching and revalorizing, securing archiving standards appropriate for the material, presenting and mediating the phenomenon of the Avant-Garde. This year, the Museum of Avant-Garde is represented with the artist Július Koller (Piestany, 1939 — Bratislava, 2007) who, with Stano Filko and Rudolf Sikora, is one of the pioneers of Czechoslovakian Conceptual art and one of the radical protagonist of the Neo-Avant-Garde scene of the 1960s and 1970s, which is the time of the political repression in the then Czechoslovakia.

Soon after the Prague Spring in 1968, all “experimental” (conceptual) artists were forbidden to show in Czechoslovakian public galleries and they were dismissed from the Artists' Society due to “cultural-political reasons”, and almost all attempts to exhibit outside of Czechoslovakian borders were sabotaged by the state apparatus. The atmosphere of the totalitarian control made them work in collectives and use subversive forms of activity in alternative spaces - to organize exhibitions and meet in ateliers and artists' apartments, to do actions and made manifestos, to create mail-art, posters as a form of an exhibition, land-art and site-specific situations or situa-

tional dramas, as well as to organize fictitious galleries. In the turbulent time of the so-called Czechoslovakian normalisation, the artists engaged in the critique of the officially accepted “modernist painting” and the critique of the system of power, as well as fundamental problems of how man and civilization were created, the questions of cosmology, ecology, the esoteric, astronomy, and philosophy. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava in 1965, Július Koller painted the so-called anti-paintings, tautologically titled, with which he wanted to redefine the idea of the artist medium. The only motifs on these paintings are the repeating words OBRAZOBRAZOBRAZ (painting on Czech), put on a monochrome background, sometimes covering the entire surface of the painting. Another series of works are paintings with the question mark motif “????????” (“otaznik” on Czech), which he put not only on paintings, but also on various objects, and some everyday items. At the same time, Koller created the anti-happening manifesto, a term which is defined not as an action but a *call for thought*, which can be done as mail-art, as is the case in the series of anti-invites/invites titled ILLUSIONISMUS or ŠOKIALISMUS. In the early 1970s, he started his series of photographic anti-happenings titled **U.F.O.-naut** (Universal Cultural Futurological Operations), as a continuation of his “cosmos-humanist cultural situations” in the time of great public interest in space explorations and the scientific rivalry of the USSR and the USA. Koller was especially interested in the 1968 pseudo-scientific book *Chariots of the Gods?* by the Swiss author Erich von Däniken. The chapters of the book, titled as the contemporary SF psychoses, for example, *Are There Intelligent Beings in Space?* or *A Quest for Direct Communication?* ignited his imagination. On these early black-and-white photographs there is the artist's figure, his alter ego of the U.F.O.-naut, being involved in everyday prosaic tasks in mundane spaces, with the goal of achieving a dialogue *with other intelligent beings outside of the Czechoslovakian reality*. In his words, to have two identities was the only way to make peace with

such “discrepancy between the (political) Utopia and the everyday life.” That photographic experiment will mark his entire artistic career, and examples of it, from the Museum of Avant-Garde's collection, are presented here. The series of photographs bears variants of the U.F.O. name (U.-Universal, Utopian; F.- Futurological, Functional, Fictional; O.-Operations, Occupation, ect), usually followed by *invitations to communicate*, hand-written or as messages created using a green stamp. With the various combinations of the U.F.O. name, the invitations or text-card, again, have the question mark (?) motif. While the question mark was used to show his “critical thinking and attitude towards the situation in the...state”, the “conceptual anti-happening information on new subjectively-objective realities, illusion, permanent mystification, shockism” are explained by the artist as “reactions on the tumultuous situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968.” His anti-happenings were almost always performed on tennis courts or the street, but outside of the public's eye. They were undetectable, and did not cause the authorities' reaction. They had only one witness, a photographer, whose role was to document them. The author of these photographic performances in most cases was his life companion, his wife Kveta Fulierová. In March of 1970 he will swap the street with the space of the independent Youth Gallery (“Galerija Mladyh”) where he, *instead of an exhibition*, organized a ping-pong tournament (*J.K. Ping-Pong Club*, 1970) on which visitors had the chance to play and *communicate* with the artist, which can be seen on the poster made for the event. Critics are familiar with the series of U.F.O.-naut self-portraits, made in the same period, which was dedicated to the mindless search for the ping-pong ball. All seven black-and-white photographs that are exhibited show the famous Koller humour mixed with the absurdity of the situation he is in.

On one, he is shown with the balls tucked to his glasses, making him look as an *alien*. The artist's preoccupation with the need to communicate with other beings, beings from another planet, or, outside of the closed Iron Curtain of the Eastern bloc, reached climax in the founding

of a fictitious U.F.O.-Gallery Ganek (1971 - 1989), a gallery on the highest point of the High Tatras, an alternative space for artistic work. There, he spent time with like-minded individuals such as Stano Filko, Alex Mlynarčík, and Rudolf Sikora, with whom he made many collective works as fictitious actions, projects and exhibitions. Much like all Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde art, Koller's art can too be characterized as utopian, since he wanted to connect art, in this case imagination, with real life. In his anti-happenings, as well as his entire anti-career, you can see Dadaist influences and the influence of Fluxus events, as well as with the Situationist Internationale movement, as a reaction not only to the political situation, but also to the dominant modernized world in which he felt as an alien.

Ivana Janković, September the 15th 2015

