Central European Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism

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DECLARATION

I, Maja Fowkes confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the question of how the natural environment figured in the neo-avant-garde practices of the generation of artists who around 1970 started to engage with the subject across the socialist states of Central Europe, where various degrees of communist control over society influenced not only artistic production, but also limited access to information about the state of the environment and ecological discourse. The study examines a historical period influenced by the aftermath of the social and political upheavals of 1968, one where art entered the natural environment and engaged with environmental problems, which corresponded to the moment when ecological crisis was first registered on a planetary scale. Individual chapters devote attention to detailed examination of the practices of the Pécs Workshop from Hungary, the OHO group from Slovenia, TOK from Croatia, Rudolf Sikora from Slovakia and Czech artist Petr Štembera, each of whom developed distinctive approaches to the environment through the investigation of process-based works, land art, public art, conceptual practices or performances, motivated by the neo-avant-garde tendency to dematerialise the art object. By focusing on their diverse approaches to the environment, which included engaging with the problems of ecological crisis, raising environmental awareness among socialist citizens, and exploring non-anthropocentric positions and cosmic perspectives, this comparative study analyses their practices in light of specific socio-political and environmental circumstances, and reveals the complexity of art history as a discipline under socialism. Working from specific positions and with different artistic affinities, the artists considered here articulated a cosmopolitan voice which commented on the nationalist trespassing of nature, and the communist denial of the environmental crisis, and spoke about a burgeoning ecological imperative that spanned the globe and could not be confined within any imposed borders.

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Introduction

The beginnings of modern environmental awareness crystallised around the middle of the nineteenth century, when the effects of the alteration of the natural environment caused by the rapid pace of industrialisation and the modernising force of the capitalist economy became increasingly visible. 'Man is everywhere a disturbing agent,' wrote George Perkins Marsh in one of the earliest comprehensive studies of environmental history entitled *Man and Nature* from 1864, in which he determined that wherever man 'plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discord.'[1] When French landscape painter Théodore Rousseau strolled around the woods, marshes and meadows in the vicinity of the village of Barbizon, he also observed the inextricable links between the conditions of the trees and the manmade changes to Fontainebleau forest. At that time, Fontainebleau was indeed not only a favourite subject for landscape painters, but had become an ideal leisure destination for escape from the strains of modern city life of nearby Paris, while its timber was extensively used as an economic resource.[2]

In 1852 Rousseau wrote a petition to Napoleon III in which he declared that 'the artists especially decried the systematic felling, clear-cuts, and unintelligent [pine] plantations that were made at Fontainebleau' and appealed for 'the places that are the subject of study for artists, recognised models for compositions and paintings, [to] be placed beyond the reach of the forest administration that runs them poorly.'[3] As a result an official report into the administration of the forest was prepared the following year, which among other managerial measures, also recommended the protection of certain areas that were particularly specified in the artists' petition, which should be 'left unmanaged'. The artist's plea and the response he received had as a consequence 'the birth of modern conservation' which, as art historian Greg Thomas stated, 'unfolded from a painter's determination to save his sacred studio.'[4] The significance of this artist's act did not go unnoticed when in 1971 a major Croatian art magazine *Život umjetnosti*

[1] George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, ed. David Lowenthal (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2003), 36.
[2] See: Steven Adams, *The Barbizon School and the Origins of Impressionism* (London: Phaidon, 1994), 157.
[3] Petition to Napoleon III as reprinted in: Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 214-217.
[4] Ibid., 172. It was only in 1972 a text entitled 'Should Trees Have Standing?' was published, which is now considered seminal in discussion of the 'legal rights of natural things'. See: Christopher D. Stone (1972), 'Should Trees have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects,' as reprinted in *Thinking Through the Environment*, ed. Mark J. Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 211-223.

devoted a special issue to the trendy theme of 'Humans and their environment', reporting that 'the first, although partial, measure of protection of nature in modern sense could be considered the protection of woods of the Fontainebleau initiated by a group of painters'.[5]

Since Rousseau's appeal, artistic involvement with ecology has corresponded to the intensity of the perceived immanence of ecological crisis and changing assessments of how acute the human impact on the environment really is, oscillating sharply as occasional eruptions of such awareness are promptly surpassed by the seemingly unchallengeable priority of social, political or economic imperatives. At present, although one can still feel the reverberations from the fervent artistic activities that preceded and accompanied the Copenhagen UN Summit on Climate Change in 2009, the sense of urgency around the environmental agenda has weakened again due to the failure of the summit to reach a binding agreement on cuts of CO_2 emissions and especially under the pressure of the global financial crisis.[6]

'The earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations' wrote Felix Guattari in 1989 and warned that if 'no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface.'[7] This was also the period when 'popular dissatisfaction with polluted and unsafe environments' in Eastern Europe became one of the main factors in triggering the 'political unrest that brought down communist regimes,'[8] in one of the rare instances when ecological and political agendas have coincided. The changes brought by 1989 entailed the restructuring of world divides no longer on the Cold War axis of East and West but rather along the fault lines between an economically differentiated North and South, while 'sustainable development' was introduced as a novel credo soon only to serve as a strategy for assimilation of ecology within neo-liberal capitalism.[9]

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[5] Dragutin Alfier, 'Proces internacionalizacije problematike i politike zaštite prirode,' [Process of internalisation of problematic and politics of protection of nature] *Život umjetnosti* (Zagreb) 15-16 (1971): 34. [My translation]

[6] See for example catalogues of exhibitions: Anne Sophie Witzke and Sune Hede, eds., *Rethink: Contemporary Art & Climate Change* (Arhus: Alexandra Institute, 2009); Franceso Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds., *Radical Nature – Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2009).

[7] Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Continuum, 2000), 27. The publication first appeared in French in 1989.

[8] Petr Pavlínek and John Pickles, *Environmental Transitions: Transformation and Ecological Defence in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

[9] For some notable artistic projects realised for the 1992 UN Summit on sustainable development held in Rio see: Jeffery Kastner and Brian Wallis, eds., *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998). On

Another period of intensive interaction between art and ecology culminated around 1968, coinciding with the formation of contemporary environmentalism and the emergence of neo-avant-garde art practice, before ecological concern became secondary to 'the worries about an energy crisis' that loomed shortly after the first UN summit on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972.[10] From that period date many of the outstanding artistic projects from around the globe which problematised the relationship to environment, while those that took place in Central Europe are the focus of this study. This research is thus concerned with the question of how environment figured in the neo-avant-garde practice of the young generation of artists who around 1970 started to engage with the subject across the socialist states of Central Europe, in which various degrees of communist control over society influenced not only artistic production, but also access to information about the state of the environment and ecological discourse.

Instead of attempting to map all the activities that took place in the natural environment or make a survey of artistic practice that referenced it, a priority here has been to establish an ensemble of the most remarkable engagements with the natural environment. Geographically this research covers artistic practices from three historic states of Central Europe: Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which until the end of communism shared a common socialist system. Attention in individual chapters is devoted to analysis of the group of Pécs Workshop from Hungary, OHO group from Slovenia, group TOK from Croatia, Rudolf Sikora from Slovakia and Czech artist Petr Štembera, indicating not only the significant differences that existed in social, political and cultural policies between socialist states, but also the diversity of the art scenes of particular federative republics. By focusing on the distinctive approaches to the environment that these artists developed as part of their practices, and which have generally not yet been highlighted from that perspective, this comparative study examines them in light of specific socio-political and environmental circumstances in the states of real existing socialism. Furthermore, the particular environmental references towards which the artists oriented their work, ranging from counterculture to science, from cosmology to phenomenology, each with their own distinctive qualities formulated in the shadow of Iron Curtain, are also closely considered.

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ecology and the fall of communism in Eastern European art, see: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'The Ecology of Post-Socialism and the Implications of Sustainability for Contemporary Art,' in *Art and Theory after Socialism*, eds. Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles (Bristol: Intellect, 2008), 101-111.

[10] Shepard Krech, John McNeil and Carolyn Merchant, eds., *Encyclopaedia of World Environmental History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 477.

Due to the ephemeral nature of artistic practices examined here and the dematerialised character of Central European neo-avant-garde art in general, this research has relied on extensive analysis of photographic records of their activities and assessment of the abundance of documentation and artist writings located in published sources as well as numerous archives where I undertook research between 2008 and 2011. In addition, it has entailed comprehensive consideration of both official and un-official published art press and the exhibition catalogues from the period, although approached with caution as they were often the subject of state control and self-censorship, while at the same time information published abroad is also reflected upon and brought together with the local sources. In order to approach these sources, I have investigated and drawn on otherwise unpublished written materials, photographic documents, printed matter and other ephemera found in private and public archives, such as Artpool in Budapest, which has opened up new perspectives on the artwork that forms the central subject of this thesis. Numerous conversations and in depth interviews with the artists and art historians from the neo-avant-garde as well as new scholars, conducted on research trips to the region between 2008 and 2011, have brought further insights in addition to critical analysis of up to date scholarship on East European art under socialism. Uncovering the environmental history of the region and ecological discourse, which entailed a similar attitude in gathering information, is also placed in a comparative perspective.

Before engaging further with these issues, it is important to clarify the notion of environment and its relation to the concept of nature - 'perhaps the most complex word in the language', as Raymond Williams put it in his 1976 book of *Keywords*.[11] The traditional understanding of nature as that which 'has not been modified by human hand', 'is independent of us', or is 'neither human in itself nor in its origins', has been subject to criticism by both critical theory and ecology.[12] At the present time of worldwide internet coverage and Google Earth devices, it is evident that there are no places left on the planet which are unmodified or independent of human presence, although the ideas of the 'death of nature' and the 'end of nature' were already expressed around 1989, when the effects of manmade changes to the patterns of the weather became apparent. In *The End of Nature* which is now considered the first popular book on global warming, environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote: 'We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we

[11] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 219.
[12] Neil Levy, 'Foucault's Unnatural Ecology,' in *Discourses of the Environment*, ed. Eric Darier (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 210.

are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning.'[13]

Clarifying the difference between nature and environment, social theorist and author on global warming Anthony Giddens explicated that although 'environment seems to be no more than an independent parameter of human existence' it is actually its opposite: 'nature as thoroughly transfigured by human intervention', and therefore 'we begin to speak about "the environment" only once nature has become dissolved.'[14] This distinction between nature and environment is useful in understanding ecology as a scholarly discipline which is concerned with the relations of living beings and their environment and which within its scope also includes a 'summary of green ideas'.[15] The term ecology was coined in 1866 by German biologist and praised illustrator Ernst Haeckel, who under the influence of Charles Darwin's book *The Origins of Species* from 1859 developed his own view on natural history and proposed a new discipline of *oekologie*, derived from the Greek word *oikos* that means home, which he defined as the study of the relationship between organisms and their environment.[16]

In 1867, a year after the word ecology entered the vocabulary of human comprehension of the natural world, the first volume of Karl Marx's *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* appeared in German and although environmental concern was not a primary consideration here, this major work nevertheless had an important and long-lasting impact on the relationship between humans and their environment, which is especially relevant for geographical regions that shared a history of state socialism. Marx compared the capitalists' treatment of workers with their attitude to nature, which was marked by exploitation, pollution and ruination, observing that they appropriate the resources of the earth without incurring any costs, as natural elements are used 'as free gifts of Nature to capital', while expressing criticism towards capitalist wastage,

[13] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Penguin, 1990), 54. First published in the United States in 1989.
[14] Anthony Giddens, 'Living in Post-traditional Society,' in *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in Modern Social Order*, eds. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 77.
[15] John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), 210.
[16] Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1866) vol.2, 286-87; English translation in: Robert C. Straufer, 'Haeckel, Darwin and Ecology,' *Quarterly Review of Biology* 32 (1957): 138-144.

deforestation and 'squandering of soil'.[17] Taking his critique of capitalism and nature literally, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe 'maintained for decades that they have a moral superiority over the capitalist world both in the treatment of human beings and the natural environment', denying the existence of any environmental problems.[18]

Another equally influential idea expressed by Marx and Engels was that the domination of nature through science and technology would 'relieve humankind from tyranny imposed by nature in procuring necessities of life.'[19] Stalin directly responded to this with the initiative of The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, which was endorsed by Communist Party in 1948 and called for the straightening of rivers, planting of miles of 'tree belts' to stop the winds and similar megalomaniac undertakings.[20] The results of Stalin's conviction that 'Man has to master Nature' were disastrous and have been discussed in terms of ecocide, or the deliberate destruction of entire ecosystems.[21]

In environmental theory, although recognition that Marx and Engels 'bought into the Enlightenment's myth of progress via the domination of nature' persists, a more sympathetic view has also been expressed, based on Marx's early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, in which he stated that 'nature is man's inorganic body',[22] a claim that has been interpreted as demonstrating understanding of the 'interconnectedness of humans and nature.'[23] Writing about the failed utopia of the socialist 'dream of the domination of nature', Susan Buck-Morss observed that it was perhaps only with the coming of ecological crisis at the end of the twentieth century that 'the young Marx's commitment to a reconciliation with nature [began to] appear to be not merely an expression of nineteenth century romanticism or youthful idealism, but an intensely

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[17] Karl Marx*, Capital*, vol. 3, ed., Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 745 and 812. See: Howard L Parsons, *Marx and Engels on Ecology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 171 and 183.
[18] Krech, McNeil and Merchant, *Encyclopaedia of World Environmental History*, 1127.
[19] Carolyn Merchant, ed., *Ecology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 2.
[20] See Ruben A. Mnatsakanian, *Environmental Legacy of Former Soviet Republics* (Edinburgh: Centre for Human Ecology, University of Edinburgh, 1992), 8. The author continues: 'Only when ecological deterioration increased beyond conceivable limits, did people's desperation outweigh their fear of state, and their protest caused the communist system to collapse. The first protests both in USSR and Eastern Europe were ecological ones.'
[21] Krech, McNeil and Merchant, *Encyclopaedia of World Environmental History*, 1127.
[22] Karl Marx*, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 112. See: Parsons, *Marx and Engels on Ecology*, 133.
[23] Merchant, *Ecology*, 2.

practical political concern.'[24] Precisely its assumed romanticism and lack of political agenda were the grounds on which ecology was criticised in theoretical discussions, which in addition to the acknowledgment that 'environment is not at the heart of the analysis offered by Marx and Engels',[25] could be perceived as crucial for understanding the rather unappreciated status of ecology in subsequent critical theory. As theorist of environmental policy Robyn Eckersley observed, critical theory, although it 'turned away from the scientism and historical materialism of orthodox Marxism' still remained anthropocentric, taking Habermas's perception of the ecology movement as 'defensive and neo-romantic', as a case in point.[26]

A corresponding view was expressed by Lucy Lippard in a publication arising from the more recent convergence of art and ecology entitled *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, in which she stated that 'from the 1960s through most of the 1990s the left considered environmentalism to be "soft politics".'[27] Indicatively, in the main introductory essay of the same publication on art and ecology, Jeffry Kastner devoted a single sentence to the Western pioneers of environmental art, such as Helen and Newton Harrison and Alan Sonfist, while in the rest of the text, which spans from the late 1960s till the present, the author deals with the legacy of Robert Smithson, whose relation to ecology is far more ambiguous.[28] A comparable art-historical attitude was also experienced by some of the East European artists who dealt with ecology in their work, such as Croatian group TOK, whose activist public art projects failed to meet the expectations of the more modernist minded art critics of the new artistic practice in the early 1970s Yugoslavia.[29] Even in those cases in which artists' practice engaged with the environment in less direct but nonetheless persistent ways, their work has generally so far not been analysed through the loop of ecological

[24] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), 119.
[25] Peter Dickens, 'Marxism and the Environment,' in *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, eds. Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate (Cheltenham, UK: E. Elgar, 1997), 180.
[26] Robyn Eckersley, 'The Failed Promise of Critical Theory,' in *Ecology*, ed. Carolyn Merchant, 65 and 68.
[27] Lucy R. Lippard, 'Beyond Beauty Strip,' in *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, ed. Max Andrews (London: RSA, 2006), 14.
[28] Jeffrey Kastner, 'There, Now: From Robert Smithson to Guantanamo,' in *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, 28. On Robert Smithson's relation to the ecology see: Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler, eds., *Robert Smithson*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004). See especially the essay by Thomas Crow, 'Cosmic Exile: Prophetic Turns in the Life and Art of Robert Smithson'. See also, Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Planetary Forecast: The Roots of Sustainability in the Radical Art of the 1970s,' *Third Text* 100 (September 2009): 669-674.
[29] See for example: Davor Matičević, 'Zagreb Circle,' in *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978), 25.

thought, despite the fact that some of these Central European artists have received an admirable amount of art historical attention.

Clearly, such indifference is not something particularly new in art history, as it is enough to recall the case of Théodore Rousseau, whose down-to-earth landscape paintings did not meet the ideal aesthetic criteria of the jury of the Paris Salon, famously resulting in a long series of rejections from the prestigious annual exhibition.[30] Even today, artists dealing with issues of environmental concern do not necessarily encounter a significantly different reception, as was demonstrated by the case of American artist Amy Balkin (1967), whose project *Public Smog*, with the aim to protect and preserve the Earth's atmosphere by including it on the World Heritage List, figured prominently in 2012 edition of *Documenta.* A display of letters written by curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev to 186 UNESCO states illustrated, apart from the inefficiency of the chosen artistic method, the complete unpreparedness of the representatives to international legal body to act.[31] Although the curator of *Documenta 13* proclaimed 'ecological perspectives' to be among the main 'intentions' of the exhibition, the majority of the works that engaged with environment were neatly presented in Ottoneum, the Natural History Museum, relegating them effectively to the appropriate niche of contemporary art and so repeating the segregation of such works from the mainstream of art production.[32]

A different approach was suggested by ecocritic Timothy Morton in his 2010 publication *The Ecological Thought*, who observed in the context of literature studies of the environment that while 'nowadays we're used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender' soon we will be 'accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it.'[33] Morton however proceeds by explaining that aside from art and universally understood science, ecological thought should be built 'from what we find in philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, religion and critical theory', completely omitting from his list of sources ecology as an academic discipline. This lack of environmental studies' references is further confirmed in the footnotes to which he redirects the theory, in order not to put off 'people who aren't members of the in crowd of specialists', but who 'badly need to read

[30] The jury of Paris Salon found his paintings 'ugly in their clotted, speckled brushwork and candid unidealised compositions.' See: Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *Art of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 182.
[31] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Documenta (13) The Guidebook* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 42.
[32] Ibid., 198-213.
[33] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 11.

this book', emphasizing that 'we simply can't leave environmentalism to the anti-intellectuals'.[34] Such an undermining apprehension of environmental discourse works against his efforts to promote ecological thinking within literature studies, as it ends up reiterating the disregard of existing green ecological thought.

A more inclusive notion of ecology was expressed by Felix Guattari, whose differentiation between the three registers of the environmental, social and mental domains underlined the interconnectedness of environmental issues with all aspects of life, as well as exposure to pollution not just of the natural environment but also social relations and human subjectivities. Guattari laid unequivocal blame for ecological disequilibrium on post-industrial capitalism, within which he also understood 'the so-called socialist countries' as they adopted the 'value systems of the West', while he perceived the seriousness of the situation to be such that 'unless humanity undertakes a radical reconsideration of itself' it risks the prospect of 'no more human history'.[35] Remarkably, 'the search for antidotes' for this unenviable situation entailed 'ways of operating [which] will be more like those of an artist', revealing Guattari's understanding of art as instrumental in his ecological program, which confirms the role that art has affirmatively taken on since the beginning of modern environmental awareness.[36]

In Yugoslavia circa 1970, where environmental discussions took place more openly than in the more strictly controlled socialist states of the Eastern Bloc, ecology was understood as 'both politics and a way of thinking, as a biological as well as a social discipline', which in its ideology was 'very close and almost identical to Marxism'.[37] Despite heavy reliance on quotations from Marx and Engels and a perceptible amount of derogative comments about capitalist states, which was then a common tactic for publishing risky texts, the author of this article from cultural weekly *Telegram* acknowledged ecology as 'not only a fashion' but an emerging scholarly field that is 'interdisciplinary, wide and all-encompassing'. Such an understanding of ecology as a discipline that entails a sense of the interconnectedness of all spheres of life is typical for the period around

[34] Ibid., 13.
[35] Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 30 and 68.
[36] Ibid., 35.
[37] Vladimir Matek, 'Pravo na opstanak,' [Right to survival] *Telegram* (29 December 1972), 18. [My translation]

1968, when it was influentially labelled as a 'subversive science' because of its 'holistic approach' in which one questioned led to another.[38]

During state socialism, the treatment of the environment was determined by the regime's preoccupation with progress, industrialisation and modernisation and as a result socialist countries drew freely on natural resources, perceiving them as limitless.[39] The state of the environment in Czechoslovakia was described as catastrophic, caused by the 'megalomaniacal ambitions of communist rule to catch up to and overtake the states of the capitalist West, which were unrealistic, except in one respect: the extent of damage done to the natural environment.'[40] Likewise, in Hungary and Yugoslavia the situation in terms of pollution and exploitation of natural resources did not differ considerably, however where they did diverge was in the availability of information about the state of the environment and in access to the ecological debates of the time.

Significantly, the first UN environmental summit in Stockholm in 1972 was held 'under the shadow of the Cold War as the governments of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union boycotted the conference after the dispute over the representation of divided Germany.'[41] As a convenient consequence of not taking part in the conference, the governments of Eastern Europe managed to avoid the question about the state of the environment in their own countries for another decade. In Czechoslovakia, the regime succeeded in maintaining the 'blockade of information about the state of the environment' until 1983, when it was leaked and made public both at home and internationally.[42] In Hungary the first environmental movement formed only in the middle of the 1980s, when the issue of the damming of the river Danube between Slovakia and Hungary attracted a strong response from the public, which started to see it as a 'symbol of state socialist

[38] Paul Shepard and Dainel McKinley, eds., *The Subversive Science: Essay toward an Ecology of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969). Their thesis was referenced in: Rudi Supek, *Ova jedina zemlja* [This only earth] (Zagreb: Globus, 1973).
[39] See for instance, Andrew Tickle and Ian Welsh, eds., *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe* (Harlow: Longman, 1998).
[40] Miroslav Vaněk, 'The Development of a Green Opposition in Czechoslovakia: The Role of International Contacts,' in *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989*, eds. Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 174.
[41] Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Johannesburg* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 4.
[42] Vaněk, 'The Development of a Green Opposition in Czechoslovakia,' 174.

system's disregard for the aesthetic and historical importance of the landscape'.[43] While the movement of the Danube Circle played a significant role in bringing down the socialist regime in 1989, around 1970 ecology was not a widely known concept in the Hungarian cultural and intellectual community. At that time the Pécs Workshop artists systematically worked in sites that had been ravaged by industrial exploitation of natural resources, without any awareness of ecological discourse.

As already mentioned, the situation was somewhat different in Yugoslavia, as the country did send delegates to the UN Summit in Stockholm and the problems and ideas expressed there were immediately critically reported in the press, while soon after the first book summarising ecological issues was published in Zagreb by neo-Marxist sociologist Rudi Supek.[44] However, although ecological prospects were widely debated and even proposed to be 'equivalent to socialism' this could be seen as a strategic move on the part of the socialist authorities, who on the one hand promoted the image of a more liberal state, while on the other used it as a substitute for discussing burning political problems, such as nationalism, which the Party was attempting to keep under control. As a result of this apolitical understanding of ecology in Yugoslavia, group TOK could realise their socially-engaged public art projects, which problematised the multifaceted pollution of an urban environment, as they were perceived as unthreatening by the authorities.

Not only did socialist states differ in their environmental policies, but also in political realities, which changed significantly in the aftermath of 1968, a political watershed that also brought colossal transformations to the cultural domain. The most dramatic political events were experienced in Czechoslovakia, where experimenting with the possibility of 'socialism with a human face' ended on 20th August 1968 when the Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invaded the country and crushed the hopes of the Prague Spring, after which a harsh process of 'normalization' began. In Hungary, which had learned the lesson from the Soviets about the cost of disobedience from the 1956 Uprising, 1968 was limited to isolated acts of protest and did not turn into a mass movement, although in that period the country saw a more liberal political atmosphere connected to the New Economic Mechanism, a policy which promised limited economic reform and cultural

[43] Krista Harper, *Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activists and Post-Socialist Political Ecology in Hungary* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2006), 33.
[44] Supek, *Ova jedina zemlja*.

freedom, but was brought to a halt by the Soviets in 1972.[45] In Tito's non-aligned Yugoslavia, the exceptional character of the 1968 protests was that the students 'articulated their demands on the groundwork of the official ideology'[46] as they pointed out the huge discrepancy between the theory and practice of socialism, before leftist confrontations gave way to the rise of right-wing nationalism, culminating in the Croatian Spring of 1971.[47]

The echo of the crushing of the Prague Spring spread across all the states of real exiting socialism, as political dissident Miklós Haraszti, who previously belonged to the small circle of Hungarian Maoists, explained: 'after 1968 my whole generation just realised that all we want is freedom, not ideology'.[48] At the time, the official Hungarian cultural policy - 'virtually alone in the Soviet bloc', was organised according to 'Three Ts', which stood for the categories of supported, tolerated and forbidden artistic production.[49] The neo-avant-garde artists who generally belonged to the forbidden category, responded with the daring call to 'be forbidden', or as Haraszti put it, 'if we're forbidden, then we'll do whatever we want' , although this radical notion of freedom should not be mistaken for an anarchic experiment, as it was foremost coloured by the political reality of real existing socialism.

The normalisation regime in post-68 Czechoslovakia brought what dissident philosopher Milan Šimečka called a 'return to order',[50] which involved screenings and purges that were especially rigorous in the cultural and academic fields, as these were perceived as 'more ideologically radical'.[51] The Czechoslovak art scene was, according to Piotr Piotrowski 'definitely divided into two adjacent zones: the sphere of official art with its official venues, artists, critics and dignitaries;

[45] Ben Fowkes, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 112-113.
[46] Boris Kanzleiter, 'Yugoslavia,' in *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism*, *1956-1977*, eds. Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Palgrave Macimillan, 2008), 222.
[47] Pedro Ramet*, Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia: 1963-1983* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 105.
[48] Miklós Haraszti in conversation with Tamás St. Auby in *Loophole to Happiness*, eds. Maja and Reuben Fowkes (Budapest: Translocal.org, 2011), 43.
[49] Tibor Valuch, 'Cultural and Social History of Hungary 1948-1990,' in *A Cultural History of Hungry in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, ed. László Kósa (Budapest: Corvina, 1998), 251. The 'Three Ts' stand for 'tiltás' (forbidding), 'türés' (tolerance) and 'támogatás' (support).
[50] Milan Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia* (Verso: London, 1984), 14.
[51] Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer And His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 45.

and the sphere of unofficial art, which was semi-private and shown in studios or outdoors.'[52] In such circumstances the young generation of neo-avant-garde artists became attracted to art practice in the natural environment, which was a widespread phenomenon both in the Czech part of the country and especially in Slovakia, as it seemed to offer many 'the intrinsic field of escape from contemporary social reality operated by directives.'[53] However, despite the established narratives of how cultural policies operated in socialist states in the early 1970s, many of the artistic examples considered here will show that these rigid categories were actually more fluid in practice and often transgressed by artists, who inventively used existing loopholes, while the more self-proclaimed liberal scenes, such as those of the capitals of the Yugoslav republics, were also subject to mechanisms of control over art production.[54]

Research into artistic practices concerned with the natural environment entails uncovering the complexity of art history as a discipline under socialism, revealing the peculiar status of such practices in the established narratives of neo-avant-garde art and positioning them in relation to the art history of East European art. Paradoxically, it was only possible for the art history of Eastern Europe to surface after the collapse of the region as a geo-political reality, as before the fall of communism the borders between socialist countries were shut and art history developed within national paradigms and in reflection to the West. While in the first post-communist decade, as Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski observed in the introduction to his book *In the Shadow of Yalta,* a majority of critics and art historians from East-Central Europe saw their main task as 'how to integrate the region's art practice into the universal art canon, or more precisely, into Western art history',[55] in the second post-communist decade the discussion moved towards examining the characteristics of Eastern European art itself, and was the subject of Piotrowski's influential essay 'How to Write a History of Central-East European art?'.[56] Here he argues that instead of inscribing

[52] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* (London: Reaction books, 2009), 248.
[53] Zora Rusinova, ed., *Action Art 1965-1989* (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001), 264.
[54] Miško Šuvaković, 'Students' Cultural Centres as Reservations,' in *The Case of Belgrade's Student's Cultural Centre in the 1970s*, eds. Prelom Kolektiv (Belgrade: Prelom Kolektiv, 2006).
[55] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 12. The discussion of Eastern European art during the 1990s, as summarized in major survey exhibitions such as *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* and *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949 – 1999*, revolved around the categories of centre (Western Art) and periphery (Eastern European Art). See: Bojana Pejić and David Elliott, eds*., After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999); Lóránd Hegy, ed., *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949 – 1999* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna, 1999).
[56] Piotr Piotrowski, 'How to Write History of Central-East European Art?' *Third Text* 96 (January 2009): 6.

the artistic culture of Eastern Europe into the Western canon, our attention should be concentrated on the deconstruction of the relationship between those two domains, by taking into consideration 'cultural policy, real politics towards art and culture in a particular country and at specific historical moments.'[57]

A number of recent research based exhibitions have followed that pattern and looked for the specific in East European art, including *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*[58] and *Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009,*[59] while still relying heavily on national contributors to introduce their respective scenes. There have also been attempts to overcome not only East-West dialogue, but also the inward looking tendency of the discipline and position it within global art history, such as the research project *Subversive Practices: Art under Condition of political repression 60s-80s/ South America/Europe.*[60]

When considering art historical sources in relation to artistic practice that took place in the natural environment or dealt with issues related to it, the prevalent approach is based on discussion of art in nature. For example, in 1994 an exhibition was organised in Budapest entitled *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe* which was, according to the catalogue text, motivated by the desire to investigate the 'regional and universal' in the art of Central Europe, taking nature as its theme.[61] Organised according to the typical principle of inviting curators from participating countries to introduce the national selection of artists had an outcome that in the most optimistic sense could be interpreted as demonstrating the diversity of artistic approaches to the natural environment. While the artistic representation in the exhibition mostly reflected contemporary practice around 1990, some of the essays in the catalogue included a longer overview of the field, encompassing also neo-avant-garde examples, however, because of the unevenness in contributors' approaches, it could hardly be taken as a representative survey of the subject.

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[57] Ibid., 9.

[58] Bojana Pejić, ed., *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna, 2009). See also, *Gender Check: a Reader, Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić (Köln: Walter König, 2010).

[59] Edit András, ed., *Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009* (Budapest: Ludwig Museum-Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest / ACAX - Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange, 2009).

[60] Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ, eds., *Subversive Practices: Art under Condition of political repression 60s-80s/ South America/Europe* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

[61] János Sturcz, ed., *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe* (Budapest: Ernst Museum, 1994). The participating artists came from: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, Macedonia, Romania, Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia.

In the catalogue of *Art in Nature*, an international project from 1996, Hungarian art historian and curator László Beke wrote what appears to be so far the only essay, published in English and Italian, which deals comparatively with the issue of Central European art in the environment.[62] In this eclectic overview without references, Beke lists numerous artistic engagements with nature which reached across generations and included outdoor symposia of sculptors, happenings in the countryside, a type of 'organic architecture', as well as artists working with natural materials. In Beke's opinion, 'Eastern European Land Art pieces have never been produced by coherent environmental philosophical or ecological strategies; rather, by desire for new forms of expression and the claim of evading the control of authorities', as a consequence of which such works 'had certain impromptu and ephemeral characteristics'.[63] Instead of pursuing further this interesting although certainly debatable line of enquiry, as this research will show, he went on to describe a much less relevant concept of 'how avant-garde elements are combined with the tradition of the folklore in Eastern European art', which would be picked up in one of the more recent discussions of the land art movement, as the major characteristic of the region.[64]

Land art is, apart from the universal framework on art and nature, another entry point for approaching neo-avant-garde practice that took place in the natural environment, one which arguably can be both productive as well as limiting. Art historical treatment of land art practice from around 1970 tended in subsequent decades to strip the movement of the multiplicity of artistic approaches it originally encompassed, equalising it with American earthworks, or in the best case, including some Western European artists that also used earth as an artistic medium – Gilles Tiberghien's scholarly study of *Land Art* from the early 1990s could serve as a case in point here.[65] More recent art historical revisits of the period emphasize the input of Gerry Schum's *Land Art* exhibition that was broadcast on German television in spring of 1969, as a tool to redefine the geographic genealogy of land art, stressing its synchronic appearance on both continents, as well as pointing out the connectedness of the movement with new media and cosmic explorations.[66]

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[62] László Beke, 'Central-East Europe,' in *Art in Nature*, ed. Vittorio Fagone (Milano: Edizioni Gabriele Mazzota, 1996), 109-116.
[63] Ibid., 110.
[64] See: Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 84.
[65] Gilles A. Tiberghien, *Land Art* (London: Art Data, 1995). First published in French in 1993. See longer discussion in Chapter 1.
[66] See: Joy Sleeman, 'Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune,' in *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture: 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: Getty Publishers, 2011), 152.

The accent on diversity of approaches that the *Land Art TV Exhibition* demonstrated at a time when land art was a provocative concept for contemporary artists is particularly relevant in the context of Central Europe, although there has so far been no single study that deals with land art comparatively and across national divides in Eastern European art history. In Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta*, which can serve as a representative textbook of the regional neo-avant-garde art, it is mentioned only sporadically, while Serbian art theorist Miško Šuvaković, in his extensive comparative study of conceptual art, does not treat land art as a separate entry, despite the fact that he devotes a lot of attention to Slovenian Group OHO, whose land art projects were a significant part of their practice.[67] If compared with the equally broad category of body art, which has been extensively researched, including through the exhibition *Body and the East* that took place in Ljubljana in 1998 and to which, for instance, a whole chapter is devoted in Piotrowski's book, the absence of land art in general accounts of the art of the 1970s could be explained by the fact that there has so far been no comprehensive study of artists' engagement with the environment in the region.[68]

More recently there have been several curatorial and research based initiatives that have dealt with East European art of the 1970s and although the contextualisation of art in relation to environment or focus on land art is missing again, an overview of the material shows that it was certainly present in the artists' work.[69] The void around land art in Central European art history should therefore not be mistaken for its non-existence, as works in the environment are an essential part of many artists' practices. Also, if not surfacing in comparative studies of East European art, when considering national art histories, particularly from those countries where such practices were more frequent, the intensity of artist's engagement with land art comes to the fore, as the 2007 exhibition on land art in Slovakia[70] demonstrated or as is shown in Pavlína Morganová's publication on Czech action art.[71] As this research will show, land art practice across Central Europe appeared at the same time as in the West and while it was practiced for a short period around 1970, it was commonly referred to using the same foreign phrase that originally

[67] Miško Šuvaković, *Konceptualna umetnost* [Conceptual art] (Novi Sad: Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2007).
[68] Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *Body and the East*: *From the 1960s to the Present* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1998).
[69] See for example catalogue: Cristine Macel and Nataša Petrešin-Bechelez, eds., *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2010).
[70] Daniela Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art* (Bratislava: City Gallery, 2007).
[71] Pavlína Morganová, *Akční umění* [Action art] (Olomouc: Nakladitelství J.Vacl, 2009).

appeared on German TV.[72] However an extended understanding of the term is required, as Central European land art was a demonstration of dematerialised art practice and in most cases entailed a critique of painting that was emblematic for the neo-avant-garde of the region,[73] rather than representing a stage in the development of sculpture, which was typical for Western land art.[74]

It is important to emphasize that Central European artists did not engage with the natural environment only within the scope of land art, which despite its diverse appearances still involved a physical intervention in it, but also approached it though process based works, public art projects, conceptual practices or performances and all these neo-avant-garde tendencies are included in this research. They did not only use a wide range of artistic strategies but also problematised environment from various standpoints, ranging from highlighting environmental pollution as was the case of the activist art of Croatian group TOK, to exploring non-hierarchical relationships to the natural world, which was the preoccupation of Petr Štembera's performances. Furthermore, Slovenian OHO group experimented with communal living in harmony with the cosmos, Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora's conceptual practice converged with scientific forecasts of the environmental future of the planet, while Hungarian group Pécs Workshop articulated a specific approach towards the sites altered by the exploitation of natural resources.

The particular positions that artists developed through their examination of the relationship to the natural environment were in various degrees influenced by ecological discussions, technological achievements and the countercultural atmosphere of the period around 1968. Countercultural initiatives, which accompanied the social disturbances around 1968, provided the context for the emergence of the environmental movement, as ecological concerns were 'rarely prominent among the grievances that animated the student protesters of the 1960s', while the counterculture showed 'environmental sentiment'.[75] Many artists from Central Europe came to the ecological paradigm through their interest in eastern philosophy and the alternative lifestyles propagated by counterculture, most notably the OHO Group and Petr Štembera. For others, the environmental studies that started to be published at the time were more decisive, as was the

[72] Gerry Schum, *Land Art* (Berlin: Fernsehgallerie Schum, 1969).
[73] See chapter 'The Critique of Painting: Towards the Neo-avant-garde,' in Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow Yalta*, 179-237.
[74] See: Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 14.
[75] Christopher Rootes, 'The Environmental Movement,' in *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977,* 297.

case with the influential scientific forecast *Limits to Growth* for the practice of Rudolf Sikora.[76] This indicates the fluidity in exchange of references across Cold War divides and interconnectedness with similar initiatives from around the world, and poses the question of the prominence of regional artistic engagements with natural environment in the context of the global neo-avant-garde, as well as its status from the perspective of the emerging scholarly field of art and ecology.[77]

At present, when environmental pollution is on the one hand dispersed even into human subjectivity, while on the other spread not only across the surface of the whole planet but has also exceeded the earth's atmosphere, as the Slovenian artist Sašo Sedlaček (1973) showed in his web project *Space Junk Spotting* (2006), pointing out that in the 'more than fifty years that have passed since the conquest of space begun, we have succeeded in filling the orbits around the earth with surplus satellites, rocket waste, and other debris,'[78] the discussion of art and ecology is as relevant now, as it was at the time when the space race had only just started and artists had begun to engage with the consequences of unprecedented technological advances. Although the majority of literature in relation to art and environment references the book *Silent Spring* from 1962 by Rachel Carson as the beginning of environmental discourse and the Cold War space competition that provided the photographs of Earth taken from space on Apollo missions as favourite images for contemporary artists,[79] it is rare to find deeper engagement with the issues raised, such as the actual state of the environment in particular geographies or the spread and availability of ecological information, which is especially significant in understanding art in relation to environment under socialism.

Despite differences in political climates and availability of information about both ecological discourse and contemporary artistic developments, Central European artists demonstrated consistency in the specific approaches they developed regarding the natural environment and therefore form a distinctive episode in the global art history of the subject. There are also several

[76] Meadows, Donella H. ed., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (London: Earth Island, 1972).
[77] On the recent scholarship on the subject see: TJ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability,' in *Radical Nature*, and Yates McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right of Survival,' in *Nongovermental Politics*, ed. Michael Feher (New York: Zone Books, 2007).
[78] www.sasosedlacek.com. Last accessed August 2012. In 2006 Sedlaček won 'OHO Award' for best young visual artist in Slovenia.
[79] See for example: Kastner, *Land and Environmental Art*.

aspects which are assumed to be characteristic for artistic engagements in the natural environment in Eastern Bloc, such as the non-aggressive treatment of the environment in land art projects and also the underlying political motivation for such practices. The reason for the appearance of art in the countryside of Central Europe in the 1970s is commonly put down to attempts to escape from the authorities, since the systems of control were not as effective as in towns, which is evident from the fact that many artistic actions that took place in the natural environment did not reference it at all, but only used it as a freer space for artistic experiments. However in terms of more genuine engagement with the subject of environment, which this research is focused on, this argument is only of indirect relevance, as for the artists who were interested in questioning the problem of nature or ecological prospects, this was not necessarily linked to working outdoors, while for those that did engage in such practice, evading control from the authorities was not a decisive motivation.

When Central European artists' engagement with the environment involved land art, their choice of sites ranged from green areas in the cities, to sites that were in close proximity to towns, while in some cases they also chose to work in the countryside some distance from the towns they worked in. The countryside, understood as an area that has undergone socialisation since the beginnings of agriculture, is contrasted with wilderness, which is a critical concept in ecology and could be related to the Western land artists' preference for working in deserts or on ocean shores. These were the works that Amy Dempsy had in mind when she wrote that 'powerful works of art can take you on a journey' and labelled it 'destination art' which 'has to be seen in situ'.[80] Yet, the art that Central European artists produced could barely qualify as destination art, not only because to visit the selected locations could hardly fit into the category of a 'journey', but also because there is nothing to see 'in situ'.

The fact that there are no monuments of land art in Eastern Europe, nor any remains to visit, led art historians to recognise the character of the region's land art as 'environmentally friendly gestures'.[81] While László Beke in his analysis of art in nature in Central Europe observed the 'ephemeral characteristics' of the works made in the environment, and claimed that 'Land Art variants of dealing with nature had a much simpler, more "minimalistic" philosophy',[82] his Slovenian colleague Igor Zabel in his description of OHO group's land art stated that it was 'very

[80] Amy Dempsey, *Destination Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 9.
[81] Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 157.
[82] Beke, 'Central-East Europe', 114.

important that such works did not affect the landscape irreparably (in fact, after the action there were no consequences for the location at all).'[83] These observations are made in obvious reference to Western land art and if compared with the monumental scale of the American earthworks, the 'environmentally friendly' aspect of Central European art is clearly perceptible. However, it is important to note that what was referred to here as land art belonged to wider neo-avant-garde tendencies that were in any case dematerialised in character, which as Jiří Valoch observed in the context of Czech art and the environment, entailed 'many varying forms of pure conceptual art' motivated by the 'effort to de-materialise works',[84] rather than intentionally demonstrating a high degree of environmental awareness.

From the analysis of Central European artists' engagement with the natural environment what comes to the fore, apart from their de-materialised works and non-aggressive treatment of the environment, is also their critical stance towards established social perceptions of the environment and their understanding that ecology is a concept that cannot be firmly located within any borders, least of all firmly shut socialist ones. Artists either distanced themselves from the assumptions of ideal national landscapes or subverted the idea of nature as a pristine national symbol, while they also borrowed freely from methods and practices that have little in common with national traditions. Additionally, in terms of artists directly dealing with ecology, they understood it as an essentially global problem that can neither be approached from a nationalist nor a state communist mentality. Dealing with the environment propelled the Central European neo-avant-garde artists to take a cosmopolitan stance at a time when the ecological crisis was beginning to be for the first time globally perceived.

[83] Igor Zabel, 'A Short Story of OHO' in IRWIN, eds., *East Art Map* (London: Afterall Book, 2006), 426.
[84] Jiři Valoch, 'Land Art and Conceptual Art' in *Krajina/Landscape*, ed. Marta Smolikova (Prague: Soros Foundation, 1993), 37.

Abstract Elements in Industrial Environments: The Land Art of the Hungarian Group Pécs Workshop

In 1980 the group Pécs Workshop held a retrospective exhibition marking a decade of their artistic activity at István Csók Gallery in Székesfehérvár, where they displayed a wide range of works from paintings, print design to conceptual and performative practices, with the documentation of their land art projects also featuring prominently.[85] The venue was one of the exceptional art institutions under the communist regime that succeeded in running a progressive program and was instrumental in gradually incorporating unofficial neo-avant-garde initiatives into art historical narratives of the period.[86] Within the circles of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde of the early seventies the group Pécs Workshop distinguished itself primarily as a result of their systematic engagement with land art, an art form which although it belonged to the then innovative spectrum of artistic explorations that energetically probed the limits of a traditional understanding of art, was rarely employed in Hungary.[87]

The collective Pécs Workshop was formed when artists Károly Halász (1946), Ferenc Ficek (1947-1987), Károly Kismányoki (1943), Sándor Pinczehelyi (1946) and Kálmán Szijártó (1946), who met in the first half of the 1960s during their education at the Fine Art Secondary School and later at the Teachers College in their hometown of Pécs, decided to separate from the milieu of the Studio of Applied Artists of Pécs. The news was announced in the local daily paper *Dunántuli Napló* on 23 April 1971, which under the headline 'Arrival of Pécs Workshop' informed its readership about the new developments in the local art scene.[88] Although they continued to collaborate and exhibit together throughout the following decades, the group's most active period lasted until 1974, after

[85] Lóránd Hegy, *Pécsi Műhelyi 1970 -1980* [Pecs Workshop 1970-1980](Székesfehérvár: István Csók Gallery, 1980).
[86] On the significance of István Csók Gallery for the historicization of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde see: Dóra Hegy and Zsuzsa László, 'How Art Becomes Public,' in *Parallel Chronologies*, eds. Dóra Hegy, Sándor Hornyik and Zsuzsa László (Budapest: tranzit.hu, 2011), 2.
[87] See for example Gábor Andrási, Gábor Pataki, György Szücs and András Zwickl, *The History of Hungarian Art in the 20th Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1999).
[88] 'Megjelent a Pécsi Műhely', *Dunántuli Napló* (23 April 1971), reproduced on CD Rom supplied with *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv* [Pécs Workshop picture book] Sándor Pinczehelyi, ed. (Pécs: Alexandra, 2004).

which the artists gradually started to go their separate ways.[89] It was in that short phase of strong cohesion of the group in the early seventies that their land art projects took place.

The specific status of land art within the versatile oeuvre of the group was revealed more recently, when in 2004 the artists published *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv*, a consensually edited monograph rich with illustrations of their artistic practice.[90] Indicative was the layout of the publication, which was organised principally according to the individual members, while towards the end of the book it contained a separate section in which the documentation of their 'land art experiments' was reproduced. This outline clearly showed that their practice in the natural environment was considered as the only joint works of the group.[91]

The outing that marked the beginning of their series of land art works took place around 11 o'clock on 11 September 1970, when Károly Kismányoki and Kálmán Szijártó, equipped with sheets of paper and a camera, set off into the Mecsek Hills which rise above their native city of Pécs in the south of Hungary to conduct an artistic experiment. Determined to find out what happens if 'a foreign element enters the natural environment', they placed white strips of paper around tree trunks and took numerous photographs of the marked trees from various vantage points.[92] The paper strips were attached to the trees at approximately the same height, while the selected trees formed a triangle which stretched fifty steps along the edge of the wood, with its third angle reaching five metres deep into the forest (fig. 4). The geometric outline of the area captured in their research and its measurements were sketched in the notes that Kismányoki took during the undertaking, in which he also wrote down the exact time, date, weather information and location, as well as the main task of the project and the name of the participants who carried it out.[93] Together with the extensive photographic documentation, these notes and the similar ones that

[89] According to Pinczehelyi, the separation period of the group was 1974-1978, when members of the group started family lives and 'did not have so much time to hang out together.' Sándor Pinczehelyi, 'Neoavantgarde műhelytitkok,' [Neo-avant-garde workshop secrets] *Balkon* (Budapest) 4 (2004): 16.
[90] Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv*. The publication is accompanied by a CD with some of the group's films and a selection of archival materials.
[91] See: 'Land art: Tájkíserletek,' [Land art: experiments] in Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv*, 293-315.
[92] Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv*, 296.
[93] According to the sketch from private archive of Károly Kismányoki, notes dated 11 September 1970.

Kismányoki would take on all subsequent outings serve as the main source of information for Pécs Workshop land art projects.[94]

While the first experiment consisted of placing narrow white strips of paper around the trees, the following visit to the same location in early October involved the use of wide white sheets of paper (fig. 5), which was continued soon after by the next experiment when the same artists wrapped the trunks with strips of paper of variable size and at different heights (fig. 6). The chosen location was described as being 'behind the TV Tower, in a North-West direction', a borderline area between the forest that covers the tops of the Mecsek Hills and ground recently cleared for the construction of the TV tower. The selected spot was particularly suitable for taking photographs and the artists photographed the marked trees from near and far, from inside and outside the woods, constantly changing perspective. These early land art examples, which involved inserting an abstract element into the environment, appeared much as geometric abstract paintings only set in the landscape, while the positioning of the paper rings into rows of the same height or similar aesthetic combinations was clearly staged for the camera lens. Ágnes Gyetvai, who in 1980, at the time of their retrospective exhibition in Székesfehérvár and a whole decade after they started to practice it, wrote the first professional remarks about their land art in an official Hungarian magazine, observed that these experiments 'remind us of geometric construction planned from a certain point-of-view on paper or canvas.'[95]

One of the photographs taken during these early days of Pécs Workshop's land art investigations shows, amongst the tree trunks wrapped with several concentric rings of paper, a vertical manmade structure in the distance (fig. 7). The Pécs TV tower, which served as a landmark for determining the location of their projects, was still under construction at the time of their interventions. The construction of the 197 metre high reinforced concrete spire complete with a circular viewing platform and restaurant started in 1968, and it was inaugurated in 1973 (fig. 8). The Pécs TV tower was one of many similar structures erected at strategic spots in urban as well as in natural settings across Eastern Europe as symbols of socialist progress and technological competitiveness of the Eastern Bloc in ideologically driven Cold War battles. In their discussion of teletowers as an exceptional type of socialist architecture, Jane Pavitt and David Crowley contrast

[94] Kismányoki's notes are partially published in the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition of the group in Székesfehérvár and in the *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv*, the rest is part of the private archive of the artist.
[95] Ágnes Gyetvai, 'Tanulmányok a tájban, Beszámoló a Pécsi Műhely munkájáról,' [Studies in nature, account of the work of the Pécs Workshop] *Mozgó Világ* (Budapest) 5 (1980): 11.

them with 'the prefabricated panel constructed apartment buildings' that were built at the time 'to standard designs using mass-produced elements', as distinct from TV towers that 'were bespoke structures which utilised the best design talents and precious resources'.[96] Furthermore, their observations about the multiple function of these structures 'designed to attract the public' and their sculptural forms which 'self-consciously referred to rockets and other contemporary fantasies of interstellar space travel', could also be applied to the Pécs TV tower that still dominates the vista of the town beneath it, bearing witness to the ideology that was once attached to it. Choosing the location for their artistic experiments in the vicinity of such an emblematic representation of the socialist belief in progress and modernisation, a scene of the infiltration of official ideology into the natural environment, is indicative of Pécs Workshop's vigilant selection of sites for their land art experiments.

Their next experiment during October 1970 took place in the stone mine near Pécs, where Kismányoki and Szijártó rolled a light blue paper reel down the sides of the quarry. This work, which became known as *Approaching,* was documented in such a way that it is possible to follow several stages of the movement of the camera starting from within the crater of the mine and then getting closer to the edge focusing on the paper reel (fig. 9). The final shot in the series of black and white photographs depicts the paper's convergence with the sky above, creating the effect of a deep and almost geometrically straight cut into the landscape.[97]

The dramatically terraced ground of the sand mine in nearby Pécsvárad, which the artists visited on 18 October 1970, was used for further investigation of the behaviour of the inserted elements. They brought with them eight sheets of white wrapping paper which they arranged on the steps of the mine in two parallel rows. The top edges of the paper, which just fitted the artificial sand steps that were approximately 130 – 150 centimetres high, were fixed with stones (fig. 10). Most of the photographs though, taken from near and far, from the sides or underneath, show them as an uninterrupted stream, revealing the artists' consideration for how these white elements 'emphasize the determining structure, support it and take their shape in a natural way' (fig. 11, 12).[98] By putting the stress on already existing structure of the terrain which determined the way

[96] Jane Pavitt and David Crowley, 'The Hi-Tech Cold War,' in *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), 176.
[97] See: Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv,* 301. Also, the photographs from Kismányoki's archive were numbered on the back to show the succession of the stages.
[98] Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv,* 300.

the inserted elements would adapt, the artists offered a clue to their approach to the environment, which would remain non-intrusive. In a similar mode, the only photograph taken during their earliest experimentations in the woods behind the TV tower on which the trees were bare actually reveals how much the strong patches of shadows on the trunks resembled the positioning of concentric rings of paper (fig. 13).[99]

The importance of photography as a constitutive part of their practice in the environment, the abstract elements as subtext to their early land art works, and the use of paper - a traditional artistic material, as the only props inserted in the landscape would turn out to be characteristic of Pécs Workshop land art. Furthermore, insisting on the scientific character of the experiments carried out in the natural environment indicated their approach to art practice as an activity that is at the same time experimental as well as verifiable. From their focus on sites which had been noticeably altered by human exploitation of natural resources it is possible to grasp their understanding of environment as very different to the romantic ideas of pure and unspoilt nature. These starting points were further explored in subsequent outings to the countryside, which also brought the gradual involvement of all the artists of the Pécs Workshop with land art practice.

In comparison with OHO Group in Slovenia, whose land art actions from 1969 followed on from their conceptual art practice and Arte Povera inspired exhibitions, or with Slovak conceptual artist Rudolf Sikora, who in the early seventies dealt with ecological issues in his work, Pécs Workshop's land art had more points of connection with Prague artist Petr Štembera, whose early works also entailed highlighting abstract geometric forms in the natural environment. The introduction of abstract elements into the environment that characterises the practice of Pécs Workshop draws them close to the modernist stream of post-war Central European art. Modernism, according to Piotrowski, functioned as one of the references of the neo-avant-garde and was on the one hand acceptable to the Communist authorities, as the cult of form and the autonomy of the work of art did not pose the danger of 'critical approaches that analysed the system of power', while for the artists 'modernist art was perceived as an expression of "European" ambitions and a protest against the Soviet dictatorship in culture'.[100]

[99] Unpublished photograph from Kismányoki's archive.
[100] Piotr Piotrowski, 'Mapping the Legacy of the Political Change of 1956 in East European Art,' *Third Text* 79 (March 2006): 106-7.

In Hungary after the failed uprising of 1956, Soviet control was tightened and party management over culture intensified and as a result the communist government allowed the organisation of only one exhibition of modern art in 1957, the 'Spring exhibition' in Műcsarnok, and from then 'until the end of the 1960s, modern art shows were not officially accepted in Hungary'.[101] Nevertheless, in an exhibition about the 1960s, which was curated by László Beke shortly after the 'system change' of 1989, there were over two hundred artists presented under the label of the 'hidden dimension of Hungarian art of the 1960s', referring to their oppositional character towards 'official art'.[102] Around thirty tendencies were identified, which the author divided between the modernists and the avant-garde, ranging from lyrical abstraction to pop art and happenings. The division between modernism and the avant-garde that Peter Bürger understood in terms of the latter's intent to counter the 'social functionlessness of art' in bourgeois society through the 'radical negation of the category of individual creation'[103] gets an alternative interpretation here. For Beke, the modernists are the ones who reconnect with pre-war Hungarian art and develop a national axis of art with no comparison to western art, in contrast to the avant-garde line, which 'can be defined more or less clearly in terms of the international -isms.'[104]

A noticeable lightening of the political atmosphere at the end of the 1960s corresponded to the change in economic policy known as the New Economic Mechanism introduced in Hungary in 1968, which promised limited economic reform and cultural freedom, allowed small scale private businesses and eased foreign trade restrictions, but was brought to a halt by the Soviets in 1972.[105] This short period of liberalisation was of huge significance to Hungarian contemporary art. The revival of the tradition of geometric abstract art of the Hungarian classical avant-garde from the interwar period was initiated by the younger generation of artists, who 'turned to the past in order to save from peril what they could.'[106] A parallel interest in national identity and the folk art tradition also flourished and some artists were rediscovered, such was the case with the

[101] Ibid., 215.
[102] László Beke, *Hatvanas évek: új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben* [Sixties: new pursuits in Hungarian fine arts] (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1991).
[103] Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnensota Press, 1992), 51.
[104] László Beke, 'The Hidden Dimensions of the Hungarian Art of the 1960s,' in *Hatvanas évek*, 315.
[105] Fowkes, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe*, 112-113.
[106] Eva Forgács, '1956 in Hungary and the Concept of East European Art,' *Third Text* 79 (March 2006): 182.

landscape painter Tivadar Csontváry-Kosztka, who according to Eva Forgács, 'became an icon of shamanistic "genuine Hungarianness".[107]

In his catalogue essay on Central European art in nature, Laszló Beke, even though his brief was to cover the whole region, begins his discussion with 'national romanticism' in Hungary as embodied in the work of the early 20th century painter Csontváry, and goes on to state that 'avant-garde elements are combined with the tradition of folklore in Eastern-European art.'[108] Although conceptual and land art were also referenced in Beke's text, Ben Tufnell, writing in a recently published general account of land art chooses to emphasize the 'traditional forms of rural life' in Central-Eastern Europe, which caused artists to develop 'conceptual and performance strategies articulating deep-seated roots in land and tradition'.[109] In other words, the deep rooted Hungarian divide between a national modernism that draws on folk traditions and the international dimension of the neo-avant-garde including conceptual and land art, which Beke elaborated in his 1960s exhibition, has since been applied to the whole of Central-East European art in nature in one general argument that largely reduces the Central European approach to land art to the use of folk traditions.

The Pécs Workshop artists did not show much interest in this line of national artistic heritage, but were rather attracted to avant-garde and contemporary artistic trends. In the beginning, information about the Hungarian classical avant-garde, epitomised by the figure of Lajos Kassák and his techtonic and constructivist tendencies in painting, was handed down to them by their art teacher Ferenc Lantos (1929).[110] Also, the town of Pécs had a strong legacy of pre-war avant-garde and in comparison to Budapest, was often described as 'the other major centre of Hungarian art'.[111] The reason for this lies partly in the fact that there were a significant number of local artists who in the early 1920s went to study at the Bauhaus, for example Marcel Breuer, the American

[107] Ibid. A museum devoted to the work of Csontváry opened in Pécs in 1973.
[108] Beke, 'Central East Europe', 112.
[109] Tuffnel, *Land Art*, 84.
[110] Lantos, an abstract painter, directed the young artists to practice good geometric and mathematical proportions, coordination, symmetry and the systematic use of colour, while encouraging an analytical approach and the extraction of basic elements from natural structures. The artists forged long lasting relationship with their teacher and often exhibited together, their works in the environment were however done separately. On the role of Ferenc Lantos for Pécs Workshop see: Tamás Aknai, *A Pécsi Műhely* [The Pécs Workshop] (Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó, 1995).
[111] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 126. Also, Dieter Hornisch compares the relationship of Pécs and Budapest to that of Warsaw and Krakow in Poland or Prague and Bratislava in Czechoslovakia. In Dieter Honisch, 'Neue Kunst aus Ungarn,' [New art from Hungary] *Kunst Magazin* 1 (1977), 73.

architect and designer, and distinguished Bauhaus member, was born in Pécs in 1902 and 'went to the school on the advice of Alfréd Forbát, an architect from Pécs, who worked with [Walter] Gropius.'[112] Optical artist Viktor Vasarely was also born in Pécs in 1908 and began his artistic career under Sándor Bortnyik, who led a workshop in Budapest 'based in large part on the example of the Bauhaus' that was specialised in graphic art.[113] Although Bortnyik, who also had an important influence on the early career of László Moholy Nagy, did not have a direct connection to Pécs, some authors claim that the name Pécs Workshop stands 'in memory of Bortnyik's progressive school'.[114]

The young artists of Pécs Workshop, whose meeting place and studio was in the basement of the Science and Technical House, were often compared to the Bauhaus. As they were at the time practically the only artists group in Hungary,[115] one author took a stand in defence of the group after 'some expressed surprise about the possibility of collective work', and justified this with the example of the Bauhaus.[116] Ferenc Romváry, director of the local Janius Pannonius Museum where he curated exhibitions about neo-constructivist tendencies in contemporary art, also stated: 'The young collective of Pécs Workshop not only brought fresh air to Pécs, but consciously responded to the intellectual heritage of Pécs Bauhaus artists, and are even the continuation of

[112] Eva Bajkay, 'Hungarians at the Bauhaus,' in *Beyond Art: A Third Culture: a Comparative Study in Cultures, Art and Science in 20th Century Austria and Hungary*, ed. Peter Weibel (Vienna and New York: Springer, 2005), 71. There were more young artists from the town who went to study at Bauhaus in the early 1920s, such as Gabor Jenő, Farkas Molnár, Henrik Stéfan, Hugó Johann, Andor Weininger and Ludwig Cacinović. Although there was not much information officially available about them in the 1960s, according to art historian Katalin Keserű 'their families lived in Pécs and people knew about them.' Interview Katalin Keserű, Budapest, January 2009.

[113] S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 308.

[114] See Honisch, 'Neue Kunst aus Ungarn', 73. The artists, however, have explained their name as originating from an essay by Károly Kismányoki, which dealt with a medieval sculptural workshop from Pécs that is known in Hungarian art history as the 'Pécs Workshop'. This is according to Pinczehely, 'Neoavantgarde műhelytitkok', 13-16.

[115] On the reasons for forming a group see: Ferenc Lantos, 'Some Reflections on the Creation of the Pécs Workshop,' in *The Workshop of Pécs 1970-1980*, 2.

[116] Katalin Keserű, 'Pécsi Műhely,' [Pécs Workshop] *Művészet* (Budapest) 9 (1973): 27. The relative unfamiliarity with artistic groups as a form of collective creativity in the Hungarian context of the neo-avant-garde is also visible from the recent essay by Edit Sasvári, who assigned the status of a group apart from Pécs Worshop also to Szürenon and Iparterv, which were loose circles of about dozen individual Budapest artists coming together for the exhibitions of the same name. See: Edit Sasvári, 'A Moment of Experimental Democracy in the Kádár Era. György Galántai's Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár and the Social Milieu of Counter-Culture in Hungary in 1960s and 1970s,' in *Removed from the Crowd: Unexpected Encounters I*, eds. Ivana Bago and Antonija Majača (Zagreb: Block/ DeLVe, 2011), 93.

that tradition.'[117] This observation adds an additional insight into the cultural atmosphere in which the Pécs Workshop artists were working, aware on the one hand of the role the avant-garde tradition played in the artistic identity of the city and at the same time eager to overcome such retrospective orientation and test out innovative practices.

During November 1970 Kismányoki and Szijártó still found some sunny days, which they used to visit the stone mine in the vicinity of Pécs on the slopes of Mecsek hills. Comparing it with the sand mine, the artists experienced the terrain of the quarry as more 'monumental and better enclosed' and experimented there with black and white geometric 'details', which they arranged sequentially on the bottom of the pit (fig. 14). As Kismányoki explains, only by photographing these inserted elements from the height of about fifty metres could the artists observe how sharply they 'clash' with the environment, an effect which weakens if the viewer is at a lower elevation or level with the paper bands.[118]

On the outing that took place during the afternoon of 15 November, the two artists were accompanied by Károly Halasz and together they realised three works in and around the stone mine. In the pine wood behind the stone mine the artists stretched a light blue reel of paper between trees (fig. 15), which they photographed from various standpoints, observing the intensity of the shadows on the paper surface, while also acknowledging that the light blue colour does not stand out too strongly from the surroundings.[119] The next interpolation took place in the smaller old stone mine, where the artists suspended light blue paper strip down the side and examined the behaviour of the 'foreign element' in the wind (fig. 16).[120] Finally, they inserted a white T-shaped paper on the bottom of the stone mine (fig. 17), but in the notes Kismányoki wrote down they admitted that 'for the time being we cannot go further on this line.'[121]

The winter must have provided the sought after space for reflection, because when the artists returned to the countryside during the following spring of 1971, they continued their investigations with inserted elements, this time choosing a deforested hill near Kantavár as the site (fig. 18). Kismányoki described the action, which involved rolling a yellow paper band down among the cut down trees and logs, as follows: 'The southern slope of a hillside in the form of a

[117] *Dunántuli Napló*, 4 July 1971. My translation.
[118] Notes dated 7 November 1970, Kismányoki archive.
[119] Notes entitled 'Kék Papirterkecs' dated 15 November 1970, Kismányoki's archive.
[120] Ibid., notes entitled 'Kőbanya – Lelógó kék sáv'.
[121] Ibid., notes entitled 'Kőbanya - Földrefektetett T'.

wedge reaching into a promontory. Reddish brown soil, cut down tree trunks, bright yellow shining strip. As it turns the white part is also visible, strongly wound around.'[122] What appears to be different from the previous experiments is the more active role of the inserted elements, as they are not just static in the space, but start to move, roll and be woven by the wind. It became more demanding for the photographic camera to document the movement of the elements.

The next experiment that took place in August 1971 was more of a group undertaking with Pinczehelyi, art historian Tamás Aknai and colleagues from the local art centre joining Kismányoki and Szijártó. They went to the familiar site of the sand mine in Pécsvárad, bringing with them blue paper rolls with the aim this time to explore the 'dynamics of the elements' (fig. 19). They also brought a film camera, which was more suitable for dealing with the changing appearance of the paper, the result of which was the first land art film of Pecs Workshop. The film shows someone throwing a blue paper roll from the top of the mine, which falls down the steps. The action is repeated several times, with the camera following the paper, while the artists observe the movement of the roll on the steps, on which it casts a strong shadow. The action is recorded from the top, from the bottom, from a distance and in the wind. Attention is paid to the site, which after the excavation of sand had been altered, becoming terraced, rhythmical and dynamic, appearing for the artists as a 'free architectural environment'.[123] Notably, the artists appear in the film only in the service of the experiment, throwing the paper or climbing on the steps to free the stuck roll, while the camera never focuses on them.

The fact that the film is shot in colour with a super 8mm camera shows that the artists faced no hindrance in material terms. According to Aknai they 'had at their disposal a deeper technological background than in general one could speak about in the [Hungarian] art of the 1970s, it could only be compared with Western European or American art, which enjoyed a similar situation.'[124] This was one of the grounds for Aknai's somewhat tendentious claim that Pécs Workshop artists belonged to the 'supported' faction of the Hungarian art world, which was at the time notoriously separated by the authorities into the categories of 'supported', 'tolerated' and 'forbidden' artistic production, with the neo-avant-garde generally belonging to the last category.[125] Although they

[122] Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv,* 307. My translation.
[123] CD Rom supplied with Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv.*
[124] Aknai, *A Pécsi Mühely*, 24. My translation.
[125] László Beke, 'Dulden, verbieten, unterstutzen: Kunst zwischen 1970 und 1975,' in *Die Zweite Offentilchkeit: Kunst in Ungarn in 20. Jahrundert* (Dresden: Kunst Verlag, 1999), 213.

might have had no hindrance in terms of material resources, the artists testify to the constant control of the authorities over their activities: 'There always had to be a reason why we were doing things.'[126]

On the same August day, the team shot another film at the Small Stone Mine entitled *Paper Strip Running* (fig. 20). The participants are filmed running in a green field, flying red paper strips high above their heads. The strips glide in the wind, break or drift on the grass. In the end all the rolls were collected into one mound and everybody jumped into the heap of paper. While in the previous film we see only the figures of the group members, and the camera concentrates on the movement of the inserted element in the defined environment, the second film seems much freer, as if it were a documentation of an action or happening taking place in nature, with girls and boys running with paper kites, rather than a serious analytical experiment.

A combination of both attitudes, the serious experimental one and the acknowledgment of the artists' presence in the landscape, is visible in the film shot on 16 September 1971 in the Mecsek Hills above Pécs (fig. 21). The project *The Separation of the Tree* can be considered among their most ambitious land art pieces, and all the members of the group took part, with Támas Aknai attending too. Before the outing, Kismányoki wrote down a precise script. The starting point was the painting of a dried out tree with an 'unnatural colour' to find out how 'it separates itself from its environment, and into what relation it comes after the process?'[127] A lot of attention was paid to external forces such as the sun, the rain, or changes in the weather, by questioning how much 'unitary changes in the natural environment have power over an object that is made artificially'. The film shows the artists painting the tree, setting it up and observing it with other trees and through the bushes. The tree is set down again and red strips are added to it, the process of observation is repeated, and in the end everyone involved gets together to pose in front of the separated tree.

After the first phase of the *Separation of the Tree* was completed, there followed the second, when the artists returned to the site the next spring to document the changes, referring to the

[126] Interview with Károly Kismányoki, Pécs, May 2009.
[127] CD Rom supplied with Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv.*

project as *Entropy II*.[128] Kismányoki also added *Afterthoughts* to the script of *The Separation of the Tree*, where he wrote about the problem of editing the film and the status of the unused documentation of other actions in the natural environment. Interestingly, this was the moment when he referred to the material as 'land art', while in the same context he also raised the question of why they stopped producing it.[129]

The term land art was first introduced in official Hungarian art literature by art historian László Beke in an essay entitled 'Why does A.P.L.C. use photographs?' published in the journal *Fotóművészet* in February 1972. The abbreviation in the title stands for 'Actions, Project Art, Land Art and Concept art' through which Beke analysed various possibilities for the use of photography in contemporary art. He also referred to the text 'Artists and Photographs' by Lawrence Alloway from the April 1970 issue of *Studio International* and both authors discuss artists associated with land art such as Michael Heizer and Jan Dibbets, while Beke also mentioned Gerry Schum's *Land Art* TV exhibition from 1969.[130]

The term land art, which was initially applied to art envisaged specially for a TV program broadcast on German national television in the spring of 1969,[131] encompassed a myriad connotations that in later historicization of the movement had been brushed away in order to limit the meaning of land art to certain Western artists and their practices. For instance, Gilles Tiberghien in his study of *Land Art* published in the early 1990s insisted on the fact that for land artists 'the privileged medium remains earth', despite the acknowledgement that the term covers 'vague designations from earthworks to process art, environmental art or ecological art and so on'.[132] On the grounds of earth as defining medium, Tiberghien effectively excluded from his narrative a variety of artistic

[128] Kismányoki, as a geography student was interested in entropy, which he found out about from natural science and according to the interview with the artist, this was not related to the Robert Smithson's writings on entropy.
[129] From autumn of 1970 till the spring of 1972, according to the information supplied in the Pécs Workshop monograph and accompanying CD Rom, the artists undertook 15 land art experiments, all of which resulted in photographic documentation, and five of which were also filmed.
[130] László Beke, 'Miért használ fotókat az A.P.L.C?' [Why does A.P.L.C. use photographs?] *Fotóművészet* (Budapest) (February 1972). After introducing the current international trends in art and photography, and especially in relation to land art, the same writer published in the next issue of the same journal specializing in photography an essay on the Hungarian artists' approach to photography, but does not mention Pécs Workshop, whom he was aware of, as example of Hungarian artists dealing with land art and photography.
[131] Gerry Schum, *Land Art* (Berlin: Fernsehgalerie Schum, 1969).
[132] Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 13. First published in French in 1993.

responses to the environment and focused predominantly on American earthworks, situating land art 'at the crucial moment in modern sculpture' which logically followed on from minimalism.[133]

Writing more recently, Joy Sleeman draws attention to 'the sharp distinction between how land art was perceived during the lifetimes of Schum and Smithson' - who both died in tragic circumstances in 1973, and how it was 'perceived in accounts written subsequently.'[134] Bearing this distinction in mind, it is worth considering what entailed land art practice while it was still in its nascent phase. Sleeman, for example, uncovers the contacts and meetings of artists and curators on the both sides of the Atlantic, revealing the participation of mostly the same 'German, English, Dutch and American artists' in several exhibitions with overlapping interests.[135] As a consequence, suggested also in her title 'Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune', the emergence of land art was 'synchronic', 'cosmic' and had 'a sense of its perceived geographic limits at the time.'[136]

Apart from the comparison of land art as TV phenomenon with broadcasting the first steps of humankind's walk on the Moon, Sleeman also emphasises 1969 as the year of 'great mobility of the art world' which marked the inauguration of land art. A similar opinion was expressed by Tiberghien, for whom the specific phenomenon of land art was 'the result of the inter-crossing trajectories of a diverse group of artists who all belong to the same intellectual generation, artists whose first exhibitions were held at the end of 1960s.'[137] Sleeman also determines 1973 as the year when the history of land art ended and its historiography began, recognising 'various periods of delay in different countries'.[138]

As this research will show, the 'geographic limits' could only be perceived on the basis of non-participation of East European artists in the shows that determined the beginning of land art, although there were certainly no barriers to producing land art in territories which were a little more distant from the Atlantic coast. Due to general restrictions on free travel, artists from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain took part in international art movements by sending their

[133] Ibid., 14.
[134] Joy Sleeman, 'Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune', 152.
[135] The exhibitions Sleeman mentions were *Earth* exhibition at the White Museum, Cornell University, New York, curated by Willoughby Sharp, *Land Art* TV exhibition by Gerry Schum and Harald Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form*, all from 1969.
[136] Ibid., 148.
[137] Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 14.
[138] Sleeman, 'Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune', 151.

photographic documentation to be included in exhibitions and publications. In that way Petr Štembera participated in the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* in Bueno Aires,[139] with leading artists from the West as well as South America and was included in the first book of Klaus Groh *If I Had a Mind….concept art –project art*.[140] Because of the special status of non-aligned Yugoslavia, Slovenian Group OHO could travel to New York to take part in the *Information* show in Museum of Modern Art[141] and both Štembera and artists from OHO were included in Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years: Dematerialisation of the Art Object 1966 -1972*.[142]

Furthermore 'intimate connections across geographical distances', in Sleeman's terms, were not only limited to the Western sphere, as for example land artist Walter de Maria visited colleagues from OHO in Slovenia in the summer of 1970, while the curator of the seminal 1969 exhibition *Earth* Willoughby Sharp toured Yugoslavia in 1973. Károly Hálasz of Pécs Workshop was in correspondence with Robert Smithson and the intricate web of contacts and exchanges could be continued. Contact between artists with similar affinities was also established across the strictly controlled socialist borders. Balatonboglár, a loophole of freedom for the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, was also a meeting point for artists from neighbouring countries, most famous of which was a visit of a group of Czech and Slovak artists in 1972, when a symbolic handshake was staged between all the participants in an attempt to reconcile all sides after Hungary's involvement in the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 by the Warsaw Pact.[143] Rudolf Sikora and Petr Štembera were among the artists who came to that historic event, which took place a few days after the Pécs Worshop's presentation at the chapel. Sándor Pinczehélyi later invited both artists to visit Pécs, where they exhibited and perform repeatedly during the 1970s. Pécs Workshop also took part in the exhibition *Xerox* curated by Želimir Koščević in SC Gallery in Zagreb in 1973, establishing links with the Yugoslav art scene, while further contacts existed with art centres in Poland.[144]

In terms of 1969, which has been considered as the year of the emergence of land art, it is important to note that OHO Group's major body of land art works was carried out in the Slovenian

[139] Jorge Glusberg, *Arte de Sistemas* (Bueno Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación, 1971).
[140] Klaus Groh, *If I Had a Mind….concept art –project art* (Cologne: Du Mont Verlag, 1971).
[141] Knyaston McShine, *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970).
[142] Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: Dematerialisation of the Art Object 1966 -1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).
[143] See: Julia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, eds., *Törvénytelen avantgarde: Galántai György Balatonboglári Kápolnaműterme 1970-1973* [Illegal avant-garde: György Galántai's chapel workshop in Balatonboglár 1970-1973] (Budapest: Artpool-Balassi, 2003), 141-143.
[144] See: Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 243.

countryside and on the Croatian coast in the summer of 1969, while the first land art actions of Czech artist Zorka Ságlová also took place that August in the countryside near Prague.[145] Interestingly, the first proto-works of Pécs Workshop realised in the natural environment also date from the winter of 1969, when Kismányoki wrapped a fir tree with a paper reel and nearby, on the bottom of the rocky slope of the hill, made a more geometric arrangement with the roll of paper (fig. 22, 23).[146] The majority of land art actions across Central Europe took place in that period around 1970 and, just as in the West, by 1973 the peak of the activities had passed: OHO Group moved to a rural commune in the spring of 1971 and changed its practice, while the last land art project of Pécs Workshop took place in spring of 1972.

Furthermore, parallels in the age of the practitioners of land art could not be more obvious, as the artists considered in this research were generally born in the mid to late 1940s and, like their Western colleges, had their first shows at the end of the 1960s, arguably belonging to the same 'intellectual generation' to which Tiberghien referred. Even considering the cosmic element that was suggested by Sleeman as being defining for land art, there are many relevant points of connection, which will be discussed in depth in subsequent chapters, although not necessarily in the strict context of land art, as the cosmology that OHO group was interested in was related to questions of spirituality and existence in the universe, while for Slovak artists space travel offered unlimited possibilities for their conceptual imaginations. On the other hand, in the practice of Pécs Workshop, cosmic references were generally not present.

The synchronic emergence of land art could therefore be extended to include territories on the other side of the geo-political divide and one cannot assume any kind of 'delay' in terms of artists' practice in the socialist countries of Eastern Bloc.[147] The delay is only to be anticipated in the second phase, namely in the subsequent period of the historiography of the movement. Equally, the problem of terminology widely discussed in Western art history, has also been the subject of

[145] Milan Knížák, ed. *Zorka Ságlová* (Prague: National Gallery, 2006).
[146] Photographs of that action are dated December 1969 and included in the archive of the artist, but are not published.
[147] In comparison, Hungarian artist Tamás St. Auby (1944) addressed the synchronicity of the appearance of Fluxus in East and West and raised the question 'Why didn't the western artists and art historians know about the Fluxus-coincidences?', explaining that while the information from the West reached the artists on the other side of the Iron Curtain through numerous publications, which were translated into local languages and published in samizdats, the communication in the other direction did not work, as 'in the East there was no smuggleable information; the samizdat was too weak to arrive in the West.' See: IPUT (Tamás St. Auby), 'Fluxus – Art – Life – Politcs' in *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe* ed. Petra Stegman (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), 107.

art historical considerations in the region, where Piotrowski for example has claimed that 'interpretive tools developed within the context of Western art can only be applied to the analysis of East-Central Europe as a region with difficulty'.[148] Even though it was a foreign phrase, the term 'land art' was used by artists across Central Europe at the time when it was practiced, just as it was first applied in the contexts of a German TV broadcast, although it was often correspondingly translated into local languages, including into Hungarian as 'taj műveszet' and used alternately with the English land art.[149] It is important though to bear in mind, as already stated, that its scope was much broader than in later accounts of the genre.

Despite belonging to the same generation of artists and the synchronous timing of the emergence of art practice in the environment across the East-West divide, the circumstances and conditions in which the art of the region was produced were significantly different, not only in relation to the West, but varying between individual countries of the Eastern Bloc as well. How much these specific social and political circumstances have influenced not only the art practice of the region but also its art history is the subject of this research.

During the period of their land art investigations, the artists of Pécs Workshop also practiced painting, photography and print making, in addition to assembling installations and producing enamel designs. Their colleague Tamás Aknai, who not only took part in some of their land art actions but wrote catalogue texts as well, and held opening speeches at the exhibitions for them at the time, is also the author of the only art historical book on the group, published in Hungarian at a later date, in which he refers to the Pécs Workshop's approach to art as a 'try out everything attitude'.[150] In difference to Aknai, Piotrowski describes this kind of syncretism 'marked by the free movement between the tendencies considered antagonistic in the West' as one of the characteristics of the Central European neo-avant-garde.[151]

In Hungarian art history a great deal of attention has been paid to the works Pécs Workshop artists produced during their summer residencies at the Factory of Enamel Industry Works in Bonyhád, a small town on the northern side of Mecsek hills, which specialised in large scale building enamel. In accordance with the socialist fashion at the time, the factory which produced architectural

[148] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 173.
[149] See for example: László Beke, 'Ahogy azt Móricska elkezeli,' [How little Móricska imagines things] [samizdat publication] Budapest, 27 May 1972, 5.
[150] Aknai, *A Pécsi Műhely*, 25.
[151] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 127.

enamel tiles for the external decoration of pre-fabricated, mass produced housing estate blocks and other newly erected socialist buildings, also started to organise artist colonies and invite artists annually for a period of ten days to make use of their facilities.[152] While in the 1950s the visits of artists to socialist factories resulted in works which were 'limited to compositions of workers and themes from working life', in the period after de-Stalinization artists were allowed to use factory resources and technology.[153] The first colony of this type in Hungary was held in Székesfehérvár at the Light Metal Works in 1967, while the colony in which the Pécs Workshop artists participated was set up the following year.[154]

Like many of their fellow artists, the Pécs Workshop used the facilities there to make art pieces with factory machines and materials, 'generally working at night' not to disturb the rhythm of the production line (fig. 24).[155] At first their works were little different to their painterly practice, resulting in the production of unique and original art objects, although they later started to design abstract geometric patterns which were suitable for mass-production, a move that in one critic's view meant the adoption of a more 'democratic content'.[156] The enamel tiles in bright colours which bore the individual signature design of each of the artists could be arranged in large geometric compositions and such was the case with the self-standing enamel walls exhibited in the centre of Pécs in 1970 (fig. 25). They also made enamel designs for large sheets of metal which were publicly displayed in the same place the following year (fig. 26).[157]

A very different experience of the Hungarian socialist factory was described by Miklós Haraszti, a poet and a political activist, who was also a regular visitor to the neo-avant-garde gatherings in Balatonboglar. Belonging to the same generation as the Pécs artists, by the time he started to work as an ordinary worker for six months in Red Star Tractor Factory on the industrial island of

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[152] On the history of Bonyhad artistic colony, see: Tamás Aknai, *Building Enamel 1970* (Pécs: Pécsi Képzőművészeti Studió, 1971). The catalogue contains a shorter English translation of the text in which more practical information about the enamel technique and a historical overview of the Bonyhad colony is omitted.

[153] Tibor Wehner, 'Iron, Steel and Sculpture,' in *International Steel Sculpture Workshop and Symposium Dunaujváros 1974-1993* (Dunaújváros: Dunaferr-Art, 1996), 35.

[154] According to Edit Sasvári, the organiser of the Székesfehérvár colony was inspired by the Polish Sculpture Biennial at Elblag in 1965, while the other two colonies in Villány (1967) and Siklós (1969), located in close proximity to Pécs, were organized under 'direct inspiration from the European Sculpture Symposium organized by Karl Prantl from Austria, in St. Margaretchen.' Edit Sasvári, 'Two Decades,' in *International Steel Sculptor Workshop and Symposium Dunaujváros 1974-1993*, 19.

[155] Keserű, 'Pécsi Műhely', 27.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Pinczehelyi, *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv,* 18-19.

Csepel on the Danube in Budapest in 1971/72 he had already been a member of Maoist circle, imprisoned for his left critique of socialism and been on hunger-strike in custody, prompting even philosopher George Lukács to protest on his behalf, demonstrating a different attitude to the political system they lived under. His realistic and uncompromising observations of the exploitative working conditions in the socialist factory were first circulated in samizdat, smuggled outside the country and published abroad under the title *A Worker in a Worker's State*, while the author had to stand trial in Hungary in 1973.[158] Dedicated to conceptual artist Tamás Szentjóby, this poetic evidence of socialism as it really existed, both in its depressing descriptions of bureaucratic minds and more invigorating revelations of solidarity among the workers, remains a vivid testimony of the time.[159]

By contrast, the works Pécs artists produced during Bonyhád residencies were clearly in no way controversial or critical of the political system, nor did they expose the working conditions in the factory. As a matter of fact, they actually provided perfect material to introduce the group's activity in official socialist art magazines. In the appropriately chosen architecture journal *Építőművészet*, László Beke published an article about the young artists from Pécs as early as 1971, which in a neutral and objective tone of writing concentrated on descriptions of the artists' abstract compositions and enamel designs.[160] Two years later their enamel pieces were the main topic of an article in a more mainstream art magazine *Művészet*[161] while, by comparison, the first text about their land art projects was not published in an official art magazine until 1980, long after they stopped producing it.[162]

Illustrating the peculiar situation in which socialist art history functioned at the time, some art historians complemented the careful selection of artists and topics for official journals by expressing more critical views on innovative practices in samizdat publications. Within a month of his text on Pécs artists appearing in *Építőművészet*, prominent young art historian and ambitious curator Beke initiated a project which would later become known as the first Hungarian conceptual art exhibition. Under the heading *Idea/Imagination* he sent out a call for proposals to 28 contemporary Hungarian artists asking them to respond to "the WORK = the DOCUMENTATION

[158] Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State* (London: Penguin, 1975).
[159] See interview with Haraszty in: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, *Loophole to Happiness*, 32-38.
[160] László Beke, 'Pécsi jegyzetek –fiatal művészekről,' [Notes from Pécs about young artists] *Építőművészet* (Budapest) 5 (July 1971).
[161] Keserű, 'Pécsi Műhely'.
[162] Gyetvai, 'Tanulmányok a tájban, Beszámoló a Pécsi Műhely munkájáról'.

OF THE IDEA", an invitation which also reached the Pécs Workshop artists, as well as their teacher Lantos.[163]

Upon receiving the artists' responses, Beke wrote an evaluative essay which he published in a samizdat in May of the following year.[164] His verdict on the Pécs artists was that 'they mostly met the formal requirements of the invitation, but still did not think deeply about the problematics of IDEA and tried to stay too much on the "ground of reality".' The only exception Beke saw was in the photomontages that Pinczehelyi suggested 'as they propose the placing of a constructive sculptural shape within the cityscape or in the natural environment, are connected to the issues of both land and project art, as well as constructivism and sign-sculpture.' While Lantos's 'strange mixture of *ars poetica*, sketch, autonomous drawing and didactic series' in Beke's opinion 'ultimately fails to answer the questions raised by IDEA', the joint submission of Kismányoki and Szijarto did not get a much better response. They sent documentation of their early land art pieces with paper rings attached to the trees and the rolling of a paper strip down the deforested hill, which prompted Beke to comment that he 'would rather find the possibility of advancement in the work…Right now it is only a visual experiment, but a lot of things can be derived from it.' The art critic's assessment of their land art was re-confirmed in the same issue of his samizdat in which he briefly reports on the lecture given by Támas Aknai in Budapest in early 1972 about Pécs Workshop, introducing their enamel works and also showing their land art films, which in Beke's opinion, were 'still just an attempt, despite a few beautiful sequences.'[165]

The frustration with their work expressed by the young critic indicated, it could be argued, the course that history of art would take on the group in the following decades. Although the Pecs Workshop artists in the early seventies did belong to a network of Central European neo-avant-garde artists and were included in initiatives such as Beke's *Idea*, or invited to presentations in Balatonboglár, this has not been accurately reflected in the literature. Discussion of the group's work remained firmly within the borders of national art history and even there was often omitted, for instance from retrospective projects such as *Parallel Chronologies*, which focused on 'invisible

[163] László Beke ed., *Elképzelés: A Magyar Konceptművészet Kezdetei Beke László Gyűjteménye* [Idea/Imagination, the beginnings of Hungarian conceptual art from the collection of László Beke, 1971] (Budapest: OSAS-tranzit.hu, 2008).
[164] Beke, 'Ahogy azt Móricska elkezeli', 9.
[165] Ibid., 5.

history of exhibitions' with the aim of 'placing the events of the Hungarian art scene of the 1960s and 1970s into an international context.'[166]

Their colleague and associate member of the group at the time, Tamás Aknai, an art historian with affinities for neo-constructivist art, wrote in the mid 1990s the only monograph about the Pécs Workshop in which he expressed his often tendentious views about their practice.[167] The artists' collectively edited publication *Pécsi Műhely Nagy Képeskönyv* could be perceived as an attempt at 'self-historization' as well as a response to Aknai's book, which in Pinczehelyi's opinion 'contains a lot of mistakes and inaccuracies'.[168] On the other hand, the artists' publication which predominantly contains photographic documentation of their works and projects, is in Akani's view 'a dull mix of valuable and worthless work.'[169]

According to Aknai, the beginnings of Pécs Workshop land art were just 'fooling around' in the countryside, because 'apart from play' they lacked any 'deeper or theoretically based motive'.[170] Such dismissals, as well as criticisms towards their practice expressed earlier, are part of the legacy of Pécs Workshop. However it is important to bear in mind that their land art projects were presented, included in exhibitions and discussed at the time, and as the only such systematic undertakings in Hungary are a worthy subject of study of that artistic tendency in the context of Central European art. Despite their seemingly inherent resistance to interpretation fortified additionally by the artists' writings, which do not ostensibly offer an easier entry point to the work, there are some consistent aspects of their approach to land art that require closer attention.

The Pécs Workshop actions in the environment were perceived as experiments, since the artists were taking 'basic elements' to the environment, whose behaviour they observed when placed in the selected site. The emphasis on the experimental character of their works in the environment could be related to the wish to distance themselves from subjective artistic creation in favour of a more objective approach that was implied in the positivistic understanding of science during socialism.[171] The 'analytical-documentary method'[172] applied in their land art was visible in the

[166] Dóra Hegy, Sándor Hornyik, Zsuzsa Laszló, *Parallel Chronologies* (Budapest: tranzit.hu, 2011), 2.
[167] Aknai, *Pécsi Műhely*. It appeared in Hungarian only.
[168] E-mail exchange between author and Sándor Pincehely, 19 May 2009.
[169] E-mail exchange between author and Tamás Aknai, 19 May 2009.
[170] Ibid.
[171] For the discussion of the use of science as metaphor in the work of Russian constructivists, see: Briony Fer, 'Metaphor and Modernity: Russian Constructivism,' *Oxford Art Journal* 12 (1989): 14-30.
[172] Hegyi, *Pécsi Műhelyi 1970 -1980*, 12.

mechanical rhythm of repetition both of the geometric elements inserted in landscapes as well as in the recoding of them, equally in photographic sequences and in edited films.

However the artists were not interested in the formalistic aspects of inserted elements, but rather in exposing them to natural phenomena such as wind, rain or sunshine and observing the results of such a process. According to Kristine Stiles, artists used the term process art as simultaneously meaning 'natural phenomena, focus of their working methods, and a style', which occurred in the 1960s at the moment when it 'was no longer possible to believe in formalist theory of art.'[173] Similarly, Pécs artists were not attracted to abstract art or to experiment with abstraction in the landscape, but were interested rather in the process of exposing abstract elements to the natural environment.

In the notes which Kismanyóki wrote in the early seventies to accompany their land art activities there is a paragraph that states: 'As we emphasise the momentariness at the same time deny it too since we expect result from it during process. The desire to create the possibility for everybody, by following it, to get attached to it somehow, - the openness, - the desire for openness. The increased presence develops with the help of the experimental means of "membrane" – term used by us. Through this the problems enlarge or diminish, it regulates the relationship between subject and the given environment. The interpolatedness determines the outcome of the process which is, at the same time, response too. Response – Choice/ Choice – Response / Challenge of environment / by chance, possibility widening / What is more significant: "why" and "how"?'[174] This short passage that addressed the importance of temporality and openness to the outcome of the process of insertion of elements in the environment is actually the only piece of writing translated into English among the artist's notes.

The artists meticulously documented every undertaking, while the texts accompanying this documentation often remained in the poetic and the interrogative mode, in order to avoid strict and definitive interpretations. Describing their method of investigation in the environment they often resorted to the metaphor of 'litmus paper' which when applied in chemical experiments changes its appearance. The artists experimented with paper strips, maps and rolls in various colours, to which they referred as 'artificial element', however there was no deeper discussion of

[173] Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 577.
[174] Exact quotation of the original translation from the private archive of Kismanyóki.

what is meant by the artificial in relation to the natural. For example, environmental theory poses the question whether there can be anything purely natural or purely artificial as a consequence of human activity, claiming that even something artificial, like roads or buildings, are made of material which come from 'quarrying "natural" rock'.[175]

An additional reason to stress the experimental character of their actions in the environment was their belief that they were up to something new and unprecedented in Hungarian art, as they had 'a strong conviction that something important happened, we knew that it was a main current of a river, but could not explain it.'[176] There was also a more pragmatic aspect to it too, namely the artists always had to justify their outings to the suspicious authorities and as Kismányoki explained, that that was the 'only way to legalize them - we constantly had to give reasons why we wanted to do things.'[177]

One of the most important considerations for land artists is the site, its location and geographical or historical significance. 'Sites and works are inseparable', writes Tiberghien and continues: 'The site does not come before the work, rather it is the work that constitutes the site and gives the site its identity.'[178] His observation is based on the land art made by American artists who physically intervened in the environment and changed the site significantly. Considering Pécs Workshop's relationship to site, which was not based on the physical alteration of the environment, Miwon Kwon's interpretation of 1970s site-specific works, which emphasizes the phenomenological experience of site, might have more points of relevance. Kwon also describes the 'inextricable, indivisible relationship between work and its site' in early site-specific works, which took the site as actual location', the identity of which is 'composed of a unique combination of physical elements' that are experienced through 'a sensory immediacy'.[179] Pécs Workshop's approach to the site can be perceived as phenomenological, in other words, as grounded in experiential reality of the site such as its terrain, size or exposure to weather. However, there are references in their selection of sites that go beyond the pure physicality of the site.

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[175] Philip W Sutton, *The Environment: Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 15.
[176] Kismányoki interview, Pécs, May 2009.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 96.
[179] Kwon distinguishes three paradigms of site specificity – phenomenological, social institutional and discursive. See: Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2004), 11.

All their experiments were carried out in very specific locations found in the surroundings of the town of Pécs, a short bus ride from the city centre. Their sites were on the borders of cleared areas and woods, a stone mine, sand mine and a deforested wood – in short, sites altered by human exploitation of natural resources – wood, sand and stone. As a consequence vast craters, terraced terrains and dramatic scenery had been created, which the artists used as 'found environments'. Although in their land art practice there is no explicit social or environmental critique, their systematic selection of sites that have been entirely transformed through industrial exploitation of raw materials indicates an attitude.

This aspect has been overlooked in Hungarian art history, where there has been little understanding that 'sites and works are inseparable' and the claim prevails that Pécs Workshop were attracted to these places only because of their rhythmic and formal qualities. For example, Lóránd Hegy describes how 'artists go out into free nature in order to place their marks on a random, non-fomalizable 'external' environment.'[180] Additional confusion was added by the observation that the sites Pécs Workshop artists used were an 'already existing "land artwork" produced by mining'.[181]

There are many points of connections between land art and mining, but not in the sense that miners produced land art, as suggested by the Hungarian critic in an oversimplified reading of the fact that some earthworks entailed changing the surface of the earth. As is well known from the history of environmental art, Pécs Workshop artists were not the only ones using disused mines as sites for their works.[182] For instance, Robert Smithson's *Broken Circle* was made on the site of a water-filled disused sand pit in Emmen in Netherlands during the Sonsbeek festival in summer of 1971, while, typically, the artist's intervention involved working with earth as medium and resulted in a monumental land art.[183] The experience of working in such a location prompted Smithson to reflect on the issues of mining areas and art as well as the relationship between ecology and industry, which he also wrote down in a short passage that remained unpublished during his lifetime, where he states that 'art can become a resource that mediates between the

[180] Hegyi, *Pécs Műhely 1970-1980*, 12.
[181] Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 157.
[182] See for example: Kastner and Walis, *Land and Environmental art*.
[183] Geert van Beijeren and Coosje Kapteyn, eds., *Sonsbeek '71 (19.6-15.8. 1971)* (Sonsbeek Park, Arnhem, 1971).

ecologist and the industrialist' and asserts that ecology and industry are not a 'one way street rather they should be cross-roads' and art can 'provide the needed dialectic between them.'[184]

These ideas were taken further by Robert Morris who in 1979 gave a lecture entitled 'Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture', and for whom working in sites which were 'scarred by mining or poisoned by chemicals' implied 'moral not just aesthetical choices'. Using art as land reclamation might have implications for the wiping away of 'technological guilt' he warned and asked whether artists working in 'industrially blasted landscapes' would convert these sites 'into idyllic and reassuring places, thereby socially redeeming those who wasted the landscape in the first place.'[185]

There is no evidence of comparable reflection on the issues of mining and industrial impact on the environment in the practice of Pécs Workshop, just as there was no metaphorical meaning hidden in the pieces of paper they took to the site. The reasons for the selection of these sites altered by human intervention were, according to Kismányoki, that these were abandoned areas, with 'no one walking there', which gave them the freedom to experiment, without being under the constant surveillance to which they were exposed in town.[186] Furthermore, the artists wanted to get away from the picturesque landscape associated with the national revival in Hungary at the time. The affirming role of the countryside in shaping national identity has been described as 'an ideal middle landscape between the rough wilderness of nature and the smooth artificiality of the town, a combination of nature and culture which best represents the nation-state.'[187] As Kismányoki explained, they wanted to separate from the traditions of idyllic 'Pannonian lyricism' celebrated by poets, which for the artists resembled 'false beauty', and therefore they chose locations that were very different to these.

In terms of the artists' awareness of land art works produced elsewhere at the time of their engagements in the environment, again there is no straightforward answer. In retrospect they

[184] Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996), 376.
[185] Robert Morris, 'Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture,' in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 259-260.
[186] Kismányoki interview, Pécs, May 2009.
[187] John Rennie-Short, *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1991), 35.

referred to several artists such as Jan Dibbets and Christo as having relevance in regard to their own practice.[188] According to Aknai, in the early 1970s the artists had access to foreign art magazines, including *Studio International, Kunstwerk* and *Cimaise*, which they used to look through in the library of the Janus Pannonius Museum, which also stocked the catalogues of Biennales and Documentas.[189] A more proactive approach to the international art world was taken by Károly Halász, who wrote to Giancarlo Politi of *Flash Art* and received copies of the magazine and was in possession of the catalogue of the Sonsbeek land art projects in the Netherlands, which he obtained from the curator in 1971. Halász also got in touch with Robert Smithson who sent him a slide of *Spiral Jetty* and some copies of *Art Forum*, which he recommended to the Hungarian artist.[190]

The issue of correspondence between the Hungarian and the American artist has been subject to some confusion in recent Hungarian writing about the author. While Tamás Aknai does not mention that episode in his narrative of Pécs Workshop, although he informs us about the other international contacts Halász had, Kata Aknai claims that 'on his return from Documenta [V] Halász wrote a letter to Robert Smithson asking for more information about Spiral Jetty' to which Smithson replied and 'also asked his gallerist to send Artforum to Halász regularly for three years.'[191] In the most recent catalogue the author of the text fails to clarify the issue, however the facsimile of the letter was included in the documentation, with the date 17th April 1972 clearly visible, which contradicts the chronology Kata Aknai established, since Documenta V took place later that summer.[192]

Regardless of the availability of international press and attempted correspondence with artists abroad, the more serious encounter of Pécs Workshop artists with contemporary artistic trends on the international scene arguably happened on their travels. As mentioned, Halász visited Documenta in summer of 1972, on a longer trip to Germany, while Pinczehely and Kismányoki

[188] Pinczehely states: 'I was very interested in the work of Dutch artist Jan Dibbets.' He also mentions Christo, who was perceived as artist from the East. In Sándor Pinczehely, 'Neoavantgarde műhelytitkok', 13. My translation.
[189] Aknai, *A Pécsi Műhely*, 22.
[190] Interview with Halasz, Paks, May 2009.
[191] Kata Aknai, *Halász Karoly: Private Transmissions/ Photoworks 1971-79* (Budapest: Vintage Galeria, 2010), 10.
[192] David Fehér, 'Cry from a Dark Room,' in *Károly Hopp Halász: Works 1966-2011*, ed. Sándor Pinczehely (Pécs: Pécsi Galeria, 2011), 66.

visited the Paris Biennial in 1973 and also travelled to Germany. Regarding the question of the influence of international developments in contemporary art on their early land art works, it could be argued that they were not crucial or decisive, but can be felt in the later practices of the artists, including some that took place in the natural environment, to which I will come shortly.

The artists' relationship to nature has not been directly addressed in their writings, just as there is no assessment of their choice of sites, although the systematic use of environments altered by humans, located in isolated spots in the countryside, points to fact that the artists were consistent in their selection. It is also evident from the actions carried out in these locations that the artists did not leave traces behind them and did not intervene into the environment by changing the surface of the site. Their attitude was described in subsequent literature on art and nature in Hungary in terms of 'there was no radical interference' but rather 'tiny "environmentally-friendly" gestures'.[193] In that sense, Pécs Workshop shared the same approach with other Central European artists working in the environment in the 1970s, who generally did not fundamentally intervene in the environment.

In Hungary at the time the Pécs Workshop artists were producing their works in the environment according to many sources, there was no existing concept of ecology, nor was there an environmental movement.[194] Until the emergence of the Danube Circle in 1985, environmental groups in Hungary 'were few and focused on monitoring bird and wildlife populations and protecting habitats', while the Danube Circle differentiated itself from such groups 'in its use of direct action and underground publishing to ensure that the public would have access to information and a role in decision-making processes.'[195] The issue of the damming of the river Danube between Slovakia and Hungary attracted such a strong response from activists as for them it was a 'symbol of state socialist system's disregard for the aesthetic and historical importance of the landscape'. Their demand for 'greater public access to the information' about the environment would play a significant role in bringing down the socialist regime in 1989.[196]

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[193] Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 157.
[194] See Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 153. Similar information was confirmed by Katalin Keserű (interview with the author January, 2009) and László Beke (interview with the author December, 2008).
[195] Harper, *Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activists and Post-Socialist Political Ecology in Hungary*, 30.
[196] Ibid., 33.

Socialist Hungary prioritised industrialisation through investment in heavy industry, which turned out to be the biggest polluter, and although environmental protection was declared to be one of the state's tasks, economic growth always came first.[197] In the early 1970s Hungary was preparing to construct its first nuclear power plant and the chosen location was also on Danube downstream from Budapest, in a small town called Paks, which is also the hometown of Károly Halász. The plant was built throughout the 1970s, but at the 'artist colony that was organised there during the construction period, discussion arose around the balance of the two world powers, Russia and USA, not ecological issues.'[198]

The majority of their land art pieces had already been realised by the time Pécs Workshop artists experienced new contexts that opened up to them by travelling abroad and participating in the neo-avant-garde exhibitions at Balatonboglár, which resulted in changes in their art practice characterised by their leaving the field of geometric abstraction and entering the territory of conceptualism. The meetings of artists at Balatonboglár and the exhibitions and performances held at the Chapel may be considered a unique chapter of global conceptualism. The run down chapel was rented by György Galantai for his studio in 1967, and after several years of private use and renovation, in the early 70s it started to host the first exhibitions. The interest of neo-avant-garde artists in participating in Balatonbolglár was encouraged by the deteriorating political atmosphere in Budapest following the halting of the reform process, as a result of which several exhibitions were forbidden, including the 'Direct Week –Avant-garde festival' organised by Tamás Szentjoby and Gyula Pauer, which then moved to Balatonboglár in the summer of 1972.[199]

The venue, despite its scenic setting on a green hill near the lake, functioned primarily as an enclave for Budapest artists engaged in discussions that were transposed from the capital without much reflection on the surroundings, counteracting the impulse to engage with land art that might have arisen from the site. Organizing exhibitions in a resort on Lake Balaton offered a convenient escape from the firm control of the authorities in the capital, although Galantai also faced a regular battle with the local authorities, who were constantly present and found numerous reasons to disturb the artists' activities, mostly on the grounds of 'public health and safety'

[197] György Enyedy and Viktória Szirmai, 'Environmental Movements and Civil Society in Hungary,' in *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe*, eds. Andrew Tickle and Ian Welsh (Harlow: Longman, 1998), 148.
[198] Interview with László Beke, 31 December 2008.
[199] Klaniczay and Sasvári, *Törvénytelen avantgarde: Galántai György Balatonboglári Kápolnaműterme 1970-1973*, 126.

regulations that the gallery failed to comply with. The artist also tried to negotiate with the authorities to find a 'legal way' to hold exhibitions there, and the possibility was offered to host 'juried' exhibitions, which would be inspected and approved by the official art institutions, in other words, juried exhibitions meant control over what is exhibited. As it was essentially an artist run space, there was apart from photographic records, very little written documentation about the events taking place there. Only after the changes of 1989 and the opening of the secret police archives was it possible to reconstruct the story of Balatonbolgár and as it turned out in many cases the police had done a better job than the art historians and described in detail what was exhibited, who participated, and what performances looked like. There is even a document in which spies discuss the problem of art criticism, and describe contemporary art as a 'very difficult and demanding area'.[200]

The Pécs artists also had to obtain permission to exhibit at Balatonboglár from their local art council or Lectorate. In a private letter to Galantai, Pinczehelyi admits 'we are mincemeat with the Lectorate, among us just Lantos is a [party] member, we are not',[201] but coming from a smaller town would again prove to be handy. The permission with the list of approved works was signed by Tamás Aknai, who also signed for the politically-inclined artist István Haraszty, who stood no chance of obtaining permission to exhibit from the authorities in Budapest, as Aknai confirms: 'I put Haraszty in with the boys, I hope he does not mind.'[202] Haraszty was to exhibit the mobile entitled *Like a Bird* (Fig. 27), which consisted of a live parrot in a cage with electric doors that open if the parrot stands on a twig, but close automatically as soon as the bird tries to escape, so the bird stays imprisoned. This work was reported in detail to the police and recognised as having heavily political overtones, and may well have been the trigger for the decision by the authorities to close the Chapel exhibition space in Balatonboglár the following year.

Prior to the exhibition, in a letter to Galantai, Pinczehelyi expressed the wish that apart from the juried material that would be exhibited in the chapel, they would realise works in the 'environment around the chapel' and asked questions about the size of the area and available material such as 'discarded wood', as they would rather use found materials and create the works in situ.[203] In another letter Pinczehelyi mentions the *Land Corrections* series of works in the

[200] Ibid.
[201] Artpool archive, Pinczehelyi's letter to Galantai, 3 May, 1972, (ML/2/1972)
[202] Ibid., K/10b/1972.
[203] Ibid. ML/2./1972.

landscape that they just completed, and their wish to show the documentation, despite the fact that this had not been submitted to the jury. The exhibition, which lasted from 10 July to 3 August 1972, was actually the first occasion on which the Pécs Workshop land art documentation was exhibited to the neo-avant-garde audience. The artists also carried out the individually proposed *Land Corrections* in the green environment around the chapel. Ferenc Ficek positioned circular paintings, *Five Spheres* (Fig. 28), behind the bushes and under the trees. Sándor Pinczehelyi had a large scale *Reconnection* (Fig. 29), a geometric form with cut sections through which nature is visible. Károly Kismányoki stretched *Hangings* - a transparent strip with geometric signs - over the roof of the chapel, across the electricity line and over the trees (Fig. 30). Károly Halasz's *Land Correction* consisted of a large frame in the shape of a cube set on the green field, through which a strip of paper was put, creating a three dimensional perspective including the landscape.

The participation of Pécs artists in the Balatonboglár exhibitions has in much subsequent literature been described as 'not just enriching them with professional contacts, but giving them the possibility to connect with the movements of the avant-garde.'[204] Also, Aknai's opinion that 'it did not matter what kind of works they were doing, but the important fact was that they were exhibiting together with the forbidden or tolerated category of artists' has found fruitful ground and been often repeated.[205] This attitude could to some extent be explained by ignorance of the centre towards the periphery, as well as a disregard for contemporary artistic practice in the artists' own milieu. For example, in a letter to Galantai, art historian Aknai admits that he is separating from the Workshop and asks whether Galantai would consider him for an exhibition and wonders: 'Why couldn't I do Land and Concept art?'[206] Evidently, it was important that Pécs Workshop exhibited in Balatonboglár with all their fellow neo-avant-garde artists, and although not recognised in the literature, their contribution was an innovative addition to contemporary art. The experiences gained there would turn out to be significant for the artists as their practice started to change and became more explicitly engaged with the cultural and political situation of the times.

[204] Edit Sasvari, 'A balatonboglári kápolnatárlatok kultúrpolitikai háttere,' [The cultural politics background to the Balatonboglár chapel exhibitions] in *Törvénytelen avantgarde: Galántai György Balatonboglári Kápolnaműterme 1970-1973*, 33.
[205] Sasvari quoting Aknai in: 'A balatonboglári kápolnatárlatok kultúrpolitikai háttere', 33.
[206] Tamás Aknai, private letter to György Galantai, Artpool archive, dated 29 March 1973, ML/15/1973.

Károly Halasz, who was based in Paks, a small town on the Danube half way between Pécs and Budapest, was significantly influenced by the new developments. 'My visit to Documenta 5 in Kassel (1972) and the studies in other museums and galleries was a real aid in getting acquainted with new art' writes Halasz in his monograph and continues: 'Graphic and painted pictures became secondary for a while, due to a lack of time. I tried such new genres as installation, action, performance, body art and later video and film.'[207]

Even before his visit to Documenta V Halász made a series of works with television screens entitled *Private Transmission* which involved installing abstract modules over an empty television frame, while later he was attached the module to the TV screen while political programs were broadcast. One of the earliest installations with the television frame dated in 1971 entailed putting a burning candle within the empty TV set, which implied references to the cult status that the medium of television had obtained at the time (fig. 31). Pavitt and Crowley mention the situation in Hungary in the 1960s, when it was a popular for people of Budapest to spend a weekend in Sopron, a small town near Austrian border, where they would rent a room and watch a Western TV program, referring to it as 'television tourism.'[208] The role television played in the beginnings of land art has already been emphasized, while in a recently published essay on the artist, Halász's act was described as 'a peculiarly interpreted pseudo video work, the ironic opposite to Jan Dibbets's TV as Fireplace (1969)'.[209]

More direct re-enactment of a renowned land art work took place in the summer of 1973, when upon hearing about the sudden death of Robert Smithson, Halász went across the Danube to the shore opposite to his home in Paks and dug a big spiral in the sand, filled it with paper and set it alight. The spiral dug on the river bank referred to the earthwork on the Salt Lake and by setting it alight Halász turned it into 'a private funeral rite' in which he created a 'dialogue of the elements (fire, water, earth and air)'.[210] *In Memory of Robert Smithson* (fig. 32) was later described as 'the only Hungarian earth art directly related to the American land art.'[211] From the point of view of Pécs Workshop land art, this does not belong to the common oeuvre of the group, nor has it been

[207] Károly Halász, *Privát Adás 1967-1993* [Private transmission 1967-1993] (Budapest: Balassi Kiado 1995), 95.
[208] Pavitt and Crowley, *Cold War Modern,* 180.
[209] David Fehér, 'Cry from a Dark Room', 66.
[210] Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 171.
[211] Ibid.

interpreted as such.[212] Though careful and detailed photographic documentation is in line with the group's method, everything else is new: the artist is not dealing with a geometric element, but a geometric sign invested with symbolism and there is a direct relation to reality, rather than it being a closely directed artistic experiment. The artist interferes with and changes the environment and does the same with the paper that he sets alight, which is in clear contrast with the Workshop's minimal attitude.

New attitudes would also appear in the work of Sándor Pincehelyi, as László Beke explained in the introduction to his 1974 solo exhibition: 'Sándor Pinczehelyi like other members of the Pécs Workshop was first attracted by geometric art, but his present exhibition summing up the last three years deals with the typical problems of process and conceptual art.'[213] In other words, these changes meant more political subtext to his practice, as is visible in his work with cobblestones from 1973 (fig. 33), on which he imprinted the text '*Weapon of the proletariat*' commenting on the social disturbances in the wake of 1968. Similar allusions are hinted at in a photographic work entitled *Star (Edit)* (fig. 34), which shows a scar on a forehead of a woman in the shape of a five pointed star that remained after a surgical operation was performed by a Soviet Army surgeon, Pinczehelyi discovering in it 'the strange coexistence of a symbol and historical reality.'[214]

One of the best known images of East European art from the socialist era is Pinczehelyi's self-portrait holding hammer and sickle from 1973 described as 'an example of the intertwining of political reality and individual destiny' (fig. 35).[215] These motifs would preoccupy the artist into the next decades, and have become a subject of speculation of the artist's intentions for numerous critics. More recent literature stresses the political aspects of the works, pointing out that these were 'the symbols of the current social system, but, of course, nobody could believe that the

[212] In her essay on Pécs Workshop land art, 'Tanulmányok a tájban', Agnes Gyetvai does not consider this work as an example of the group's land art.
[213] László Beke, *Pinczehelyi*, exh.cat. (Pécs: Janius Pannonius Museum, 1974).
[214] Lóránd Hegyi, *Pinczehely* (Pécs: Reproflex Kft, 1995), 6. Incorrect information about the work is published in *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, where Piotrowski misquotes Hegyi claiming that 'in 1973 artist was supposedly operated on by Soviet surgeon, a Red Army officer who left a five-pointed star on the artist's forehead as a result of the operation.' See: Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 280. Hegy stated that the photograph depicts a wound 'on the forehead of a patient', not the artist himself. The title of the work is Edit, which is a Hungarian woman's name.
[215] Katalin Néray, 'The Great Decade of the Hungarian Neo-avant-garde: 1968-1979,' in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe* (Vienna: MMKSLW, 1999), 265.

artist's intention was meant as a simple affirmation of its authority.'[216] At the time though a more balanced and neutral interpretation was needed: 'The five pointed star with sickle and hammer appears in his works as a problem of process- and body-formation, but also as a regular geometric form and while it points to the remote past it also keeps its role as a political symbol.'[217]

The combination of cobblestones interpreted as working class weapons and the political symbolism of a five pointed star appeared in Pincehelyi's practice for the first time in 1972 in a series of works in the natural environment, suggesting a link between land experiments and his conceptual turn. Pinczehelyi first made a shape of a five pointed star with cobblestones that he laid down in the same stone mine in which many of the Pécs Workshop land art experiments had taken place. The eight metres star was carried out only in contour and still remained close to a geometric sign, while the documentation of the work bore the reminiscence of land art visible in the fact that the artist still paid a great deal of attention to the site (fig. 36). In the next series of photographs that show the same motif also made of cobblestones the natural background becomes only green grass, without reference to a specific site (fig. 37). In these photographic sequences the cobblestones gradually merge from a heap into the five pointed star, filling steadily the whole surface of the star shape, as if from a formless mass of (revolutionary) cobblestones would emerge and crystallize a perfect (red) star. There was a shift here from the actuality of land art to conceptual references that the symbols of cobblestones and the five pointed star embodied.

It is perceivable from these examples that due to personal experiences and affinities the artists from Pécs Workshop, with their formative years behind them, started to pursue more individual careers. This did not however prevent them from exhibiting together. They took part together in Balatonboglár also in 1973, but the exhibition that was organised in Pécs, in the private garden of Bruno István Geller in the summer of the same year may be considered one of the highpoints of their joint activities. There were many partakers ranging from writers, actors and musicians to artists, with Pécs Workshop members also participating to 'declare their unity and deep-rooted faith in the spirit of change.'[218] The exhibition was a one day event in the open, 'from 10 am till 10 pm' for which an invitation card was printed, and each of the artists was represented with several works. Kismányoki again inserted paper elements in the environment, but this time he scattered

[216] Peter György, 'Hungarian Marginal Art in the Late Period of State Socialism,' in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition,* ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 180.
[217] Beke, *Pinczehelyi*, no page number.
[218] Email interview with Tamas Aknai, May 2009.

flyers around trees, on the grass and other surfaces which bore the interchangeable inscription 'Ma' or 'Nem' (Today/Not), leaving the choice and interpretation of a supposed dilemma to the public (fig. 38). Halász made an installation with cardboard boxes, 'as metaphors of information exchange' and painted on them logos of western galleries, such as Leo Castelli, Gallerie Muller as well as Documenta VI (fig. 39), expressing the wish to be part of the international scene that was so attractive to him, or as Aknai put it, he was 'looking at western modernism from a distance'.[219] Pinczehely paid attention to the surroundings and made site specific works by spraying a bush pink (fig. 40) and painting four square meters of grass with a blue colour (fig. 41), this time more decisively intervening into the environment, although again with traditional artistic tools.

The works realised for the exhibition at Bruno Gellér's garden demonstrate a shift from their earlier practice, liberated from local traditions based on constructivism, and represent a freer attitude to the neo-avant-garde. This can be perceived as a consequence of their experience of contemporary art gained at the Balatonboglár exhibitions and their travels abroad, as well as from their own works in the environment. Their collective land art projects happened at an early point in their careers when they had at their disposal much more limited resources in terms of experience and information. Despite this, the artists showed strong conviction in their artistic approach through the systematic application of their methods and lucidity in their site selections, and created a body of work in the environment that are of genuine significance in the context of land art under socialism.

[219] Aknai, *Pécsi Mühely*, 69.

The Cosmic Environment of the Slovenian Group OHO

OHO Group's practice in the natural environment commenced during the summer of 1969 when they started to carry out projects in the Slovenian countryside, in a move which also brought consolidation of the group to four members: Milenko Matanović, Andraž Šalamun, David Nez and Marko Pogačnik. Prior to that OHO was a more open collaboration between artists, poets, writers and theorists, the beginnings of which are marked by the publication of the OHO Manifesto in 1966.[220] The metamorphosis of OHO, however, ranges from the pre-history of Pogačnik's high school activities in Kranj in 1962 to their foundation of a commune near the village of Šempas in western Slovenia in spring of 1971.[221] The name of the group derived from the superimposition of the words for eye (oko) and ear (uho) in Slovenian, that , as Pogačnik explained, 'when visually, symmetrically fused makes the word OHO, which could be read from top to bottom, or from bottom to top as well as from left to right or from right to left.'[222]

The OHO Group is credited with being the 'most interesting and most important neo-avant-garde movement in Slovenia in the 1960s',[223] a status which the group also enjoyed in Yugoslav contemporary art at the time, receiving much critical acclaim for their exhibitions, happenings and publications in artistic centres across the country. Art historian Ješa Denegri's assertion that 'the spread of conceptual art in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Novi Sad was conditioned by the trace left by OHO exhibitions among the young artists' verifies the importance of the group in adopting new artistic trends.[224] Interest in OHO was not limited to Yugoslavia alone; the group, participated for example in the conceptual art exhibition *Information* at Museum of Modern Art New York in

[220] OHO Manifesto was written by Marko Pogačnik and I.G. Plamen and published in *Tribuna* newspaper (Ljubljana) no. 6 on 23 November 1966. For a reprint and translation see: Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 92-95.

[221] The commune lasted till 1978, however most of the OHO group members left it in 1972. For the history of the group dynamic see: Marko Pogačnik, 'OHO after OHO' in *OHO Retrospective*, second expanded edition, ed. Igor Španjol (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2007), 8-11.

[222] Marko Pogačnik in: 'Članovi grupe OHO,' [Members of OHO group] *Treći program* (Belgrade) winter (1970): 225. My translation.

[223] These are the opening words of Igor Zabel's 'A Short History of OHO', which first appeared in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, an extended version of which was published in *OHO Retrospective*, 105.

[224] Ješa Denegri, 'Primjeri konceptualne umjetnosti u Jugoslaviji,' [Examples of conceptual art in Yugoslavia] *Život umjetnosti* (Zagreb) 15-16 (1971): 151. My translation.

1970,[225] while the image of Matanović's land art action *Wheat and Rope* as well as a description of some of their collective works were included in Lucy Lippard's canonical *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of Art Objects from 1966-1972*.[226]

Compared to the group Pécs Workshop, whose delicate position in the Hungarian art world resulted in a scarcity of published sources, OHO group represents a diametrically opposed case, a difference which, although partly based on the special status of non-aligned socialist Yugoslavia in contrast with the harder conditions in eastern bloc Hungary, continued in post socialist times, with OHO Group figuring prominently in international exhibitions and scholarly texts, while Pécs Workshops' position in art history has not changed considerably.[227] Despite the differences in the conditions of production, reception and dissemination of the work of these two collectives, their projects in the countryside share some formal similarities, such as the ephemeral nature of their interventions, which were minimal and had no long lasting consequences for the environment in which their worked. This chapter investigates the aspects of OHO group's practice that were related to the natural environment and examines the characteristics of their approach to nature, while maintaining a comparative perspective with the work of other Central European artists from the 1960s who engaged in similar endeavours.

Although OHO's practice has received significant scholarly consideration, including Igor Zabel's extensive 'A Short History of OHO' which places the group within the art historical narrative and offers comparison with Western land artists and the more recent book *The Clandestine Histories of OHO Group* in which Miško Šuvaković deals with aspects of their work in terms of transgression, subversion and sexuality,[228] the issue of OHO's relationship to the natural world and their engagement with the environment, from their land art projects to the changes brought by their settlement in a rural commune, have so far not been approached separately from their overall practice nor researched in depth. This chapter looks at the character of the projects they carried out in the Slovenian countryside and on the Croatian Adriatic coast, from early land art pieces

[225] McShine*, Information*, 98-102.
[226] Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object 1966-1972*, 153-154.
[227] See for example exhibition curated by WHW: *Collective Creativity* (Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridricianum, 2005), or more recent exhibition *High Times: Reflections of Psychedelia in Socialist Yugoslavia 1966 – 1976* curated by Branko Franceschi at Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, 21 December 2011- 19 January 2012. Also, The OHO Award for young artists in Slovenia has been organized since 2006. See: http://www.zavod-parasite.si/oho/. Last accessed February 2012.
[228] Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E, 2010).

realised during the summer of 1969, through artistic actions during the summer of 1970 that entailed references to nature, cosmos and explored spiritual dimensions of existence, to the immersion of art and life in the rural commune in the summer of 1971. Their attentive relationship to the environment, founded on their countercultural orientation and reinvigorated by new age spirituality was balanced between the appeal of Western pop culture and the reality of everyday life under socialism.

As previously mentioned, OHO's land art activities start with the *Summer Projects* of 1969, however there is one earlier work which anticipates the subsequent changes and new developments in the practice of OHO. It was carried out on a winter's day in a snow covered park in central Ljubljana, where three artists stood wrapped in long black drapery with only their heads popping out (fig. 42). The piece was entitled *Triglav*, literally meaning three-headed, after the highest peak of the Slovenian Julian Alps. The mountain top obtained this name through the indubitably anthropocentric observation of 'three pointed peaks resembling human heads'[229] and became a prime symbol of Slovenian national identity. In a country in which a constant feature of national consciousness 'from the beginning', as claims one historian, 'was a sense of the nation's smallness',[230] the people's gaze was directed up high to the sublime mountain top.

'Throughout most of Slovenian history, national identity was built almost exclusively on the Slovenian language and culture' writes Aleš Erjavec in his essay on Slovenian art and the post-socialist condition, which opens with a sentence that describes the Slovenians essentially as a 'people living in mountainous terrain.'[231] The distinctive geography of the natural environment became a decisive element of national identity, with the three headed mountain top appearing both on the coat of arms of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia and on that of independent Slovenia. The latter was actually designed in 1991 by Marko Pogačnik, a founding member of OHO group, who in his description of the crest draws on two key figures of Slovenian national identity: the 19th century poet of modern Slovenian nationhood France Prešeren and celebrated architect Jože Plečnik, who both employed it in their works.[232] This inextricable thread of nature and culture was

[229] Ibid., 108.
[230] Carol Rogel, 'In the Beginning: The Slovenes from the 7th century to 1945,' in *Independent Slovenia: Origins, Movements, Prospects*, eds. Jill Benderly and Evan Kraft (London: Macmillan Press, 1994), 11.
[231] Aleš Erjavec, 'New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management and the 1980s,' in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, 135.
[232] See: Marko Pogačnik, *Slovene National Symbols* (Ljubljana: National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, 1995).

intertwined in OHO's *Triglav*, where the highest mountain top of the country should not be simply perceived as a 'raw material', but understood in the terms of W. J.T. Mitchell's discussion of landscape and power, in which the landscape is best understood as 'a medium of cultural expression' and as an 'always already symbolic form'.[233]

OHO's staging of *Triglav* took place in the historic Zvezda Park, the name of which translates as Star Park, which in this case refers to the shape of the green area rather than the favoured socialist icon, although it is located within a bigger square that was at the time, in true socialist style, renamed Liberation Square. The significance of the chosen site lies in the references it provides as the place where the most important events of Slovenian history took place, from the proclamation of independence from Austro-Hungarian rule in 1918 to the greeting of Tito on his first post-war visit to Ljubljana in 1945, but also as the most central public space of the capital of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. Such public spaces functioned 'as the most self-evidently ideological spaces where the collective identities of socialism were to be forged'[234] and any disruption of the controlled order implied the subversion of power structures.

The separate path that Socialist Yugoslavia chose after the 1948 break with Stalin also involved developing its own theory of socialism, which became known as 'workers self-management '. The architect of this distinctive Yugoslav economic system was Tito's main theorist, the Slovene Edvard Kardelj, a key figure in the League of Communists, who stood against both stronger centralisation in Belgrade and advanced liberalisation of Slovenia. This was most evident in the late 60s, when the 'national question became one of the central themes of Slovene journalism and cultural discussion' and in 1968 at the 6th Congress of the League of Communists of Slovenia, 'speakers criticized the post-war national policy, spoke of the republics' sovereignty and of Slovene statehood' but Kardelj objected strongly so that 'the discussion about the possibility of a more independent Slovenia came to an end.'[235]

Bearing these heated political circumstances in mind, the action of taking the national symbol down from its elevated place to the midst of everyday reality by inverting the always snowy white

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[233] W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14.
[234] David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 2.
[235] Petar Vodopivec, 'Seven Decades of Unconfronted Incongruities: The Slovenes and Yugoslavia,' in *Independent Slovenia: Origins, Movements, Prospects*, 38.

mountain top into the black silhouette, which took place on 30 December 1968 in the centre of Ljubljana, contained implications which go beyond purely artistic preoccupations, delicately intervening into the socio-political sphere of public space (fig. 43). In comparison, their previous artistic activities in the public spaces of Ljubljana, such as the happening *Urban Theatre* which involved participants walking around the city until the leader blew a whistle as a sign to freeze, or David Nez's *Black Sea* which consisted of swimming on black PVC foil, were discussed in terms of their 'approach to the urban space as a free playing field'.[236]

There was an additional factor of subversion in OHO's *Triglav,* namely, the artists' heads representing the nation's hallowed mountain peaks were all unshaven, with long hair, and possibly 'stoned'.[237] A young person dressing and behaving in an unconventional way, with long hair as a distinctive feature was at the time referred to as a 'hooligan'. 'Hooliganism' was in fact a movement among young people in Slovenia who expressed dissatisfaction with society, and many of the OHO members were part of that circle.[238] Marko Pogačnik for example, wore a T-shirt with the inscription 'I am a hooligan' on the back, while Milenko Matanović stated that the Rolling Stones were the band they listen to, with the rebellious 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' the hymn of the group.[239]

A Rolling Stones poster was used in one work from the series initiated by Pogačnik that involved producing labels for matchboxes, which when put together into a puzzle revealed a whole image and were sold on the street for the price of an ordinary matchbox, demonstrating their fascination with western rock culture (fig. 44). The rise of generational difference in the 1960s could be felt on both sides of the Iron Curtain, with Rudi Dutschke's call 'Do not trust anyone older the 30!' on one side, while on the other, 'the same generation that in the 1950s hated Russian folk-songs on the radio now hates pop music' and communist parties across Eastern Europe generally turning into

[236] See Igor Zabel's discussion of the role of play in OHO's work in Igor Zabel, 'Uloga igre u djelu grupe OHO,' [The role of play in the work of the group OHO] in *Ludizam: Zagrebački pojmovnik kulture 20. stoljeća* [Ludism: Zagreb culture dictionary of the 20th century], eds. Živa Benčić and Aleksandar Flaker (Zagreb: Zavod za znanost of književnosti Filozofskog Fakulteta, 1996), 359.
[237] From the lecture by Miško Šuvaković on the occasion of the opening of OHO exhibition in P 74 Galerija, Ljubljana in April 2009, posted on 17th May 2009 on www.radiocona.wordpress.com/2009/05/17/miško-šuvaković-hidden-histories-of-the-oho-group. Last accessed 11 April 2010.
[238] Igor Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 106.
[239] Milenko Matanović on *www.grist.org/article/matanovic/* (last accessed 12 April 2010)

the parties of the gerontocracy.[240] OHO's discontent with society, their wish to disrupt the normality of the socialist everyday and their attraction to rock culture point to the countercultural aspect of the 1968 protest movements.

The exceptional character of the 1968 protests in Yugoslavia was that the students 'articulated their demands on the groundwork of the official ideology'[241] as their critique expressed in the slogan 'Down with the red bourgeoisie' was directed towards pointing out the discrepancy between the theory and practice of socialism.[242] The disturbances were led by the circle of young philosophers and academics associated since 1964 with the Zagreb periodical *Praxis*, who were later prosecuted and accused of 'ultra-leftism'.[243] In the spirit of protest movements, according to Miško Šuvaković, the work of many artists at the art academies 'was initially positioned as confrontation and criticism of the socialist moderate modernism', in other words, they engaged in institutional critique within the art world, in contrast to some artist groups, including OHO, who came from a different milieu, 'weren't tied to fine arts schools' and whose point of origin was 'hippie culture'.[244]

The countercultural aspect of 1968 which was 'so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of society'[245] was also the area in which the environmental movement appeared. As already mentioned, environmental concerns were 'rarely prominent among the grievances that animated the student protesters of the 1960s' who were preoccupied with politics and history, while it was the counterculture that accompanied the rise of the New Left that showed 'environmental sentiment'.[246] This is especially relevant in understanding OHO's relationship to nature, environment and ecology and will be discussed further in the context of their land art works.

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[240] Paul Neuburg, *Hero's Children: The Post-war Generation in Eastern Europe* (London: Constable and Company, 1972), 128.
[241] Kanzleiter, 'Yugoslavia', 222.
[242] On the left critique of actually existing socialism that spread across Central Europe in the years around 1970, and the issue of New Left that appeared at the time in the West in relation to Marxist Humanism, which was attached to the Eastern counterparts, see: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'New Left East: Socialism as (if) it really existed' in *Loophole to Happiness*, 22-32.
[243] See the special issue of *Praxis* 'Jun-lipanj 1968. Dokumenti,' [July 1968. Documents] (Zagreb: Praxis, 1971).
[244] Miško Šuvaković, 'Students' Cultural Centres as Reservations', 100-101.
[245] Theodor Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 42.
[246] Rootes, 'The Environmental Movement', 297.

The OHO group exhibited widely in the leading artistic centres of Yugoslavia, the reason for which, in Šuvaković's view, is that they became too provocative for Ljubljana and were 'relocated to a different environment' – Zagreb, Belgrade or Novi Sad, where their work was removed from a concrete social place to an ideal artistic space and 'became a good example of highly aesthetical art practice'.[247] As an example of such institutional de-politisation of their practice, their re-enactment of *Triglav* on the square in Novi Sad at Tribina Mladih in 1969, realised with white fabric in this version,[248] could serve as a case in point, as the subversive references that the work contained in the local context of Ljubljana were diluted in the new more neutral setting of an art festival in Novi Sad. OHO's practice in general was described as 'purposeless, with no implication of any social or political program',[249] or being political 'only in its complete lack of attention to political ideas and positions, they create art as if politics did not exist'.[250] In that sense, after their Arte Povera inspired exhibition *Great-Grandfathers*[251] held in Zagreb in 1969 one critic observed: 'Anyone who's looking for some kind of 'program' will be disappointed, also the admirers of parodies or protests will miss out.'[252] In other words, their interest in issues such as relations to the natural environment, uncovering of cosmic laws and questions of the spiritual dimension of human existence, which they explored in depth in their works in the environment, even taking the step of founding a commune to be able to live according to their beliefs, was not perceived as political. This could be compared with the status of ecology, which although formulated as 'subversive because of its holistic approach',[253] did not figure prominently in the main current of 1968 politics, which was preoccupied with anti-war protests, dealing with the legacy of recent history and the traumas of Second World War and foregrounding the questions of human rights.

In terms of the development of OHO's art practice, the work *Triglav* is also a marker of a change in direction from their focus on objects, which was primary in their early phase known as *reism*,

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[247] Miško Šuvaković, 'Transcript of debate "Continuous Art Class",' in *Omitted History*, kuda.org, eds. (Novi Sad: kuda.org, 2007), 57.
[248] See Zvonko Maković in 'Transcript of debate "Continuous Art Class"', 66.
[249] Zabel, 'Uloga igre u djelu grupe OHO', 360.
[250] Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1999* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 54. This view has been corrected in his later publication on OHO, in which he considers anti-Vietnam War drawings and posters by Marko Pogačnik from 1967. See: Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, 78-81.
[251] Milenko Matanović, David Nez, Andraž Šalamun, Tomaž Šalamun, *Pradjede* [Great-grandfathers] (Zagreb, Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1969).
[252] Željka Čorak, 'Čin i primisao: Grupa OHO u Galeriji suvremene umjetnosti,' [Act and thought - OHO Group in the gallery of contemporary art] in *Telegram* (Zagreb) 14 February 1969, 17. My translation.
[253] See: Shepard and Kinley, *The Subversive Science: Essays toward an Ecology of Man*.

towards the interest in communication between objects, natural processes, working outdoors and exploring the qualities of new materials, as well as aspects of dematerialised art practice. As some photographs of the documentation of *Triglav* show, there was a sign placed underneath the artists, on which in big letters was written 'Triglav' that served as a label of the work and at the same time stressed the word itself (fig. 45). Placing the word 'at the centre of focus' was a doctrine of Slovene poets that literary theorist Taras Kermauner described as *reism* according to which 'the word no longer pointed to a world outside language'.[254] Reist linguistics, deriving from the Latin word *res* meaning thing, was at the core of OHO's early activity as Igor Zabel explains: 'The members of OHO wanted to develop a radically different relationship towards the world: instead of a humanistic position, which implies a world of objects dominated by subject, they wanted to achieve a world of things, where there would be no hierarchical difference between people and things; the correct relationship towards such a world is not an action, but observing.'[255] Reism was also interpreted in terms of the 'phenomenality of the very object, devoid of any further elaborations'[256] while Marko Pogačnik later stressed the liberation of artworks from the subjective roles of both creator and viewer by inventing modes of creation that 'prevent human appropriation and anthropocentrism in advance'.[257] However, the predominance of the reistic approach started to lose ground when the artists became more interested in communication between the objects, as well as dealing with the ideas and concepts that imbue them, which art historian Tomaž Brejc situated at the moment when Nez and Matanović begun to include 'urban space in a number of happenings, that culminated in *Triglav*'.[258]

The three artists who stood on the ladder covered in black fabric in Zvezda Park were Milenko Matanović (born 1947), Drago Dellabernardina (born1948) and David Nez (born 1949). Nez was a young American who came to Ljubljana in 1967 and started to study at the Art Academy, soon getting involved with OHO. His arrival and attachment to OHO was a cause for puzzlement and fascination among artists and critics, who saw it as a 'disruption of the traditional scheme of movement of artist from province to metropolis',[259] recognised in his behaviour the 'well known

[254] Djurić and Šuvaković , *Impossible Histories*, 82.
[255] Igor Zabel, 'Art in Slovenia since 1945,' in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949-1999*, 150.
[256] Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group,* 29.
[257] Marko Pogačnik, 'OHO after OHO', 8.
[258] Tomaž Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971' in *New Artistic Practice 1966-1978*, 14.
[259] Miško Šuvaković, 'David Nez – Rad 1968-1973,' [David Nez – work 1968- 1973] in *David Nez* (Belgrade: Galerija SKC, 1981), 2. My translation.

spirit and mentality of his country: unlimited breadth and freedom of expression, extreme sculptural simplicity and deep mental concentration on the appearance of phenomena either of technological or natural origin'[260] and were immersed in typically Cold War speculation that the CIA might be behind him.[261]

David Nez recently revealed the reasons for coming to Slovenia, explaining that his first visit to Yugoslavia was a trip to Skopje, Macedonia, after the big earthquake in 1963, when his father who worked as a city planner for the United Nations helped reconstruct the city. During the trip, which lasted six months, they also visited some relatives in Slovenia. Nez decided to come to Ljubljana after he finished high school and was worried about 'being drafted into military service' during the Vietnam War.[262] The significance of David Nez's contribution to OHO was recognised in his divergence from the practice of *reism*, as Denegri points out that 'thanks to the culture that he had already absorbed Nez could not fully accept the rules of reistic doctrine'.[263] The artist however only emphasized the different point of view that he had 'as a cultural "outsider", which allowed him to be 'free of the conventional cultural attitudes of Slovenians'.[264]

Further departure from strict *reistic* aesthetics occurred when Tamaž Šalamun (born 1941), an art historian and at the time curator at Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, who was active as a poet and associated with the literary circle of OHO collective, begun to work as a visual artist and started to employ the principles of Arte Povera in his practice.[265] At the exhibition *Great-Grandfathers,* held in February 1969 in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, Matanović, Nez and the two Šalamun brothers all used 'poor' materials and created environments that entered art historical accounts as the 'first exhibition of arte povera in Yugoslavia'.[266] Tamaž Šalamun installed a haystack, piles of bricks and mounted cornstalks in the gallery (fig. 46), Matanović created *15 Hills of Rome* using hemp (fig. 47), Andraž Šalamun made an environment entitled *Wood* from inflated fabric (fig. 48), while Nez created a *Jungle* with iron wool (fig. 49) and *Roof* that consisted of roof

[260] Biljana Tomić, 'Grupa OHO,' *Umetnost* (Belgrade) 21 (1970): 88. My translation.
[261] This is according to Miško Šuvaković's lecture on 17 May 2009 on www.radiocona.wordpress.com.
[262] 'The OHO Files: Interview with David Nez', www.artmargins.com Posted on 24 August 2011.
[263] Ješa Denegri, 'Šutnja Davida Neza,' [The silence of David Nez] *Telegram* (Zagreb) 29 December 1972.
[264] 'The OHO Files: Interview with David Nez'.
[265] Piotr Piotrowski incorrectly attributes the familiarity with arte povera movement to Andraž Šalamun, as well as Tomaž's works in the Great-grandfathers exhibition, without distinguishing the work of the two brothers. In general Piotrowski gives a considerable amount of space to OHO Group in his study of Central European post war art, which he bases predominantly on Igor Zabel's history of OHO. See: Piotrowksi, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 189.
[266] Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 14.

tiles laid on the floor (fig. 50), which was another ironic inversion of order.[267] The exhibition was largely discussed in the context of *reism* and the shift away from it, for example, theorist Braco Rotar observes how Nez's *Roof* 'signifies a change of the function of the material, and through it the change of the basic sense of intention'[268] while Zabel explains that if the aim during the first period of OHO 'had been to *see* a haystack, it was Tamaž Šalamun's aim in Great-Grandfathers to see it as *sculpture.*'[269]

The works in the *Great-grandfathers* exhibition showed sensitivity for materials and processes, they contained paradoxes and twists in their allusions to art and life, and were balanced between nature and culture in a typically Arte Povera manner. According to Filiberto Menna, in Arte Povera it is not just that the 'constituent elements derive from and evoke the natural world', but that artists are also inclined to set up more complex analogical elements by 'opening on to new dimensions of the external (nature) and the internal (deep psychic structures)'.[270] The contingent references to the natural world in the *Great-Grandfathers* appeared in installations, titles and materials – woods were made of fabric, the jungle from iron wool ropes, haystacks with real hay, while the accompanying catalogue contained a conversation between Tamaž Šalamun and Matanović which adds an additional layer. The conversation was made in the form of an interview that in fact appears as a lengthy collaborative poem with lines including 'I will redirect [river] Sava into Adriatic Sea', 'I will extend the gallery, buy a bus, conductor, drive the passengers through exhibition halls, in front of the gallery I will plough the field and grow wheat' and ends with the artists repeatedly telling each other 'You are my most dishevelled sheep'. The persistence of references to the elements of the external environment, which are not only bound to urban spaces but reach out to include rivers, sea, woods, fields and jungles, and in the poem even animals, show the shift of the artists' interest to not only work with natural materials, but actually work in the natural environment, which was to happen in early summer of 1969, when their first land art projects were realised.[271]

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[267] See the catalogue of the exhibition Milenko Matanović, David Nez, Andraž Šalamun, Tomaž Šalamun, *Pradjede* [Great-grandfathers] (Zagreb, Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1969).
[268] Braco Rotar, 'Vizualizacija prostora kao aspekt formulacija Davida Neza,' [Visualisation of space as aspect of formulation of David Nez] *Umetnost* (Belgrade) 20 (1969): 59.
[269] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 121.
[270] Filliberto Menna, 'A Mise en scene for Nature,' in *Arte Povera* ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 196.
[271] For more references to the inclusion of natural elements in their early work see also: Biljana Tomić, 'Permanentna umetnost,' [Permanent art] *Umetnost* (Belgrade) 16 (1968): 91-92.

OHO's interest in natural materials and move to work outdoors, their intertwined aesthetics of Arte Povera with the beginning of land art, could be compared to a somewhat similar situation in Czech Republic, where Zorka Ságlová (1942-2003) also worked with both paradigms simultaneously. Her first land art action which involved throwing coloured balls into the water with a group of friends happened in April 1969, while her exhibition with natural materials took place in August in Václáv Špála Gallery, which at the time was a leading gallery for contemporary art in Prague.[272] Ságlová's exhibition consisted of piled up bales of hay and straw brought into the gallery and left for visitors to re-arrange, use as furniture or as a stage for playing rock music. Although Ságlová did not belong to an artist group, both her land art action and the exhibition had a collective character as visitors and friends were invited to participate and contribute to the art pieces, while the early works in the environment of the OHO group as well as their gallery presentations were individual undertakings, which would change gradually through the systematic investigation of group behaviour and later through the experiment of communal living.

The term land art, just like Arte Povera, gained currency in Yugoslav contemporary art at the same time as in any Western artistic centre, the reason for which could be found in the cultural policy of Tito's Yugoslavia and the establishment of networks of contemporary art galleries in the federative capitals such Zagreb, Belgrade and Novi Sad, which had the freedom to invite international artists and curators. These art centres functioned as free enclaves in a strictly controlled socialist system, in which it was possible to hold exhibitions, performances and discussions, while at the same time they exercised control by keeping them within the institutional domain.[273] In such conditions of fictive freedom and openness to the West, many international figures associated with land art visited Yugoslavia in the late sixties and early seventies, for example Germano Celant of the Arte Povera movement, Willoughby Sharp, the curator of the seminal *Earth Art* exhibition at Cornell University in 1969, and German artist Joseph Beuys, an influential figure for the green movement.[274] Also from the mid sixties the citizens of Yugoslavia had the possibility of unrestricted travel and for example, Tomaž Šalamun was able to visit Rome, where he got acquainted with Arte Povera.[275] In contrast to the situation in Hungary where land art had to be

[272] See: Knížak, *Zorka Ságlová*.
[273] Šuvaković refers to Achille Bonito Oliva, who pointed out that these institutions act as reservations in the socialist everyday life. See: Miško Šuvaković, 'Students' Cultural Centres as Reservations', 99.
[274] For the overview of artistic exchanges in 1970s Yugoslavia see: Ješa Denegri, 'Issues in Artistic Practice of the last Decade' in *New Artistic Practice*, 5-13.
[275] See Igor Zabel, 'OHO – From Reism to Conceptual Art' in *OHO Retrospective*, 28.

interpreted and translated through local critics, remaining to some extend external to contemporary art discourse, OHO's land art developed in significantly different circumstances.

Their land art started modestly in the public spaces of Ljubljana in summer of 1969, with Milenko Matanović's temporary sculpture made of four metre long wooden poles. The bars were tied together with a rope forming simple triangles or more complex spatial drawings that spread through the green area around the remains of a Roman wall, which is the name under which these works became known (fig. 51). In a similar way David Nez made *Invisible Sculpture* using 400 metres of transparent string that he tied around the old castle of Ljubljana (fig. 52). The work also consisted of a *mail art* element, as the artist sent postcards with a piece of string to the local art world. Matanović also made a *Snake* from short sticks and a long rope that he threw into the middle of the Ljubljanica river that flows through the centre of the city (fig. 53). At the time the artist lived on the bank of the river and recalls how he 'always liked looking for fish from the balcony', and while doing so he 'noticed the almost invisible currents that moved through the channelled water'.[276] The *Snake* made those currents visible as it 'swam' down the river – and out of town. Matanović also took the wooden poles to the woods near Kranj and installed them between the branches and trees in symmetrical, rhythmical and dynamic compositions (fig. 54, 55), the aesthetic dimension of which is, according to Brejc the 'last trace of gallery experience',[277] while Zabel saw the novelty in the 'balance and tension that became dominant aspects of the works'.[278]

Comparing the gallery space defined by its geometric dimensions with working outdoors, David Nez referred to outside space as 'organic, unlimited' and also 'exposed to elements – wind, the degradation of substances'.[279] These observations were made after he realised a series of works in the natural environment in summer of 1969, for which he used mirrors in various shapes and sizes. The earliest of these were quadrangle mirrors placed vertically into the grass in a meadow, and then square mirrors of various heights installed in a plaster base on the meadow, creating complex optical impressions (fig. 56). He also used square mirrors in slanting positions which continued to descend into the earth to the same degree, creating a diametrical reflection in the ground (fig. 57). He went on to install rectangular mirrors, long and narrow, directly in the ground and spaced them

[276] The OHO Files: Interview with Miljenko Matanović, www.artmargins.com, last accessed: February 2012.
[277] Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 15.
[278] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 127.
[279] David Nez in: 'Članovi grupe OHO', 230.

in a symmetrical order (fig. 58). The optical disturbances created in that way based on the differences between actual environment and the reflection of nature in the smooth surfaces of the artificial material with sharp edges were an exercise in the dematerialisation of an art object.[280]

Marko Pogačnik (born 1944) who rejoined OHO in the spring of 1969 after his obligatory military service, made one of the earliest summer projects entitled *Programmed Wood* in the grid shaped reforested wood along the Kranj - Ljubljana road (fig. 59). The grid served for a numerical program involving 365 trees onto which shiny aluminium rings were fastened and which were designed to be seen by passing cars. The precise order, numerical distribution, reference to the cycles of the year and communication with the audience determines this work. When compared with the Pécs Workshop projects with paper rings on trees, Pogčnik's *Wood*, although taking place in an industrial landscape for which the Pécs artists had a strong affinity, is significantly different, as the Hungarian artists focused on the abstract appearance of different sizes of rings, while the Slovenian artist's rational and systematic approach implied references which reached beyond the formal manifestation of the project.

Pogačnik's return to the group was interpreted as 'a new impulse'[281] recognised in his role in directing the interest of the group towards processes, rather than materials, which since the exhibition *Great-grandfathers* in February of that year were a major preoccupation for the group. For instance, David Nez' work *The Line of Transparent Tape Stuck to Grass Gets Lifted and so it Collects Natural Substance* contains the aspects of process in the title itself, despite still keeping the sense of material qualities characteristic of Arte Povera. Art historian Nena Baljković highlights the difference between Arte Povera, which for the artists meant 'absolute freedom of choice and use of materials' with conceptual artists who 'took the freedom to discard the material.'[282] The 1969 summer projects of OHO group expand from paying close attention to the characteristics of the medium they were working with, in some cases still employing abstract forms in the

[280] Zabel compares them with Robert Smithson's *Mirror Displacements* from the same year of 1969 and makes a distinction according to which Nez was not interested in marking sites with mirrors, but 'creating perpetual games based on actual views and reflections' from actual landscape. See: Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 127.
[281] Ješa Denegri, 'Prisečanje na rad grupe OHO,' [Remembering the work of OHO group] *Polja* (Novi Sad) 190 (1974), 21.
[282] Nena Baljković, 'U ulici dugoj tisuću godina. Nekoliko informacija o konceputalnoj i postobjektnoj umjetnosti,' [In the street thousand years long, some information on conceptual and post-object art] *Omladinski tjednik* (Zagreb) 31 (March 1971).

environment, to dealing with natural processes, and finally becoming interested in the possibility of art to communicate ideas liberated from any formal concern.

Pogačnik's *Family of Fire*, *Water and Air* deals with natural processes through a strict conceptual program which entailed research into the relationship between the 'classical elements' of fire, water and air in various combinations and in two basic modes. In *Water Air - Static* Pogačnik filled a number of transparent plastic bags half with water and half with air and let them float in the river Kokra in the centre of Kranj on 23 July 1969, in that way creating a 'simultaneous distribution of water in water and air in air.'[283] In *Water Air – Dynamic* he filled long bags just with air and attached weights to them so they would stay straight when he put them into the Adriatic Sea by the island of Mali Lošinj, creating a tension between half submerged bags filled with air and the surrounding water. In *Water Water – Static* he sunk in the sea a plastic tube filed with water, while in its dynamic version the transparent tube contained coloured pigment at one end, that was tied and submerged in the river bed facing upstream, so that the water flow filed it and the pigment started to dissolve and spread in the opposite direction to the current.

Pogačnik also coupled water and fire, which in a static version was represented by a dry corn stalk half submerged in water, while the top half was set on fire (fig. 60). In *Water Fire Dynamic*, carried out on the small island of Srakane near Lošinj, he set fire to a plastic bag filled with water, which resulted in water turning into steam and plastic into carbon dioxide, the residue of which, according to Pogačnik's chart, was air and ashes.[284] The artist explained the difference between the meaning of the notion of series in the classical sense that orders the things into perceptible lines and which 'exists only to get a clearer picture of the substance of the single objects' and the concept of family which 'signifies communicational channels' between the elements through the two main characteristics – static and dynamic.[285]

Earth, air, water and fire are four classical elements which have been part of western theory since they were articulated by Presocratic thinker Empedocles in the fifth century B.C. who explained the functioning of the cosmos through the governing principles of the four basic elements. Environmental theorist David Macauley, who talks about the 'durable wisdom' of the four

[283] Marko Pogačnik, 'Družina vode, zraka in ognja,' [Family of Water, Air and Fire] *Problemi* (Ljubljana) 1970: 26.
[284] Ibid., 24.
[285] Marko Pogačnik in: 'Članovi grupe OHO', 228.

elements that represent an early understanding of the natural environment, also addresses, among many layers of interpretation, the 'organic unity' of the elements, which all have corresponding senses. For instance, touch involves the solidity of earth, taste is linked with moisture and water, sight implies light or fire, while smell entails vapour in the air. Furthermore, Macauley also explains the 'social aspect' of classical elements as 'many early cosmological and mythical views were presented in terms of human relations', such as marriages.[286]

Pogačnik arranged the elements into 'families' and according to Zabel 'was using the traditional theory of four elements'[287] however, he was primarily interested in demonstrating their appearance through physical laws that determine the relations between the elements, rather than their metaphysical meaning. Working with water, air and fire and experimenting outdoors drew the artist closer to considering issues of natural environment, a preoccupation that would become a permanent axis of his work.[288] Pogačnik explored families further in gallery contexts, involving investigation of the force of gravitation through *Family of Weight, Measure and Position*[289] and completed in the lived Family of Šempas in spring of 1971.

In difference to Pogačnik's demonstrated and self-declared 'systematic mode of work',[290] Milenko Matanović expressed his laid back attitude to life and nonchalant approach to art: 'I do not care about making great miracles. I am very calm and take much pleasure in watching things happen quite slowly. Namely, I am interested in how certain matter, water for instance, can exist in three different forms, as ice, liquid and steam. I like to watch it transform. That happens in life as well. For example, from the North Sea, an iceberg goes to the South Sea. This is water circulating. Or: a matter of my perception and I like it. If water, when boiling, produces sound, it only enhances the function of this experience – sensory experience.'[291] The interest in observation of fundamental processes, spatial perception and sensuous experiences the artist talks about were implied in his well known action in the environment entitled *Wheat and Rope* from July of 1969.

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[286] David Macualey, 'The Flowering of Environmental Roots and the Four Elements in Presocratic Philosophy: From Empedocles to Deleuze and Guattari,' *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 3 (2005): 298.
[287] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 124.
[288] See his personal web site: www.markopogacnik.com
[289] This work was realised in the context of the exhibition *Great-Great-Grandfathers* in November 1969 in Novi Sad.
[290] Pogačnik in: Braco Rotar, 'Razgovor sa članovima grupe OHO,' [Conversation with the members of OHO group] *Pitanja* (Zagreb), 21 June 1971, 584.
[291] This is a quotation from Milenko Matanović in 'Članovi grupe OHO', 232 – 233. Translation from Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, 32.

The work consisted of the artists slowly walking on the opposite edges of a shimmering wheat field, across which they stretched a rope, and as they moved the rope bent the wheat tops (fig. 61). With this gesture the whole environment was included in the work, while at the same time the participants became immersed in the environment, and the sharp distinction between art and life, in which OHO would become increasingly interested in the subsequent period, disappeared. In comparison, the previous projects that took place in the open were isolated interventions with for instance mirrors, aluminium or wood and the artists maintained a separate status, both from the works and from the surroundings. The all encompassing aspect of *Wheat and Rope* pointed to phenomenological dimensions of the work in the artists' sensuous experience of the site. Furthermore, similarly to the previously discussed examples of OHO's fervour for cyclical principles in nature, the work also contained 'countless allusions associated with the motif of the wheat',[292] which Brejc named as ranging 'from bread to transformations in life'.[293]

The profound connotations found in the work were in stark contrast to the socialist system's ubiquitous premise of a great alliance and unity of workers and peasants symbolised by the hammer and sickle. The widespread images of peasants wielding sickles, the traditional tool for cutting wheat, did not refer to the cycle of life, but rather to the harvest which represents wealth and the much favoured idea of progress, while at the same time indicating man's dominating relationship to nature, which was another doctrine of actually existing socialism.[294] In OHO's gesture, although the golden wheat field was ripe for harvesting, they did not use sickles and there was no attempt to master nature, even the rope was used in such an attentive way that it only gently bent the ears of wheat.

According to Heidegger the domination of a 'technological' understanding of the modern world manifests itself as estrangement from the world, in which everything, including nature stands as a resource for human ends.[295] In order to break free from the alienating influence of technology one must nurture a mode of being through 'releasing towards the thing' and in that way 'gather the world'. This has been interpreted as 'being filled with a sense of belonging' which is not to be understood as 'just the frame of mind' but also as bodily experience, therefore the release implies

[292] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 125.
[293] Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 15.
[294] See: Mnatsakanian, *Environmental Legacy of Former Soviet Republics*.
[295] See: Michael E. Zimmerman, 'Martin Heidegger: Antinaturalistic Critic of Technological Modernity,' in *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology* ed. David Macauley (New York: Guildford Press, 1996), 67.

'practical ways of being'.[296] In Slovenia of the 1960s Heidegger figured as 'the most influential single philosopher of the time'[297] and his critique of humanism through 'rejection of the concept of man at the heart of the world' has been referenced in the context of OHO's practice of reism.[298] His ideas about how to overcome the 'technological' revealing of the world may be useful also to understand OHO's relationship to the natural world, as the artists were open, attuned and aware of their bodily and sensuous presence in environment. However, OHO's relationship to the environment was more significantly informed by current countercultural fascination with eastern philosophy, which was especially palpable in the summer 1969 project by Andraš Šalamun.

Šalamun and his partner re-enacted several poses from the ancient Indian classic *Kama Sutra* in a natural setting on the island of Srakane near Mali Lošinj in Croatia, a series of photographs of which were published in *Problemi* magazine, showing artist and his partner leaning against a tree or lying in the grass (fig. 62, 63, 64).[299] The choice of the site for Šalamun's *Kama Sutra* could be perceived as placing additional emphasis on the perception of sex as something 'natural' at a time when the sexual revolution was spreading across youth culture, with greater sexual freedom even put on the list of student demands of the 1968 protests.[300] Experimentation with various positions further stressed the liberation of the body from conventional sexual behaviour, while reference to an old Indian text highlights the artist's attraction to Eastern philosophy and religions, at a time when in socialist Yugoslavia 'the existence of other spiritual traditions and contemporary alternative spiritual movements apart from official religions was systematically hidden from the youth'.[301] The publication of these uncompromising photographs provoked public anger expressed in letters addressed to daily papers, triggering a debate on the appropriate role of youth magazines in socialist society.[302]

Already in his contribution to the exhibition *Great-Grandfathers*, Andraž Šalamun explored the iconography of the erotic in his soft sculpture installation entitled *Wood*, which was an

[296] Simon P James, 'Body in Environmental Virtue,' *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy,* vol. 18, no.1 (2002): 1-9.
[297] Erjavec, 'New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management and the 1980s', 137.
[298] Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories,* 30. See also his 'Konceptualna umetnost', 340.
[299] Andraž Šalamun, 'Kama sutra,' *Problemi* (Ljubljana) 86 (1970): 25-29.
[300] The student uprisings of May 68 in Paris started with demands for coeducational dormitories at Nanterre University. See: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, eds., *Revolution I Love You: 1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy* (Manchester: MMU, 2008), 231.
[301] Pogačnik, 'OHO After OHO', 10. The official religions in Yugoslavia were Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Orthodox faiths and Protestantism.
[302] See: Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, 126.

'environment made of soft forms, filled with air' that he used 'as an erotic field for his body', as shown on the photographs from the exhibition documentation on which the artist sprawled among the pieces of sculpture.[303] Considering the role of photography in the project *Kama Sutra*, it is apparent that the work is mediated through photo-documentation, however these photographs reveal that the acts in nature were clearly staged for the camera lens, and in that way photography becomes an integral part of a project, not just a record of it.[304] This example of OHO's photographic documentation is comparable to conceptual art's use of photography according to which the artist 'stages an event for the benefit of a preconceived photographic rendering'.[305]

A similar attitude is observable in early work by David Nez, in a pair of photographs entitled *A White Line on Black, a Black line on White* from winter 1969, in which one image shows a white role of paper rolled out in a meadow, while the other consists of a 'line' or dark strip of grass in snow (fig. 65). The perspective here has been carefully centrally constructed, while the effectiveness of the work relies on the contrasts of black and white photography. In comparison, Matanović's photograph from the same time *Walking a Line 1000 Times* (fig. 66), which records the artist's project that involved walking the same distance a thousand times in order to leave a trace in the grass, can be perceived as documentation of an 'event shown in the process of its occurrence'.[306]

In the literature, OHO's employment of photography is briefly described as being 'in function of documentation'[307] of their works and the use of the camera considered as a 'machine for copying'.[308] According to Šuvaković, OHO's 'work of art comes into being as an event or situation in nature and then as a conceptual document and as a presentation in media of an event executed in space and time'.[309] This observation implies that photographs are a residue of physical actions in the environment, whose role is to mediate them to wider audiences. As pointed out earlier, there are elements in OHO's photography which are more multifaceted then sheer

[303] Igor Zabel, 'Body Art in Slovene Art: 60s to 80s,' in *Body and the East*, 167.
[304] For role of photography in representation of land art see: Tiberghien, *Land Art*.
[305] Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' from *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, as reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 250.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Leonida Kovač, 'Impossible Photographs' in *Impossible Histories*, 285.
[308] Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 15
[309] Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories,* 215.

documentation, a consideration which is especially relevant for their earlier projects in the environment. Nevertheless, OHO artists rely not just on photographs, but also on texts regularly written in Slovenian and English, then drawings and charts, and sometimes films documenting their actions, a tendency which becomes increasingly visible in their projects in the environment in the following year, when they undertook further explorations of the cosmos and human relations. Brejc states that their 'documentation consisting of photographs and drawings is not formal or legal evidence but an element of mental reference for the spectator to their spiritual and metaphysical experiences'.[310] In addition, the sheets of A4 paper containing this information also appear as the group's own analytical and structural diary for their activities, which would become increasingly complex during the 1970.

The projects from summer 1969 represent OHO's version of land art which involved a myriad approaches that range from direct interventions in nature, systematic experiments with natural processes, to spiritual and corporal experiences of being in the environment, while some were also recognised as 'interventions in nature as an enlarged gallery environment'.[311] Treating the natural environment as an extended gallery space, which could be perceived in Matanović's spatial drawings of geometric elements with wooden planks, or insertion of mirror cubes and rectangular forms by David Nez, as well as his making inversed black and white parallel lines on the meadow and in the snow, share some common characteristics with other Central European artists' early outings to the countryside. In that sense, Petr Štembera's beginnings with land art practice were directly linked to his ideas for gallery installation with coloured strips peeling of the walls entitled *Falling Off – Soft Geometrical Environment* from 1969, when one of the strips became a ribbon that was stretched along the footpath in snow, while the connections between abstract paintings and Pécs Workshop have been discussed in previous chapter. What makes the approach of OHO artists different from these more direct translations of artistic practice from galleries or studios to outdoors, is that even in the works with seemingly abstract artistic subtexts the role given to natural forces, processes or appearances is made a constituent part of the work and the environment cannot be perceived as simply a neutral background.

The points of connection with the fore mentioned examples is the geographical location for their land art actions, as they were realised either in the green areas of the towns they lived in, or the

[310] Tomaž Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 15 and 17.
[311] Ibid., 17.

nearby meadows, fields, woods or rivers, in other words the artists used the locations that were available at hand, or places they happened to be visiting, without having to make long distance trips for the purpose. OHO artists also employed traditional crafts rather than technology in their dealings with nature, as for example Matanović only used ropes to tie wooden poles to the trees, not nails. Such conduct towards the natural environment has been described as 'personal, direct and sensual, corporeal' and as having 'no consequences for the space',[312] which could be asserted about many other artists in Central Europe working in the environment at the same time, Pécs Workshop included, whose gestures were also ephemeral and interventions only temporary. The difference that crystallised in OHO's approach was that they had the intention to work in harmony with the circles of nature and cosmic powers.

The spiritual dimension of their presence in nature gradually strengthened to the degree that it exceeded the scope of the term land art, while conceptual art became an equally limiting concept in terms of their activities, which in the end resolves into life itself. In a conversation with theorist Braco Rotar held in Ljubljana on 15 January 1970, David Nez expressed his view on art as 'a lifestyle which was still linked with man's reaction to the material world', while the end of art would happen 'at the moment man abandons his aggression towards material and becomes satisfied with what there is, without wanting to change anything.'[313] Art historians have struggled to find the right term for such contemplation and the practices that accompanied it, suggesting 'Transcendental Conceptualism' and 'Esoteric Conceptualism' in turn.[314] This novel attitude in their work was recognised at the moment when two of the members, Matanović and Nez, went to New York in February 1970 to prepare for the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, while the other two artists stayed in Ljubljana.[315] They carried out simultaneous telepathic exercises in order to maintain contact among the group members and to develop communication between them regardless of distance. One such exercise initiated by Matanović was entitled *Intercontinental Group Project* and involved all four artists looking daily at the sun at an agreed time and dropping a match from a height of ten centimetres onto a piece of paper and marking its position (fig. 67).

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[312] Zablel, 'OHO – From Reism to Conceptual Art', 30.
[313] David Nez in 'Razgovor sa članovima grupe OHO', 584. (My translation)
[314] Tomaž Brejc used Transcendental Conceptualism, while Zabel later proposed Esoteric Conceptualism in order not to get confused with transcendental philosophy.
[315] They received the invitation to take part in the exhibition with the help of Taja Vidmar, a young Slovenian art historian with international connections. In the MOMA exhibition five OHO artists were represented: Pogačnik, Nez, Matanović, Tomaž and Andraž Šalamun.

It is important to note that OHO's perceived move from investigations of 'external phenomena towards the deep dimensions of the human soul'[316] did not occur at once. Indications of such a development appear for example in David Nez's work *Cosmology*, presented at the exhibition *Atelier 69* in Ljubljana in spring 1969 (fig. 68). The work consisted of a circle made from neon light tubes that the artist removed from the ceiling of the gallery, a light bulb hung above the centre and a stone underneath it on the floor. In accordance with the title 'all three elements had a meaning', as Zabel explained – 'the circle was the earth, the light bulb was the sun and the stone represented the moon'.[317] During the opening Nez lay in the circle and started to meditate placing the stone on his stomach. In his description of the work, Zabel emphasized the spontaneity of the installation - the neon tubes were from the gallery, the stone taken from outside the museum, while someone else suggested to the artist to lie in the middle of the circle.[318] This impulsiveness of the work should not be perceived as a lack of artistic concept, but rather as a method based on the artist's openness and attunement to situations as they happen in life following the teachings of Zen Buddhism, the credo of which is the ability to directly experience 'living in the present moment'.[319] 'I think idea is anthropomorphic interpretation of intelligence in cosmos…I want to find relation between myself and the world as an open thing' – this is how artist at the time described his views, stressing also that ideas can develop rationally or intuitively 'without discrimination that some way of thinking is higher or better than the other.'[320]

Cosmic imagery flooded public sphere in the late 1960s at the height of Cold War space race, when the first photographs of Earth taken from space appeared in the press and the first steps of human walking on the Moon were broadcast. The cosmic dimension in the emergence of land art has been addressed by Joy Sleeman, who in her essay 'Land Art and the Moon Landing' stated that the 'most straightforward connection between land art and moon landing is temporal coincidence', depicting the similarities in the activities of Apollo astronauts and early pioneers of land art who 'journeyed the distant and inhospitable terrain, collecting rocks, planting mirrors, marking the landscape with footsteps and recording those journeys in photographs, maps, words

[316] Denegri, 'Primjeri konceptualne umjetnosti u Jugoslaviji', 151.
[317] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 128.
[318] ibid.
[319] Ruben L. F. Habito, 'Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth: Zen and Ecology,' in *Buddhism and Ecology,* eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 166.
[320] David Nez in 'Razgovor sa članovima grupe OHO', 584. (My translation)

and the moving image.'[321] Not similarities in methods, but rather the new dimensions of the universe that the space race opened up, were the starting point for Slovak conceptual artists who employed cosmic references in irrational or ironic ways, while Rudolf Sikora used a more scientific approach in his projects with a cosmic thematic, rooting them in astronomy and geology. OHO's approach to the cosmos was of a completely different nature, as they looked for cosmic laws in human existence on earth and wanted to achieve harmony between self and cosmos.

The notion of cosmos, which originates in ancient Greek philosophy where it stands for order as opposed to chaos, can also be understood as the Western study of the universe. According to theorist Freya Matthews, cosmology depicts 'large-scale structure, origin and evolution of the concrete world' and may include 'not only ordinary concrete items such as material objects, but also forces, fields, minds, spirits, even deities, since all these entities are capable of being actual, of consisting of actual world'.[322] The author further describes it as a worldview of a community which defines 'the place of humankind in the cosmic scheme of things' and tells its members 'where they stand in relation to the rest of creation'. She claims that while both Marxist theorists and empirical scientists have rejected it as outmoded, in fact there has been 'a renaissance of cosmological speculation in the second half of the twentieth century'.[323]

The interest in cosmology in the late 1960s not only originated from the actual space flights, but was also assisted by an unprecedented curiosity for the teachings of Eastern religions. The appeal of Eastern religions was perceived by the young generation as an alternative to the constraints of mainstream society, a liberation from the 'obedience' required by traditional religions such as Christianity and Judaism, as well as a way to explore the 'real self'.[324] The recipe for deliverance was found in the books of Herman Hesse, with the almost forgotten *Siddhartha* republished in large editions, and his characters celebrated as the ones 'who did their own thing', while the message of the book was understood as 'to look at the world not as something that needs explanation, but to love and observe with wonder and admiration the richness of its

[321] Joy Sleeman, 'Land Art and the Moon Landing,' *Journal of Visual Culture* 8 (2009): 300 and 303.
[322] Freya Matthews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991), 11-14.
[323] Ibid., 11.
[324] Western guru of Zen Buddhism Alan Watts wrote on the issue of 'Relevance of Oriental Philosophy' that 'if Christianity is a religion, if Judaism is a religion, and if Islam is a religion, they are based on the idea of man's obedient response to a divine revelation.' Alan Watts, *The Philosophies of Asia* (London: Eden Grove, 1995), 3.

appearance'.[325] Apart from the reading of Hesse, Eastern religions and particularly Zen Buddhism spread in the West mainly thanks to the Japanese author Daisetz Suzuki, whose writings were filtered through the Beat Generation of writers and poets, so that 'Zen soon found itself caught up in a maelstrom of counter-cultural ideas.'[326]

The American artist Nez testified later that during his OHO period he was 'reading mysticism, psychology, philosophy' and listed the most important writers for him: 'Alan Watts (Zen), Aldous Huxely's Doors of Perception (psychedelic experience), Gurdjieff and Ouspensky (mysticism), Gershom Shalom (Kaballah), Herman Hesse's Glass Bead Game, Jung's Man and His Symbols.'[327] In the typically eclectic counter-cultural manner of the 60s, Nez used meditation techniques to achieve harmony between self and the cosmos, while in his work he started to explore symmetry, which represents order and balance in nature. In his work *Symmetric – Parallel Realisation* from spring 1970, symmetry was pointed out by using two parallel lines of gasoline, one of which was set alight at noon, the other at midnight. Andraž Šalamun carried out a project entitled *Reciprocal Symmetry* in April 1970 which consisted of two participants standing on opposite sides of a river and responding to each other by making equal signals with sticks in two colours. Šalamun also marked the daily movement of the sun by using a wooden stick and engraving the shadow it cast on the ground, the effect of which was a circular pattern. Some of these projects were realised in connection with exhibitions, such as the *Belgrade Triennial*, which indicates the artist's lack of interest in working in a gallery context, opting instead for projects that included elements of the universe, refering to laws of nature even in urban contexts.

In Zarica Valley near Kranj, which spreads along the river Sava between Drulovka and Breg, the artists could reflect more freely on their experiences of harmonious relation with nature and the cosmos as well as take further their group exercises. Milenko Matanović created several works in the environment which have been referred to as 'late land art'.[328] In *Arrangement of Candles on a Field Corresponding to Constellation of Stars in the Sky 30.IV 1970* the artist spread the candles in such a way as to exactly reflect the night sky and once more referred to the powerful order of symmetry, this time though including not just the element of time, but adding to it the importance

[325] Klara Gönc Moačanin, 'Hesse –Boom 60-tih,' [Hesse Boom of 60s] in *Šezdeste* [Sixties], (Zagreb: Hrvatsko Filološko Društvo, 2000), 124. My translation.
[326] Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 27.
[327] David Nez in: 'OHO Files', www.artmargins.com
[328] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 133.

of space - the location of Zarica Valley (fig. 69). In his next work *Relation –Sun - Zarica Valley – Venus* Matanović used a mirror reflection to point out an axis of sun rays falling on the valley at 6.15 pm and spread burning candles along the same line when the Venus star appeared at 8.15 pm (fig. 70). The axis of sun and Venus, highlighted with the alignment of mirrors and candles on the grass, also passed the Zarica Valley church spire. The reason for observing these two works in terms of land art may be found in the fact that they contain the physical presence of an art object, although dematerialised to the utmost, refer to the environment around them, and include the element of space, or to be precise a section of the universe according to their conceptual agenda, while many other OHO projects taking place in the valley dealt with the exploration of strictly spiritual domains.[329]

OHO's interest in cosmology derived from their countercultural position, characteristic of which is the desire for the 'transformation of the deepest sense of self, the other, the environment'[330] which was accompanied by the renewed appeal of religious movements and search for 'the true essence of a spiritual nature'.[331] The Slovenian artists investigated this through notions such as cycles in energy flows, constellations of universe, symmetry, time and space, as conveyed in the wisdom of ancient worldviews, Eastern religions and Western esoteric traditions. In terms of personal inclination towards various traditions, a distinction has been made between Nez's and Matanović's interest in Zen and Marko Pogačnik's reliance on Western esotericism.[332] The foundation of esotericism is the belief that all religious traditions are different manifestations of the same underlying essence, the characteristics of which are the conviction that 'all parts of the universe are connected through real or symbolic power', that 'nature is living', and that insights can be gained through 'rituals and symbols' in order to achieve personal transformation.[333] These explorations of consciousness came to the fore in OHO's works carried out in spring and summer of 1970, involving fire, sun, stars and group rituals.

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[329] One such work is Pogačnik's *The OHO-Group Man,* which involved a group activity, – throwing a stone into a circle in the grass, and proceeding accordingly to new positions, which were then analysed as the group's internal relations and expressed in form of geometric diagrams.
[330] Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 49.
[331] Paul Heelas, 'The Spiritual Revolution: From "Religion" to "Spirituality",' in *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead (London: Routhledge, 2002), 362.
[332] Šuvaković, 'David Nez', 7.
[333] Olav Hammer, 'Esotericism in New Religious Movements,' in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 447.

One more project that is related to the issues of land art is OHO's map *Locations of Present OHO Projects in Relation with Historical Locations* from May of 1970. It consists of handwritten inscriptions on a piece of A4 paper with exact locations of OHO's projects in relation to ancient and historic sites such as Neolithic settlements, Celtic burial mounds, a Slavonic burial ground and a medieval gothic church found along the river Sava that flows through the Zarica Valley (fig. 71). By drawing a map OHO made a visual representation of the space in which they established the link with the past, and in that way referred to the passing of time and the experience of space of that specific location. In his chapter on 'Maps and Inscriptions' Gilles Tiberghien depicts the multiple engagements of Western land artists with cartography and asserts that 'if maps hold interest for the artists it is for their analytic connections to the reality and discrepancy between representation and the reality'.[334] In the same context he also observes how for land artists 'nature was a new medium' and that they refused 'the ideological naiveté of seeing nature as the last refuge against the evils of civilisation', despite accusations of being 'anti-ecological', while some artists also 'contributed to the spread of the idea of the desecration of nature'.[335]

In OHO's case, the artists were interested in the possibility of using maps to express a connection to reality, in other words to emphasize the archaeological remains in a specific location to which they related their own projects. What they were not interested in were the formal representation of the map, as there are no coordinates, no grids or geometry on their map, and the toponyms are marked along the river which is the only point of reference in that landscape. However, OHO's map also interestingly reveals their relationship to nature. First of all, for OHO nature was not a 'new medium', as they were not interested in perceiving it as an extended possibility for making large scale sculpture. Their map did not include any of the natural characteristics of the terrain and from it we cannot anticipate the artists' interest in 'return to nature', or any kind of ecological awareness, which they might have in common with the land artists that Tiberghien mentions, although OHO's approach to nature was entirely the opposite of those artists whose work may have promoted the 'desecration of nature'.

OHO artists wanted to establish spiritual links with the hidden powers and qualities of the place by referring to sacred sites from the past. The specific character of the location of sacred sites has been explained as being 'often associated with particular patterns of underground energy flows'

[334] Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 171.
[335] Ibid., 217-218.

which form the 'basis for their harmonious relationship with surroundings and cosmos'.[336] OHO's spiritual, mystical and archetypal relationship with nature has often been misinterpreted as 'ecological' or showing 'ecological responsibility',[337] but OHO artists did not go into nature for environmental reasons, such as a concern with pollution, a wish for conservation of the environment, or an interest in biodiversity. There are no indications in OHO's projects in the environment from that period of a direct engagement with such issues, in contrast to for example Group TOK from Zagreb, who purposely took ecology as a concern of their public art projects realised in 1972, or Pécs Workshop who although not dealing with ecology per se, carried out their projects in sites that were altered by the use of the earth's resources, such as sites of open cast mining. On the contrary, OHO artists were interested in primeval nature and cosmos, in the mystical powers of energy flows and hidden natural laws, as well as in spiritual and corporal harmony with nature, which they tried to achieve through meditation and rituals. Their interest in environmental issues would arguably appear only once they settled in the countryside and started to cultivate the land, coming to ecology from more practical concerns. On the other hand, taking into consideration their method of working in the environment, which was ephemeral, temporal and had no consequences for the environment, as they worked 'without affecting it too aggressively, or attempting to posses it, let alone damage or alter it permanently',[338] shares characteristics with other Central European artists working in the natural environment, which have in hindsight been interpreted as 'environmentally friendly'.[339]

While most of their spring projects still contained a physical residue of artistic activity, in the summer of 1970 their outings to the countryside, Zarica Valley and the village of Čezsoča in western Slovenia were mostly focused on explorations of the relationships within their own collective through a process of 'schooling'. Igor Zabel explains the concept of schooling as 're-disciplining the liberated body' through meditation practices and rituals in order to 're-harmonise with the universe'.[340] When they went on a schooling outing they worked together throughout the day, and all their activity was part of the ritual including eating, breathing and walking (fig. 72). They did not work on individual projects, only reflected on group relations, which were sometimes

[336] Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: the Greening of Science and God* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 179.
[337] See for example Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 133. Also, Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 16.
[338] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 131.
[339] Sturcz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 155.
[340] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 127.

expressed in geometrical graphs. One such schooling ritual included forming a line by holding sticks and then walking behind each other with their eyes closed, with only the first person able to see and having the responsibility of leading the others through the environment. The aim of such an activity which put emphasis on shared trust between the members was to experience OHO as a collective body.

Relations within the OHO group, according to Marko Pogačnik, were characterised by the fact that every member played his own role within the group, which the artist attempted to systematize in a range from rationalism to intuitiveness and from systematism to sensibility.[341] This way of working in a group while preserving full personal identity, in Ješa Denegri's view, is characteristic of the group formations of the 'new artistic practice' in 1970s Yugoslavia, as members did not come together because of team work, but for the reason of a shared worldview.[342] The author recognizes the grounds for the emergence of a widespread phenomenon of artistic groups across Yugoslav republics in 'situations of heightened socio-cultural tensions', in which group support is needed for freer expression of personal attitudes. Another author stresses sociability as the main reason for the forming of artists' groups in the late 1960s which offered 'a sense of togetherness and moral strength' and were held together through 'intensive socialising of the members', while asserting that 'new art in Yugoslavia started with the activity of one artists' group – OHO group from Ljubljana in 1966'.[343] From this it is evident that the role model of OHO group was important in the formation of other artistic groups in Yugoslavia, just as they were recognised as the first artists in the country to engage with conceptual art. It could also be claimed that not only did OHO establish a model in these terms, but took it to the extreme, both in their exploration of internal group relations through joint meditations and telepathic exercises, as well as in transgressing the boundaries of conceptual art by opting for a fusion of art and life in a commune rather than pursuing a successful career in the international art world.

Apart from participating in the *Information* show in New York, OHO also held an exhibition in Aktionsraum in Munich in September 1970, in a gallery which also hosted many arte povera artists and Vienna actionists. In that exhibition OHO artists continued the exploration of group relations

[341] See: Šuvaković, *Konceptualna umetnost*, 375.
[342] Denegri, 'Issues in Artistic Practice of the last Decade', 10.
[343] Jadranka Vinterhalter, 'Umetničke grupe – razlozi okupljanja i oblici rada,' [Artists' groups – reasons of gathering and forms of working] in *Nova Umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980* [New art in Serbia 1970-1980] (Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 1983), 14.

in which they were engaged during the summer. In August 1970 they received a visit from American land artist Walter De Maria, whom they had met in New York earlier in the year. He was also invited to take part in their schooling sessions in the countryside, which resulted in a series of photographs, the first of which depicted the four members of the group leaning against a huge haystack and posing for the camera (fig. 73). In the next photograph three members of OHO pose with Walter De Maria who is standing on the edge, taking the place of the fourth missing member. In each of the subsequent three photographs the members of OHO exchange places till all the combinations have been tried. They stand frontally, sometimes with the hay embroiled in their hair, with the American artist wearing dark sunglasses and holding his sunhat, while all look seriously at the camera, which captures them in close up. This work expresses the OHO artists' ongoing inward looking preoccupation with group consciousness, with their guest being invited to join but not to interfere a great deal, as his is the only static position in the photographs.

In art history the visit of Walter De Maria was noted down as a fact, proved by reproductions of the photo series, but with little interpretation. Igor Zabel only in a footnote speculates on the effects of his visit: 'When Walter De Maria met with the OHO group, he tried to help them with their international career by explaining how the international art system functioned and advising them about how to behave in it. His advice, however, had the completely opposite effect. Now that they realized the actual nature of the world they were about to enter, OHO made the decision to abandon art.'[344] It would be more correct to claim that OHO artists decided to abandon the institutional art world, they 'ended public art activity',[345] the motivation for which is complex and can only partially be put down to conversations the artists held with Walter de Maria.

One can observe the shift in interest of the OHO artists in the direction 'from ideas towards life'.[346] This could be understood in terms of new age spirituality according to which 'life is all about realising one's inner, true life' which involves finding out through practicing, engaging and experiencing 'what works for you'.[347] In the quest for such a life spiritual communes have been founded, of which Findhorn Centre of Light in north-east Scotland is one of the most prominent, beginning with their 1962 proclamation of a 'pioneering a new way for the New Age which is

[344] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 136.
[345] Denegri, 'Prisečanje na rad grupe OHO', 20.
[346] Šuvaković, 'David Nez, Rad 1968-1973', 12.
[347] Heelas, 'The Spiritual Revolution: From "Religion" to "Spirituality"', 362.

gradually unfolding and will require a new type of man'.[348] Sociologist Andrew Rigby described the Findhorn community as a religious commune founded 'in order to seek new form of life' and as composed of people 'who have travelled along different spiritual paths and from different social backgrounds', and gathered in a 'centre from where the forces of the light will emanate to counteract the forces of darkness'.[349] Furthermore, Rigby describes how the members were expected to contribute to life in the commune in some practical way or another, but not asked for a financial contribution and that Findhorn had an 'open door policy' which attracted a 'wide variety of types' of visitors who were led there by the 'voice within'.[350] Marko Pogačnik was one of them and after spending some time with the Findhorn community returned and 'immediately after that established a small commune in Slovenia'.[351]

The Šempas commune was founded on 11 April 1971, when the OHO group with their families and some friends, 14 members altogether, moved to an abandoned farm near the village of Šempas in Vipava Valley.[352] Their move to a rural commune involved farming land that had not been cultivated for years and turning a derelict house into a liveable space (fig. 74). They were vegetarians who grew all their food, using tools that they made themselves, collecting herbs and making natural remedies. When a journalist from Zagreb visited the commune, he described their kitchen which was furnished with a table made of rough wooden planks, with handcrafted pottery plates and earth-ware dishes, in which they lived with no electricity, using candles that they produced from the wax of their own beehives.[353] They had no radio, did not read newspapers, and used no money, only sometimes exchanging goods with local farmers. Asked about their worldview, Pogačnik talked about a 'return to nature and the light through which nature speaks', while 'man is polluting and reducing the light from which he lives'. This belief in Divine Light showed how determining the links with Findhorn were in the beginning of the Šempas commune.

[348] Andrew Rigby, *Alternative Realities: A Study of Communes and Their Members* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 150.
[349] Ibid., 153.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Aleš Crnić, 'Changing Concept of New Age,' *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 4 (2009): 25.
[352] According to Brejc, to the commune moved Marjana Juvanc, Irena Majcen, David Nez, Milenko Matanović, Ajra, Nike, Marika and Marko Pogačnik, Samo Simčić, Zvona and Andraž Šalamun.
[353] Salih Zvizdić, 'Pobjegli od civilizacije,' [Escape from civilization] *Večernji List* (Zagreb) 20-21 April 1974. My translation.

The Yugoslav art world was rather perplexed by the withdrawal of the much favoured artists' group, who were a few months earlier described as an 'holding an exceptional position within Slovenian visual culture' as 'the first group effort originating exclusively from an urban environment, without displaying any pseudo–Rousseauian nostalgia for nature and rural life, which is the most common mystification to be encountered in the Slovenian and Yugoslav cultural environment'.[354] This statement often repeated as proof of the authenticity of OHO's conceptual art in the juvenile history of the movement in Yugoslavia,[355] suddenly no longer held water, but nevertheless pointed to the existing antagonism between the urban and the rural. Once the OHO artists had chosen a rural lifestyle, art historians lost the tools to apprehend their activities, the result of which was that general overviews of OHO practice stop at the moment of their move to Šempas.[356] Rural communes of the 1960s, seen as a more serious response to alienation from contemporary society than urban ones, were in sociological studies characterised by voluntary primitivism: 'the essence of voluntary primitivism was a deliberate withdrawal from institutions and structures of modern life and the voluntary acceptance of a reduced standard of living, both as a way out of a destructive and oppressive social system and as a positive, freedom-enhancing end in itself.'[357] Šuvaković describes Šempas Familiy in terms of an 'urban settlement informed by the alternative currents of the contemporary international counterculture'[358] and as a decision of 'urban artists to live in the countryside'.[359]

Recently, on the occasion of an exhibition entitled *High Times* about psychedelic influences in film, music and art in the Yugoslav context of the 1960s, Marko Pogčnik revealed in an interview with the curator that the group had experimented with LSD prior to the move to Šempas, and one such session 'which we made together with a group of peers, has shown us that it would be inspiring to live together in a commune'.[360] Search for alternative ways of living and the depreciation of the commodity world were connected in counter-cultural circles with their pursuit of 'expanding consciousness', often relying on the help of psychedelic drugs on that quest. In the case of the

[354] Theorist Braco Rotar wrote this in 'Položaj Ohoovaca' [Position of OHO], as translated in Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, 35.
[355] See for example: Denegri, 'Primjeri konceptualne umjetnosti u Jugoslaviji', 152.
[356] Such is the case with Zabel's 'Short history of OHO'.
[357] Hugh Gardner quoted in: William L. Smith, *Families and Communes: An Examination of Nontraditional Lifestyles* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 88.
[358] Ibid., 137.
[359] Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories*, 215.
[360] The interview was part of publicity material accompanying the exhibition *High Times*. See note 8.

Findhorn commune, Rigby observes how a 'sense of deep personal relationship with fellow trippers that develops among drug-users is mirrored in the sense of community and group consciousness that is to be found at Findhorn'.[361] While the use of psychedelic drugs in Western culture and art of the 1960s is widely known,[362] the references to Eastern European art and experiments with drugs are still rather oblique. Under socialism, 'the use of drugs is very little known', claims Paul Neuburg, although a number of young people 'have tried hashish and LSD' it is not a commonplace, partly because of closed borders as a result of which 'prices are beyond the reach of all but an insignificant section of society' as well as 'the traditional fear of drugs'.[363] In Yugoslavia, the official position towards drug use was condemnation and it was referred to it in terms of the clinical addiction of 'weak individuals who escape from reality into an illusionary dream world', however there were attempts by young scholars to observe it as a social phenomenon, finding out that 'young people here predominantly use hashish, LSD and marijuana' – drugs, as stresses the author, which 'do not cause addiction'.[364]

In terms of OHO's position towards drug use, there is also one revealing work, attributed to Matjaž Hanžek[365] made in the context of Pogačnik's match box series from 1968, consisting of six boxes which when put together disclose the text 'I take LSD' (fig. 75). Šuvaković interprets the meaning of the work as based on the Cold War status of LSD, which in Eastern Europe was primarily related to the appeal of American pop culture and rock music.[366] Theodor Roszak, writing about American counter-culture, which was 'essentially an exploration of the politics of consciousness' claims that 'psychedelic experience falls into place as one, but only one of the means of that exploration'.[367] Talking to the journalist who visited the commune in 1974, Marko Pogačnik explained that the Family of Šempas was 'not a hippie commune, because hippies take drugs, drink alcohol and are promiscuous, in difference to us who are just normal people who have run away from civilisation.'[368] The position of psychedelic experimentation within OHO's practice may resonate

[361] Rigby, *Alternative Realities: A Study of Communes and Their Members*, 151.
[362] See for example: Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).
[363] Neuburg, *The Hero's Children*, 244.
[364] Slobodan Drakulić, 'Narkomanije mladih,' [Drug uses of youth] *Revija za sociologiju* (Zagreb) 3 (1973): 110.
[365] This is according to Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, 72. In some reproductions the work is attributed to Marko Pogačnik.
[366] Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group,* 74-76.
[367] Roszak, *The Making of Counter Culture*, 156.
[368] Zvizdić, 'Pobjegli od civilizacije', 7. My translation.

with Rigby's description of coexistence in Findhorn of a 'spiritual wing of the underground' who were 'forced to be somewhat less than open in some of their habits for fear of upsetting the other members of the community, most of whom did not even smoke cigarettes.[369]

The Šempas Familiy, through their preference for basic living conditions, practice of traditional crafts and skills including collective drawing sessions and living in close relationship with their natural surroundings, provided a challenge for art historians, who often used the conventional tools of the discipline, such as stylistic analysis, in their writings about the commune. The drawings made by the whole family, including children, were discussed in terms of showing 'extremely close knowledge of the objects, a mastery of their structural substance, the effects of texture, firmness and specific weight', although 'they never use shading', while their sculpture, including woven fabrics made by Marika, by profession a chemist , were described as an attempt to 'reconstruct the practice of sculpture' when 'contemporary formalistic sculpture is dead and can only be described as the waste material of our civilisation'.[370] Furthermore, there were somewhat narrowed down attempts to see 'a direct link between the practice of the Šempas Family and OHO's land art' in their approach to working in the land.[371]

Another concept that reappears in discussion of OHO's move to the commune is reference to Susan Sontag's text from 1967 'The Aesthetic of Silence' according to which by choosing silence the artist 'frees himself from servile bondage to the world' and can 'impart retroactively an added power and authority'.[372] Quoting Sontag, Ješa Denegri refers to OHO as being in a 'period of silence'.[373] Although the concept of silence might be relevant to some extent, OHO's supposed withdrawal from the art world is more complex, and not so straightforward.[374] David Nez, for example graduated from the Art Academy and had an exhibition of his graduation work, which dealt with the geometric depiction of mandala, referring to its symbolic representation of the universe and as an instrument of meditation used in sacred Buddhist rites. The exhibition was

[369] Rigby, *Alternative Realities: A Study of Communes and Their Members*, 158.
[370] Brejc, 'OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon 1966-1971', 19.
[371] Zabel, 'A Short History of OHO', 134.
[372] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetic of Silence,' in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), 5.
[373] Denegri, 'Prisećanje na rad grupe OHO', 20.
[374] The subject of artists stopping their art activities, 'setting aside their creative work or changing to another profession' was a theme of the exhibition 'Kurze Karrieren' at MUMOK in Vienna in 2004. OHO Group was also represented, however, the accompanying catalogue does not go into much depth about the problem of short careers and the reasons for withdrawal from art world in 1960s and 70s. See: Susanne Neuburger and Hedwig Saxenhuber, eds., *Kurze Karrieren* [Short carriers] (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftun Ludwig Wien, 2004).

organised in 1972 at the Gallery of Tribina mladih in Novi Sad, but 'at the time of exhibition Nez was somewhere on his trip to India'.[375] Furthermore, Marko Pogačnik insists that 'Šempas family was not only an agricultural collective and spiritual centre, but also an artistic group: for instance it appeared at the Venice Biennial in 1978'.[376] This fact to some extend corrects Ješa Denegri's observation on the occasion of their exhibition in Student Centre Gallery in Belgrade, namely that the works of commune members have no parallels with orientations in the field of contemporary art.[377]

At the time these exhibitions took place, the commune was centred around Pogačnik and his family. The majority of other OHO members stayed in the Šempas commune till 1972, when they dispersed. Matanović went to the Findhorn Commune and stayed there for two years before moving to the United States, where he lives to this day. Nez who 'went to India full of ambitions and with the wish to teach art', returned a few months later 'disappointed and tired of India'[378] also proceeded to Findhorn. However the experiences from the OHO period and the founding of the Šempas commune in which everyday life was intertwined with artistic creation and spiritual practice, have significantly determined their later lives, an important aspect of which also became ecological concerns. It was arguably in Šempas, once the artists started to work the land as farmers, in the sense that they were growing their own food, as well as collecting edible and remedial plants, that they became increasingly aware of more tangible aspects of environment. Pogačnik talked to the journalist in 1974 not only of the power of natural energy, but also of how 'man has polluted nature and nature is taking revenge', and continued: 'we want to live in indigenous nature, in which there is no asphalt, electricity, polluted atmosphere or money.'[379]

Pogačnik's interest in ecology would lead him to geomancy, which is a method of divination, and he became an 'internationally renowned geomanticist and healer of the earth, for the purpose of which he developed a unique technique he called lithopuncture'[380] which functions like acupuncture for the earth.[381] He and his family remained on the farm. Andraž Šalamun turned to

[375] Denegri, 'Šutnja Davida Neza', 65.
[376] Pogačnik, 'OHO after OHO', 11.
[377] See: Ješa Denegri, 'Družina u Šempasu,' *Umetnost* (Belgrade) 48 (1976): 82.
[378] Šuvaković, 'David Nez, Rad 1968-1973', 17.
[379] According to: Zvizdić, 'Pobjegli od civilizacije', 7. My translation.
[380] Crnić, 'Changing Concept of New Age', 25.
[381] Pogačnik first book on these issues appeared in 1986. See: Marko Pogačnik, *Zmajeve črte, ekologija in umetnost* [Dragon's lines: ecology in art] (Maribor: Obzorja, 1986). He has since published numerous articles

painting and moved to the seaside town of Koper, David Nez after his return to the US continued his art education in the direction of art therapy, while Matanović became a community planner dealing with sustainable communities and the creation of meaningful neighbourhoods.[382] Each of them in a sense continued their creative, spiritual and nature oriented experiences that derived from the prolific years of OHO practice.

Considering OHO's engagement with the environment one can follow the development from their early outings into the countryside taking with them artistic materials such as wood, mirrors or aluminium rings to the turn to natural processes, the environment itself and body art in a natural setting from summer of 1969. Their continuous exploration of spiritual paths, including Eastern religions and esotericism, influenced their actions in the natural environment during the spring and summer of 1970 when their works increasingly referred to the cosmos and underlying natural laws, directing them towards the exploration of individual and group consciousness which could best be achieved outside of town and away from the distractions of civilization. Their countercultural experiment of a rural commune where they lived in basic material circumstances, strengthening their bonds with the natural environment, meant for some the fulfilment of their expectations, while for other members it was a stop on a longer path that led them outside Slovenia.

It would be wrong to assume that OHO's engagement with the environment happened on a neutral territory, where worldly realms such as the social system had no influence or consequence for their extraterrestrial concerns. Although OHO as a Central European artistic phenomenon was only possible in the conditions of non-aligned Yugoslavia with its open borders, there is no doubt that the machinery of the socialist state was operating and kept them under supervision. When the Zagreb journalist went to the commune in 1974, after receiving a tip from his colleague in Ljubljana, who would stand no chance of visiting Šempas farm, he did not neglect to stop by at the local police station, which confirmed their awareness of the 'community that makes no problems'.

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and books, also with Findhorn Press, which have been translated into several languages. See: www.markopogacnik.com (last accessed 3 May, 2010).

[382] Matanović founded Pomegranate Centre in Washington State in 1986. See: www.pomegranate.org (last accessed 3 May, 2010).

Ecology of the Socialist City: Public Art of the Croatian Group TOK

'The city as a total happening' was a maxim of the Croatian group TOK, which was formed on the occasion of the 7th Zagreb Salon, an annual exhibition which in 1972 for the second time included a section 'Proposal' that dealt with artistic interventions in the public space of the city under the slogan 'City as a space for plastic happening'. The core members of the group, whose name translates as 'FLOW', were Dubravko Budić, Vladimir Gudac and Davor Lončarić, who shared an interest in questioning the role of art in an urban setting and examining the context of public space in relation to the environment, which they considered as 'not just nature, architecture, road, but also mass media, people, intimateness, warmth, traffic, politics, waste.'[383] Their theoretical stance towards contemporary art practice and critical analysis of the socio-political atmosphere of everyday life under socialism earned them a distinctive, albeit not fully appreciated, status within the 'new artistic practice' of the 1970s in Yugoslavia.[384]

In the early 1970s Zagreb struggled to establish better connections between its historic centre and new parts of town, housing estates erected on the southern side of the River Sava following the scheme of post-war urban planning. In terms of the political situation, the city became an arena of tense national upheaval, which culminated in the Croatian Spring of 1971, while in the context of contemporary art, Zagreb turned into a testing ground for artistic experiments and interventions. The public art projects by group TOK were on the one hand conceived as a vital response to the changes the city and its population had recently experienced, while on the other, they offered a critical revision of the art displayed on the streets and squares of Zagreb in the previous year. A decisive tool for their critical positioning was ecology, then a freshly formed discipline, which entailed up to date knowledge about the human environment and which in the Croatian context

[383] Davor Lončarić, 'Okoliš i komunikacija,' [Environment and communication] *Telegram* (Zagreb) 21 January 1973, 18.

[384] New artistic practice covered a wide range of phenomena including 'conceptual art, body art, land art, urban interventions and actions in natural surroundings, performance and video' which, according to Dunja Blažević, 'articulated a critical approach to the existing practices – from politics to art.' Dunja Blažević, 'Who is that singing over there? Art in Yugoslavia and after... 1949-1989...' in: *Aspects/Positions*, 93. For more detailed analysis of new artistic practice, which stands for a new generation of artists engaged with innovative de-materialised art practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Yugoslavia, see: Ješa Denegri, 'Art in the Past Decade,' in *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978*, 7-14.

had an important role in expressing public consciousness, without being perceived as directly political.

In contrast to OHO group, who received wide recognition within the art world in Yugoslavia and abroad, the reception of group TOK was more similar to that of Pécs Workshop in that they were taken into account by national art history, but never became canonical artists within that structure. There is also an important difference with the Hungarian artists whose bibliography, although short, still exists, while group TOK was almost literally never the sole subject of an independent art historical study. TOK member Vladimir Gudac, himself an art historian, has recently written a brief account of the group's activities, and there was a similar situation in the early seventies when artists were also asked to write about their own work.[385]

TOK's engagement with questions of art conceived for an urban setting and problematising of the meaning of public space, as well as their concern for environmental issues, presented Croatian art historians, who generally nourished a warm affection for modernist art, with a rather difficult task in evaluating their work. In the catalogue *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978* their works were described as 'primarily transmitting a social message, rather than artistic one' and recognised as 'close to the contemporary forms of ecological art',[386] giving a clear picture of socialist art history in non-aligned Yugoslavia, which although it embraced innovative artistic approaches and could deal with the institutional critique of conceptual art, was not prepared for artistic practice that reached out of the discipline's confines and dealt with the social and political reality itself. This is confirmed in the equally influential catalogue *Innovations in Croatian Art of the Seventies* published in 1982, in which the verdict on group TOK was that 'it only wants to warn about and develop consciousness about an ambient' through their 'ecological art, which takes reality itself in order to transform it'.[387]

The perceived interrelation of their criticality with interference in social reality and the assumed term of 'ecological art' were left in those sources without further clarification, while a lack of comparison with other artists and absence of existing models within which to position group TOK ,

[385] The publication in question is the monograph of Dubravko Budić, which also contains a short account of TOK, published on the occasion of the acquisition of the works for a private collection. See: Marinko Sudac, ed. *Budić: Between Gesture and the Program* (Zagreb: Edicija Sudac, 2007).
[386] Davor Matičević, 'Zagreb Circle,' in *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978*, 25.
[387] Marijan Susovski, ed., *Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdesetih godina* [Innovations in Croatian art of the 1970s] (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1982), 31.

indicates their exceptional character among the artists involved in new artistic practice. As a matter of fact, in their critical examination and direct engagement with the social, political and environmental situation of Zagreb in early 1970s, group TOK represents a local incarnation of what has recently been conceived of as a global art-activist trend that in the aftermath of 1968 became concerned with 'social change'.[388] In their public art projects TOK incorporated the legacy of the situationists' encounters with the everyday, conceptual art's institutional critique and the up to date theory of mass media, while environmental pollution became the main subject of those works.

The term ecological art was used at the time in relation to American artists such as Alan Sonfist, who focused on re-creating lost habitats in urban contexts by drawing attention to the 'history of natural environment' as well as Newton Harrison's practice that involved making 'sophisticated ecosystems' in gallery contexts such as a fish farm.[389] The contribution of group TOK to the field of art and ecology is based on their analysis of pollution in a specific urban environment that had an effect on the mental as well as physical wellbeing of the city's population. By comparison, Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora dealt with the dangers of over-exploitation of planet resources in his conceptual pieces which had a more general scope, discussing the future of the earth through issues of overbuilding and overpopulation, which were articulated from the distinctive position of an artist confined to normalization stricken Bratislava. Although these artists from Eastern Europe formed their practice using the most current information on ecological issues, they did not view their art as ecological, rather ecology was a subject of their neo-avant-garde and conceptual practice.

An overview of artist groups in Croatian post-war art assigned the status of a 'certain marginality' to group TOK, which apparently, 'also, to a degree, matches the truth'.[390] This is a rather surprising statement as it comes from a curator who actually helped to raise the group's profile by offering them exhibitions and publishing reports about their activity in his gallery newspaper.[391] Želimir

[388] Will Bradly and Charles Esche, eds., *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).
[389] See: Alan Sonfist, 'Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments [1968]' and Jack Burnham, 'Contemporary Ritual: A Search for Meaning in Post-Historical Terms' [1973] reprinted in *Land and Environmental Art*, 256-258.
[390] Želimir Koščević, 'Umjetničke grupe u poslijeratnoj umjetnosti u Hrvatskoj' [Artists' groups in post-war art in Croatia] *Život umjetnosti* (Zagreb) 43-44 (1988): 81.
[391] See for example: *Novine galerije SC*, nos. 35, 37-39, 41, and 45.

Koščević grounds his argument on the 'unstable cohesion of the group' since it was founded in order to take part in the competition for the Zagreb Salon, and ceased to exist only a year later. Despite its brief existence, group TOK deserves more detailed study that takes into consideration the specific character of their work against the backdrop of the artistic, cultural, political as well as environmental parameters present in the Socialist Republic of Croatia at the time. To disclose the relevance of TOK's contribution to the field of art and environment in Central Europe their projects will be viewed through the lens of the political reality which influenced the atmosphere of their works, as well as in the frame of public art displayed in Zagreb in the year prior to TOK's interventions. Furthermore, the consultation of articles discussing ecological concerns that were regularly published in Croatian art and cultural magazines, at a time when ecology as a discipline was still positioned between social and natural sciences, will help to explicate particular issues of environmental crisis that were innovatively addressed in TOK's projects.

TOK was a diverse collective, which apart from the then art history and comparative literature student Vladimir Gudac (1951), who was especially interested in art theory and ecology, also included architecture student Davor Lončarić (1951), who had an affinity for hippy lifestyles and countercultural worldviews, as well as Dubravko Budić (1948-2009), who was an art academy student and often engaged in more practical artistic questions, such as graphic design.[392] Their proposal for the Zagreb Salon, which was an annual survey exhibition, also contained the names of several colleagues with whom they socialised intensively at the time, namely Ivan Šimunović, Gustav Zeherl and Darko Zubčević, but who withdrew from the activities of the group during or even before the Salon exhibition.[393] After the group ceased its activity, Gudac distinguished himself as an artist, curator and critic, and is today practically the sole heir of group TOK.

While Pécs Workshop was practically the only artist group in Hungary at the time, in Yugoslavia, as Piotrowski observes, there was 'a widespread interest in forming art groups'.[394] Yugoslav art theorist Ješa Denegri, as was discussed in relation to OHO group, accounts for this phenomenon

[392] This is according to curator Nada Beroš, interviewed on 26 August 2010 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.
[393] In the article written by TOK for *Telegram* (2 June 1972) during the Salon, the names of Šimunović and Zechel do not appear, while in the recent account of Gudac , it was Šimunović and Zubčević that 'gave up right at the beginning and did not participate in any of the actions', while 'Zechel left shortly after the Salon.' Gudac also provides a more detailed description of how they all met. See: Vladimir Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973,' in Sudac, *Budić: Between Gesture and Program,* 22.
[394] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 304. There is no mention of the group TOK in this publication.

by highlighting the tense socio-political situation, in which a collective offered a better position from which to express a common worldview, which is often the main motive for the formation of a group, rather 'than a fixed program' which would draw the group together.[395] In the case of TOK, it was in fact the precise program that was decisive for its formation, and while in general, as Denegri observes, 'individuals kept the full identity of name and work', TOK's practice was another deviation from the rule, as all their projects were signed collectively. TOK also had a group of followers and fans who named themselves BNK, the acronym of which roughly translates as 'We Don't Give a Fuck' (about group TOK), who joined them on trips to Belgrade and Graz. The existence of BNK also sheds light on the countercultural atmosphere in which these projects were carried out, despite the serious political situation.[396]

In 1971 the main Croatian art magazine *Život umjetnosti* published a special issue devoted to 'Humans and their Environment' in which selected papers dealt with the history of environmental protection, ecological problems related to urbanism and envisaging environmentally acceptable form of tourism for Croatia, and also included an essay which discussed differences in approach to the environment between 'humanist' Lewis Mumford and 'technician' Richard Buckminster Fuller.[397] Despite the well informed and up-to-date discussion of environmental issues, the frequent quotations of Marx and Engels in the essays illustrate the writers' awareness of the 'decentralised censorship' of the state bureaucracy through which the party controlled publishing, by relying on author's self-censorship. Political theorist Miklós Sükösd termed this kind of more liberalised, but still closely watched public sphere of 1970s Eastern European socialism 'tolerant repression'.[398]

A similar pattern of 'tolerant repression' can be observed in many other local periodicals dealing with culture at the time, where ecological problems and initiatives were openly and critically examined, while state politics was generally not part of the editorial agenda. For instance, the leading cultural weekly *Telegram* published an immediate and detailed report from the 1972

[395] Denegri, 'Art in the Past Decade', 10.
[396] This information comes from my interview with Nada Beroš, who was a member of BNK (Boli nas kurac). Gudac does not name the group, but mentions Nada Beroš, her sister Rada and Đurđa Fučkan who accompanied them to Belgrade, Graz, Pazin and also joined them at the manifestation in Zagreb at the Philosophical Faculty of the university. See: Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[397] *Život umjetnosti* (Zagreb) 15-16 (1971). Edited by Žarko Damjan.
[398] Miklós Sükösd, 'From Propaganda to "OEFFENTLICHKEIT" in Eastern Europe. Four Models of Public Space under State Socialism,' *Praxis International* 1-2 (1990): 48.

Stockholm conference on the Human Environment by a young delegate Nenad Prelog, who highlighted the criticism expressed towards the 'most praised and most disputed' publication *Limits to Growth*, discussed the issue of 'American ecocide in Vietnam' and warned that 'we can't be too satisfied with the final outcome of the conference.'[399] The same paper, however, when it conceived the last issue of 1971 as an annual evaluation of the cultural scene, dealt in depth with the crisis in the theatre and acted as if the turbulent political times that culminated in the crushing of the Croatian Spring in the last days of the year did not affect the arts. Only on the back pages in a 'Letter to Santa' that starts with the words 'we have no special wishes for 1972 since you still haven't fulfilled the ones from 1971', could one sense an implicit political comment.[400] From these instances we may detect the twofold position of ecology – as a substitute for the voicing of direct political issues on the one hand, while on the other containing unstated denial of the political implications raised by environmental problems.

During the 1960s Yugoslavia experienced major changes such as the relaxation of border controls, economic reform with widespread migration to Western Europe in search of 'temporary work', the opportunity to open foreign currency saving accounts at home, and a rise in tourism, all of which brought a sense of liberalisation and generated a new atmosphere in which 'people began to raise matters that had previously been taboo.'[401] One such issue was the question of the status of the Croatian language in Yugoslavia, which escalated into a dispute after a new dictionary published in 1967 appeared to relegate Croatian to a regional variant of Serbian, to which Croatian linguists and scholars responded with a 'Declaration' that demanded equality in status for Croatian with other languages in Yugoslavia and consistent use of it within the Republic.[402] Furthermore, economic grievances were also on the agenda, and facts such as that Croatia, mainly through tourism on the coast, brought in half of the foreign capital into the Yugoslav Federation, but controlled only 15 % of it, made it 'impossible to divorce economics from politics', as Croatians felt that 'they were being exploited' within the Federation.[403]

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[399] Nenad Prelog, 'Dilema: stagnacija ili propast,' [Dilemma: stagnation or collapse] *Telegram* 23 June 1972, 9.
[400] Slobodan Šembera, 'Memoari jednog tajnika,' [Memoirs of a secretary] *Telegram* 28 December 1971, 12-13. My translation.
[401] Ivo Goldstein, *Croatia: A History* (London: C. Hurst & Co. 1999), 176.
[402] Pedro Ramet*, Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia: 1963-1983* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 108. The full title of declaration was 'Declaration Concerning the Name and Position of Croatian Standard Language'.
[403] Ibid., 105.

As a result a coalition was forged between liberals in the Croatian communist party and nationalists in the cultural organisation Matica Hrvatska, which during 1971 grew into a mass movement known as the Croatian Spring, involving public demonstrations and by the end of the year strikes and protests by students.[404] The demands of Croatian nationalists became increasingly radical, such as the call for a separate currency, threatening to undermine the federal structure of Yugoslavia. In December 1971 Tito moved to crush the Croatian Spring by forcing the reformist leadership to resign, outlawing Matica Hrvatska, imprisoning the ringleaders and organising a purge of party members and the intelligentsia. At the same time, Tito granted 'many of the nationalist demands' such as tripling the proportion of foreign currency earnings Croatian firms were allowed to retain.[405]

Vladimir Gudac, then an art history student, recalls how in 1971 'as horses carried moustached policemen on their backs and groups of three people were scattered apart by the order "Keep moving!", he spent his time at the university 'attending gatherings and fervent discussions between the so-called extreme leftists and the new rightists'.[406] The Philosophical Faculty was still a stronghold of the Praxis group of neo-Marxist philosophers, who had been the leaders of the 1968 student unrest and who 'felt an ideologically rooted antipathy toward decentralisation [and] nationalism'. The 1971 summer issue of Praxis was in fact temporarily banned for claims such as that the nationalist movement was linked with 'the efforts of a new middle class to consolidate its position'.[407]

Gudac transfers the division between the leftists and nationalists to the art scene where the 'groups of figurative painters gathered around "national" art, were in conflict with members of New Tendencies, who were allegedly spreading ill-spirited internationalism through their abstract painting.'[408] The neo-constructivist New Tendencies was a series of international seminars, publications and exhibitions organised by the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb from 1961 and, together with the Gorgona group, it was perceived as the most influential art initiative in Croatia of the 1960s. While the Gorgona group, which was described 'not as an art group in the

[404] According to historian Ivo Goldstein, in Croatia 'the Prague Spring was seen as a possible model for democratisation.' See: Goldstein, *Croatia: A History*, 178.
[405] Ramet*, Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia: 1963-1983,* 139.
[406] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 21.
[407] Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia: 1963-1983,* 129.
[408] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 21. In this case he refers to Biafra Group who opposed abstraction on the grounds that it was not able to express true national art.

usual sense' but rather 'as a process of searching for artistic and intellectual freedom'[409] showed 'a complete lack of interest in the social life of their community',[410] the focus of New Tendencies was slightly different, in that they envisaged a more socially aware role in the application of new technologies to contemporary art practice.

In August 1968 the New Tendencies conference on 'Computers and Visual Research' coincided with 'Cybernetic Serendipity', an exhibition at the ICA London, which is considered to be the first major exhibition of computer art. While the London exhibition was criticized for being a 'technological funfair', in Zagreb the question was posed whether computer art might 'address social consciousness', the ideas of which were also expressed in the 'Zagreb Manifesto' co-authored by Gustav Metzger.[411] The Manifesto, written in London but delivered at the symposium in Zagreb, pointed to 'the current unprecedented crisis in society' and proclaimed:

> 'Some artists are responding by utilising their experience of science and technology to try to resolve urgent social problems. Others, researching in cybernetics and the neuro-sciences, are exploring new ideas about the interaction of the human being with the environment. Others again are identifying their work with a concept of ecology which includes the entire technological environment that man has imposed on nature. There are creative people in science who feel that the man/machine problem lies at the heart of making the computer the servant of man and nature. Such people welcome the insight of the artist in this context, lest we lose sight of humanity and beauty.'[412]

The ecology to which the group TOK would refer in many of their public art projects would however be more grounded in the disciplines concerned with the issue of environmental crisis, rather than cybernetic theory, as will be shown later.

The question of the social responsibility of art works voiced at New Tendencies and the proclamation of absolute artistic freedom to which 'anti-group' Gorgona was devoted would go on to have long lasting influence on Croatian artistic practice of the 1970s. In contrast to Slovenia, where the activity of OHO group meant a 'radical break with the local artistic culture' which was

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[409] Nena Dimitrijević, 'Art as a Way of Existence' (1977) reprinted in *Gorgona* (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), 52.
[410] Branka Stipančić, 'Some Aspects of Croatian Contemporary Art 1949-1999,' in *Aspects/Positions*, 129.
[411] Gordon Hyde, Jonathan Benthall and Gustav Metzger, 'Zagreb Manifesto,' *Bit international* (Zagreb) 7 (1971): 4.
[412] Ibid.

characterised by graphic production of the traditional 'Ljubljana school', in Zagreb, 'because of its cosmopolitan character', various artistic spheres could exist at the same time, neatly illustrating the specific path of development of the art of the seventies in the various centres of Yugoslavia.[413] However, the chapter on the new decade of Croatian contemporary art often starts with the activity of the Student Centre Gallery in Zagreb and the chaotic exhibition 'Hit Parade' which was held in October 1967. This group exhibition involved the creation of four ambients, rather than traditional artworks, which entailed the total transformation of the gallery space, while infamously at the *vernissage* 'the exhibition was destroyed by the public'.[414]

The Gallery curator Želimir Koščević, as an impassioned opponent of the dominance of traditional categories of sculpture and painting, was committed to questioning the function of art in society, through exhibitions, public actions and by publishing a gallery newspaper.[415] Koščević organised a series of innovative exhibitions at the gallery, such as 'Postal Delivery', which consisted of the mail art section of the Paris Biennial of Youth in 1971, which Koščević for the sake of conceptual wit, exhibited without unpacking its contents. In comparison with other countries under socialist rule, where mail art was highly appreciated as it 'gave the East European artists the illusion that they were participating in the international art movement at relatively low cost',[416] in a more internationally open Zagreb the precious postcards never saw the light of day. Furthermore, starting in 1969 he invited several young artists, including Sanja Iveković, Braco Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak for their first solo-shows, which has been recognised as marking the inauguration of the new generation of artists of the 1970s.[417] The slightly younger artists Gudac and Budić would also have their first joint exhibition there in the spring of 1972, while group TOK were invited to edit several issues of the gallery newspaper.[418]

Thanks to the activities of the high profile institution of the Gallery of Contemporary Art and the more informal Student Centre Gallery the contemporary art scene in Zagreb flourished, while an

[413] Denegri, 'Art in the Past Decade', 11.
[414] Želimir Koščević, ed., *Galerija SC* (Zagreb: Galerija SC, 1975), 45.
[415] Such was the action TOTAL in 1970, which involved putting up posters and spreading flyers which called for abolition of painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied art, galleries and art critics, in the interest of bringing art and life closer together. See: 'Akcija TOTAL,' *Novine galerije SC* 22 (1970): 81.
[416] Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 268.
[417] See: Davor Matičević, 'Nova generacija zagrebačkih plastičara: Informacija o seriji izložbi u zagrebačkoj Galeriji Studentskog centra,' [New generation of Zagreb plasticists: information about series of exhibitions in Zagreb Student Centre Gallery] *Čovjek i prostor*, reprinted in: Koščević, *Galerija SC*, 125-126.
[418] For the exhibition Budić – Gudac see: *Novine galerije SC* 35 (March 1972) and 37 (June 1972).

additional important asset was the Haustor, a temporary gallery in the entrance hall of a house in the centre of town run by artists Braco Dimitirijević and Goran Trbuljak, who since 1969 had been working with passers-by and accidental encounters on the street in their conceptual practice. Their starting point was that the street is not 'the neutral scene for the realisation of a pre-elaborated idea' but the work results from the 'spontaneous interactions of initial conditions and the street environment', while passers-by participate in the completion of the work. One such action by Dimitrijević involved placing a carton of milk onto the road which was run over by a car, and then asking the driver to acknowledge co-authorship of the work.[419]

The subtle but far reaching changes to artistic practice brought by conceptual art, the institutional critique of galleries as 'temples and treasuries which keep art imprisoned in their cold rooms'[420] and the appearance of a new generation of artists and curators around 1970, contributed to the transformation of the traditional perception of art in society. Following the conviction that 'art practice has to have a wider social dimension, the success of which is measured by its consummation, by making it available to a wide circle of users... ideal places for which are the square, street, park, the living tissue of urban landscape'[421] several exhibition projects in summer of 1971 invited artists to 'intervene in space'. Apart from the 'City as space for plastic happening' promoted by the Zagreb Salon, the Gallery of Contemporary Art organised the exhibition 'Possibilities for 1971', which took place outside the Gallery in its close surroundings, while Koščević curated 'Gulliver in Wonderland' in a city park in the nearby town of Karlovac. In all of these the young generation of artists was involved.[422]

In Yugoslav art at the beginning of the seventies the term plastic, which was used in the concept of the exhibition 'Proposal', was applied to indicate the three dimensional character of the works created, while at the same time stressing their difference from traditional sculpture. It was connected to the 'youngest generation of artists' which started their careers with exhibitions in the Student Centre Gallery and referred to the practices of 'new ambient, poor and conceptual

[419] See: Nena Baljković, 'Braco Dimitrijević – Goran Trbuljak,' *Nova umjetnička praksa*, 29.
[420] Zvonko Maković, '6. Zagrebački salon,' *Život umjetnosti* 17 (1972): 97. In the review of the exhibition Possibilities for '71 the same author takes the critique of museums even further, almost in a Maoist tone condemning them as 'hackneyed and rotten treasuries of bourgeois art in which under thick golden frames and marble pedestals next to artist names also stands the market value, which for the "fine art lovers" and collectors is the same, since for them art is identical to any other capital.' See: Zvonko Maković, 'Mogućnosti za '71,' *Čovjek i prostor* (Zagreb) 221 (1971): 16.
[421] Maković, '6. Zagrebački salon', 97.
[422] For visual information about the exhibition Gulliver in Wonderland see: Koščević, *Galerija SC*, 148-150.

art'.[423] Koščević talks about 'plastic problems' in his essay on the creation of 'a total ambient by direct interventions in space', taking it a step further with the observation that this also meant the 'transformation of the passive viewer into an active participant of the realised work', as well as the 'necessary correction of the function of art in society'.[424] The term 'plastic art' was in use for only a short period of time, giving way to the more inclusive notion of 'new artistic practice' that was chosen for the title of a major exhibition in 1978, becoming a reference point for the Yugoslav art of the period.

When the Zagreb Salon was reconceptualised as a three part exhibition in 1971, it included a major retrospective of the interwar group Zemlja, an overview of contemporary production entitled 'Situation 71' that dealt with traditional disciplines such as painting and sculpture, and the section 'Proposal' which was envisaged to represent 'the germ of the future that the given moment embodies' and was devoted to the 'sphere of the future, the sphere of the possible'.[425] The call for proposals declared that 'full and limitless freedom is a precondition for every creative act and postulate of any artistic result' and that the Salon 'respects and affirms equally freedom of thought and choice', but, because the Salon is a 'communal institution and has a social role' the organisers of the Section 'Proposal' understood it as 'a question of social responsibility' to give it the theme of 'humanising urban space'.[426] This proclamation could be viewed as a fine example of socialist curatorial practice in Yugoslavia, which on the one hand declared full freedom of artistic expression, while on the other, through the act of self-control, warned about the 'social responsibility' of art. Furthermore, the vision for entries was conveyed in an instructive if rather poetic tone announcing that the field of artistic happenings 'stretches from the overall tissue of the city to the ornaments of human steps, from stages of the squares to the stages of shop windows, from screens of facades to the screens of posters, from programmed lights to accidental reflections'.[427]

Two of the most polemical works of the Salon were Ivan Kožarić's *Grounded Sun* and Braco Dimitrijević's *A Passer-by whom I met by chance*. Dimitrijević's work consisted of photographic

[423] Zvonko Maković, 'Najmlađa generacija jugoslavenskih plastičara,' [The youngest generation of Yugoslav plasticists] *Život umjetnosti* 14 (1971): 55.
[424] Želimir Koščević, 'Aspekti ambijentalizacije prostora,' [Aspects of ambientalisation of space] *Život umjetnosti* 13 (1971): 57.
[425] 'City as Space for Plastic Happening,' *Omladinski list* (Zagreb) 122, 10 March 1971. My translation.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Ibid.

portraits of passers-by he accidentally met at 1.15 pm, 4.23 pm and 6.11 pm that the artist enlarged to a size of 2x3 metres and installed on the facade of a central building on the main square in Zagreb. Similarly to early apolitical interpretations of Sándor Pinczehelyi's *Hammer and Sickle*, the work was first considered to express the artist's 'scepticism of the authorities in history of art, suspicion of arbitrary imposed values and criticism of the hierarchical structure of the system of value'.[428] Later interpretations relate the work to the practice of placing enlarged portraits of communist leaders in public squares across Eastern Europe and especially to the 'cult of personality embodied in Tito's figure',[429] thereby attributing more political significance to the work, since 'it inscribed ordinary people into portrait conventions normally reserved for the leaders or dictators.'[430]

Grounded Sun by Ivan Kožarić provoked a more direct reaction from the public, namely, on two occasions black paint was spilt on it and then it was set alight, until the City Council order it be removed on the grounds that the object 'had become a target for molestation by unconscious citizens who cover it with various paints, fire and texts, which altogether makes the environment of that ambient very ugly'.[431] The reason why this two metre high fibreglass sphere painted in gold and placed on the ground in a busy spot in front of the National Theatre caused so much controversy was that the 'nationalists' among the artists believed that non-figurative art could not deal properly with the essential issues of humanity, which should be the main concern for artistic creation.[432] While art critics praised the work for its 'anti-monumental understanding of sculpture placed in an urban setting'[433] the conservative stream opposed 'contemporary formalistic art' and called for 'humanistically engaged art that speaks about the life and problems of one nation.'[434]

From this heated atmosphere one project realised for the Salon distinguished itself as best expressing the expectations of an art public traditionally guided by modernist values. This was the drawing of the city's shadows on the pavement in the centre of town by Boris Bućan, which was

[428] Baljković, 'Braco Dimitrijević – Goran Trbuljak,' 31. Also quoted by Susovski in the catalogue of *Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdesetih.*
[429] Kovač, '(Im)possible Photographs', 289.
[430] Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 309.
[431] Decision of the City Council reprinted in *Novine galerije SC* (1971): 110.
[432] The destruction of the sculpture was attributed to the Biafra Group whose 'aggressive role towards the interventionalists was quickly connected with the vandalistic act of burning the Grounded Sun'. See: Vinko Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra 1970-1978* (Zagreb: Art Studio Azinović, no date), 90.
[433] See: Maković, '6. zagrebački salon', 98.
[434] Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra 1970-1978*, 62.

admired for being 'surprisingly clean', for having appropriately understood the 'rules and aesthetic criteria', and for 'throwing itself under the feet of citizens of all social layers'.[435] Such appraisal for a rather formalistic intervention in public space indicated the unpreparedness of critics for the direct interference with the social fabric in the work of group TOK realised within the same institutional framework the following year.

Bućan also took part in the outdoor exhibition *Possibilities for '71*, for which he painted the chimneys of the gallery in red and white, while other artists used neon lights rhythmically installed on the street, a multi coloured plastic tube set on the rails of an out of function cable car in the city centre, as well as erecting elongated lampposts in a small square, and giving the public 'the opportunity to participate in the creative activity' by leaving coloured ropes in a pedestrian area.[436] The starting point of this exhibition was that 'art has to be created for the street in order to be close and accessible to everyone'.[437] Interestingly, the catalogue of the exhibition exposes the way in which the works displayed in the city were realised materially, by acknowledging the support of socialist factories, mostly those involved in heavy industry and electronics, from across Croatia. Although these firms helped with the realisation of the works installed in public space, it would not be appropriate to interpret this gesture as a form of public art commission as understood in the West, where corporations sponsored public art projects on the understanding that they would be accountable to them,[438] but rather in the sense of the socialist ideal of a mutual alliance between the working class and art. The meaning and scope of the call for the 'democratisation of art' is probably best expressed in a review of the show that stressed the purely physical appearance of the works, which the audience takes as 'objective facts perceived for play', since these elements placed in urban environment change the function of the streets and squares by turning them into 'playgrounds'.[439]

In spite of these benign interventions in the public space around the Gallery, the exhibition opening was marked by protests by the same group of artists that so strongly objected to Kožarić's

[435] See: Maković, '6. zagrebački salon', 96.
[436] Davor Matičević, *Mogućnosti za '71* [Possibilities for '71] (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1971). The artists in the exhibition were Sanja Iveković, Jagoda Kaloper, Boris Bućan, Dalibor Martinis, Gorki Žuvela, Davor Tomičić, Goran Trbuljak and Slobodan Dimitrijević.
[437] Ibid.
[438] On these issues see: Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Public Art and its Uses' in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context and Controversy*, eds. H. F. Senie and S. Webster (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 158-170.
[439] Maković, 'Mogućnosti za '71,' [Possibilities for '71] *Čovjek i prostor* 221 (1971): 16.

Grounded Sun, who spread leaflets condemning this kind of interventions in the city as pure 'behaviourism'.[440] It seems paradoxical that the most intense clashes over the function of art in public space were based on the classical dispute between abstraction and figuration, with a human-size golden sphere arousing the most destructive impulses. One should bear in mind though, that the subtext of this conflict was of a political nature, touching on the question of the national role of art related to the political issues raised by Croatian Spring. Likewise, the move of art from galleries to open city spaces in terms of the character of realised works showed that, despite the rhetoric of the 'social role of art', which creates works that 'ought to be the common property of all citizens and the socialist society'[441] it was meant and understood as an invitation 'to play', rather than an opportunity for critical engagement.

In comparison, in neighbouring Hungary some works realised in public space addressed the political system in which they were created more directly. Such was the *Negative Star* that artist Gábor Attalai created in 1970 by shovelling snow into the shape of a five-pointed star on the bank of the Danube in front of the Hungarian Parliament. On the grounds that the work was realised using snow, which is a natural element, László Beke includes it in his overview of Central European art in nature, referring to it as 'minimalist Land Art'.[442] Piotrowski on the other hand interprets the ephemeral nature of the material as questioning the 'stability of the Communist symbols and its value', while making a point that 'Hungary presents a unique instance of the politically engaged neo-avant-garde', while in other Central European countries, Yugoslavia included, artists were 'in general not particularly interested in this issue.'[443] In that sense, while public art on the streets of Zagreb in the early seventies was organised officially, Attalai's *Negative Star* could be perceived as an individual subversive artistic act, which became part of the Central European art history through its photographic documentation, while the actual intervention in the snow did not even last till it melted, as it was 'immediately destroyed by the authorities, petrified of secret messages'.[444]

Art that was created for an urban setting and displayed in Zagreb during 1971 was in general referred to in art reviews as 'art in the urban landscape', or 'interventions in an urban ambient',

[440] Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra 1970-1978*, 64.
[441] Matičević, *Mogućnosti za '71*, n.p.
[442] Beke, 'Central East Europe', 114.
[443] Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 278 and 313.
[444] Fehér, 'A Cry from a Dark Room', 66.

with nearly no discussion of what constitutes the urban. Yet, one expert on urbanism, art historian Milan Prelog in his article published in the issue of *Život umjetnosti* that dealt with the environment claimed that the city in all historical periods receives and absorbs the critique of social systems in which it exists, just as the 'utopias in their description of ideal cities contain the critique of the real ones'.[445] The contemporary crisis of urban agglomerations, determined by factors such as 'rapid population growth in the cities, expansion of the built environment and an increase in traffic' was according to Prelog 'the final, global phase in the growth of the city that was determined by the process of industrialisation'.[446] For Prelog, the crisis of the environment cannot be approached separately from the urban crisis, and arguably this was also the starting point for group TOK, which connected the problems of urban living with issues of ecological crisis.

In charge of the 1972 edition of the Zagreb Salon was Žarko Domjan, editor-in-chief of *Život umjetnosti*, who put forward the general theme for the exhibition of the 'human environment, which is a major concern of our civilisation'.[447] During the exhibition which lasted for a month from 8 May till 8 June, the editors of *Telegram* invited TOK, 'the impressive young group of artists' whom they interestingly label as 'conceptualists-plasticists' to describe their own contributions for the section Proposal, which in 1972 'again proved the most fruitful sphere of the new conception of the Salon'.[448] The reason for this, as we read in the preface, is that TOK's 'approach to space inaugurates two important modifications of how we think about it – that of ecological and the "intimate", which changes the current technicist and technocratic approach to the city.'

TOK began their contribution by foregrounding the problem of space within the city, stating that the city entails a 'gradation of space which can be reduced to the dichotomy outer/inner, open/closed as well as public/intimate'.[449] The last pairing indicates the artists' take on the issue

[445] Milan Prelog 'Četiri bilješke o krizi ljudske okoline,' [Four notes about the crisis of human environment] *Život umjetnosti* 15/16 (1971): 6.
[446] In her discussion of Chicago School of urban theory that was based on writings of German sociologist Georg Simmel, such as 'Metropolis and Mental Life' from 1903, and theories of Charles Darwin, which resulted in urban ecology that took as its subject observation how humans adapt to their external environment, American art theorist Rosalyn Deutsche states that 'urban ecology tended to dissociate spatial organisation from the specificities of industrialism and modern capitalism' which came under criticism after 1968 and urban geographers and sociologists started to develop 'a politicized spatial knowledge'. See: Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 133.
[447] Žarko Domjan, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, exh.cat. (Zagreb: 1972), 5. Interestingly, one of the (unrealised) proposals also came from Marina Abramović, then resident in Zagreb, who suggested building a sound installation in an underground passageway under the railway station.
[448] 'City as Total Happening,' *Telegram* (Zagreb), 2 June 1972, 17.
[449] Ibid.

of public space, as a more commonly used antonym for public is private. The distinction of public and private is the topic of the seminal study by Jürgen Habermas *The Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, written in the early 60s, according to which the notion of public sphere is related to the strengthening of bourgeois society. He differentiates between a public sphere that belonged to the realm between state and society and was under the rule of public authorities, with its decisive mark being the 'published word',[450] and the private sphere, which in bourgeois society was 'no longer confined to the authorities but was considered by subjects as one that was properly theirs'.[451]

The issue of the private had a specific character in countries under communist rule, dating back to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia when private ownership of housing was abolished, and the private sphere was determined by openness to the state and the collective, a condition which has been described in terms of 'public privacy'.[452] This was especially noticeable in *kommunalki*, communal apartments in the Soviet Union, usually set in spacious flats of former bourgeoisie in which one room was allocated per family. Susan Buck-Morss describes 'the forced intimacy of the communal apartment' in the Soviet Union which was 'a particular kind of terror, affecting the most banal practices of everyday' by keeping 'the body in perpetual public exposure' through ideological claims that 'public life was personal fulfilment.'[453] In the Yugoslav variant of socialism housing estates were a more common feature and such was the case of New Zagreb, which was built on the southern side of the River Sava and was popularly named 'Zagreb's Bedroom'. Prelog describes this kind of zoning of an urban agglomeration as a 'direct result of the industrial organisation of labour, where the working place is clearly divided from living space' which for him is, at the same time, a 'cause and consequence of the separation of private and public spheres.'[454]

While the notion of private originates from the Latin *privatus* meaning 'withdrawn from public life' and stands for 'belonging to or for the use of one particular person or group of people', the word intimate comes from the Latin *intimus*, referring to the 'closely acquainted and familiar'.[455] TOK's

[450] Jürgen Habermas, *The Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (London: Polity Press, 1992), 16.
[451] Ibid., 23.
[452] Katarina Gerasimova, 'Privacy in the Soviet Communal Apartment,' in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, 209.
[453] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 201.
[454] Prelog, 'Četiri bilješke o krizi ljudske okoline', 7. My translation.
[455] See: www.oxforddictionraries.com. Last accessed 6th October, 2010.

preference for the notion of intimate over private stresses one's close relationship with a space and investigates a sense of belonging that is based on sensuous attachment to space and how environments affect people. Vladimir Gudac recalls how they were actually directed towards the 'Poetics of Space',[456] which is the title of the book by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, written in 1958 that applied the methods of phenomenology to architecture.[457]

Bachelard describes 'home' as a tangible place and shelter from the outside, as well as a place of dreams, and by looking at corners, attics and stairways he shows how physical forms and shapes psychologically affect the inhabitants of those spaces. In his discussion of outer and inner spaces he concentrates on the door, which at times is 'closed, bolted, padlocked' and at others is 'wide open' and in that way 'awakens in us a two-way dream'.[458] In TOK's attempt to enrich the nuances of the sharp division of space, as the last on the list of nineteen proposals sent to the Salon, they declared the spy-hole to be 'a filter that belongs to the domain of social communication', since a citizen evaluates the space by choosing whether or not to open the door and let someone into the flat.[459]

TOK's concept of the intimate did not only apply to the spaces on the borderline of private and public, but also to the city's outside places, which had a distinct character under state socialism. This can be contrasted with the public realm of a city in the capitalist social order, where one of the key merits is the 'privatisation of public space' under capitalism's law of maximising profits, as Rosalyn Deutsche shows in her analysis of the redevelopment of New York, where city regulations began to 'require corporations to build privately owned atriums or plazas in exchange for increased density allowances', resulting in a 'private public space' as a celebration of the 'partnership between public and private sector'.[460] It should again be stressed that in the socialist city, squares were first and foremost 'ideological spaces', which especially came to the fore when official celebrations were held and public speeches organised in order to forge 'collective identities of socialism', often bestowing an important role on monumental sculpture.[461]

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[456] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[457] Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).
[458] Ibid., 222.
[459] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 160.
[460] Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, 57.
[461] Crowley and Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, 2.

Still, although the authorities kept constant control over public squares, for most of the time these were neglected and uncared for spaces. Gudac's claim that the group's 'aim was to get hold of the alienated space for public use and make nobody's public space intimate'[462] illustrates this situation. Their action that most directly addressed this problem, which was selected for realisation in the scope of 'Proposal' section of the 7th Zagreb Salon, involved the symbolic cleaning of several square meters of the pavement on the main square in Zagreb. The pavement was first swept than washed with brushes by the artists on their knees as if 'they were cleaning their own apartment', while images show them surrounded by onlookers. This action intended to raise the possibility of the repossession of the public space of the city by its citizens, while at the same time referring to public hygiene, a motif of several more of their realised proposals.

A year later in 1973, American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles performed her famous maintenance activities in public spaces, such as cleaning the steps of the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut. These actions of public cleaning were a further development of the ideas initially expressed in her 'Maintenance Manifesto' from 1969 in which she stated: 'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs minimum wages, housewives – no pay'.[463] Ukeles's proclamation consisted of two parts - in the first she expressed ideas about 'development' which referred to the 'creative work' and undervalued maintenance which takes most of woman's time, while the second part was the envisioning of an exhibition that consisted of personal, general and 'Earth Maintenance' parts. In the last section she problematised the issue of waste and air, water and land pollution, which was a component of her thinking about the scope of maintenance that ultimately included the whole environment, while at the same time it demonstrates how familiar the issues of ecological crisis were in the period. However, Ukeles's Manifesto was foremost recognised as one of the earliest expressions of feminist art raising the issue of the gender related division of labour in, as Lucy Lippard explained, 'a super patriarchal society'.[464] While her early providently expressed ideas could be perceived as providing guidance throughout her later practice that dealt through various projects with the management of waste, the manifesto was also written from the perspective of a young mother 'when her children started to arrive and she

[462] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[463] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Maintenance Manifesto: Proposal for an Exhibition, "Care" [1969]', reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, 245.
[464] See: Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 220.

found her art time slinking out the kitchen door.'[465] By contrast, TOK's cleaning of the pavement was not motivated by gender politics, but proceeded from an incentive to figuratively reclaim neglected public space and make the citizens aware of its existence.

In order to further demonstrate the treatment of public space as a space of 'no one's interest', proof of which the artists found in 'dirt on the pavements, streets, squares and parks' of the city, that pointed to an 'unsustainable situation of street pollution', the TOK artists designed transparent rubbish bins that were installed at several locations in the city centre during the Zagreb Salon exhibition (fig. 77).[466] The see-through bins showed all the litter thrown into them and so laid bare to passers-by 'the picture of the environment in which he walks and also helps form'.[467] The production of waste as one of the main concerns of ecology in the 1970s was linked chiefly to the unprecedented phenomenon of new synthetic materials that had recently started to be mass produced, but degraded very slowly, as well as industrial waste.[468] As a result of an orientation towards the manufacture of cheap goods, 'highly developed industrial production showed a stupendous lag behind its technology' in terms of the elimination of side effects on the environment, which in return, as Milan Prelog observed, is a very expensive task, and therefore it is 'precisely on rubbish dumps that truths get revealed, which we in other aspects of contemporary city life still often keep hidden behind veils of delusion.'[469]

In their article for *Telegram*, the artists gave us a glimpse of how citizens reacted upon seeing the novelty on the streets: they put their hands and legs into the newly erected transparent bins, as if they wanted to test what they really were. Another project, which involved installing pocket size mirrors at busy spots in town, also offered the possibility for the 'appropriation of common goods' and in that way put collective consciousness to the test, as the viewer had the opportunity to decide whether to steal or break them (fig. 78).[470] The mirrors, 7x10 cm in size, were put together and arranged in small structures that had the purpose of making the exteriors of the city more

[465] Lucy Lippard, 'Sniper's Nest - The Garbage Girls,' *Z Magazine* (New York) 4 (December 1991): 80.
[466] Grupa TOK, 'Grad kao totalno zbivanje'.
[467] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 159.
[468] *Of Our Synthetic Environment* was the title of one of the first ecological publications, written by founder of social ecology Murray Bookchin, which appeared in 1962 several months before the widely acclaimed *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carlson.
[469] Prelog, 'Četiri bilješke o krizi ljudske okoline', 3. My translation.
[470] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 159.

intimate, while at the same time giving passers-by a chance to take a glance at themselves and in that act also see the city surroundings behind them (fig. 79).

Some were also glued on the pillars between the main square and Tkalčićeva Street, which were apparently used as a promenade by prostitutes at the time, the artists offering them the possibility to check their make-up.[471] Apart from such specific functions, the mirrors also served to symbolically reflect on the social layers of the city's population. This was in line with the inclination of the artists to expose the invisible and hidden aspects of city space and its population, issues that were directly addressed in several projects that were either focused on communication between the citizens or the public image that cities in general try to promote through their tourist prospects and postcards.

Another in the series of proposals realised for the Zagreb Salon entailed producing a postcard with an image of smoke billowing from a factory chimney, with the text 'Greetings from Zagreb' printed on it (fig. 80). Here TOK referred to the use of postcards as a medium to deliver affirmative messages about the city, as postcards usually depict sights which are celebratory of a place, as symbols that are familiar and quickly recognisable, but the recipient of such a card in TOK's view 'gets a completely wrong picture' about the town.[472] According to Gudac, postcards do not only use symbols of the city, but rather actively create them by selecting what to feature on their covers and postcards representing Zagreb, for instance, regularly reproduce images of the Croatian National Theatre, Republic's Square or Zagreb Cathedral. He continues by questioning how far these sights can realistically 'represent' a city that is otherwise full of 'sad parts', such as Trešnjevka, Dubrava and the area around the main Bus Station, claiming that for the residents of the parts of town that do not appear on the front of the postcards, such postcards 'are discriminating and show an exclusionist way of thinking'.[473] TOK also pointed to the fact that all the images on the postcards are taken in beautiful sunny weather and it was therefore 'necessary to imagine a postcard of Zagreb on rainy days'.[474]

On the postcard published on the occasion of the 1972 Zagreb Salon, as the artists explained, 'all the elements are standard, except the motif of the city, which in the collision of textual and visual

[471] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[472] Vladimir Gudac, 'Razglednica grada,' [Postcard of a city] *Studentski list* (Zagreb) 10 April 1973, 13.
[473] Ibid.
[474] Grupa TOK, 'Grad kao totalno zbivanje'.

message creates an ironic note'.[475] By changing the visual message but keeping the textual one the same, TOK deconstructed the meaning of a postcard and took a stand with the polemics of the time inspired by Marshall McLuhan's statement that 'the medium is the message', according to which the form of a message determines how it will be perceived. McLuhan writes 'societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication' before proceeding to stress the importance of 'electric technology'.[476] McLuhan's insistence on the advantage of the form of medium over content was disputed by TOK who disliked his 'scholarly cynical theory of media', at a time when 'university departments lived on it and exams were passed', yet no criticism was expressed.[477]

Apart from initiating a discussion about the use of postcards as propaganda tools for representing the city, by selecting the image of a factory for theirs, the artists also directed attention towards the problem of environmental pollution. The factory in question was located near the main bus terminal, which indicates a phase of urban development of Zagreb when the industrial belt surrounded the old city centre, but in ongoing expansion these factories found themselves in the middle of town. TOK's black and white postcard shows an industrial landscape at the lower end of the cadre, while black smoke gushing into the air and spreading into the atmosphere symbolically takes the central plan of the image.

The questions of poor air quality and industrial pollution were among the key preoccupations of environmental thought at the time, as it became clear that environmental protection cannot be limited to the conservation of beautiful landscapes or saving rare plants and endangered animal species, but also 'has to focus on sustaining the human race in a fierce battle with the unstoppable progress of technology'.[478] In the environmental writings of the day in Croatia, the main cause of environmental pollution was located first and foremost in capitalist industrial societies as the 'main logic of a capitalist businessman is not the nature protection, but the maximum reduction of production costs in order to increase profit', and therefore 'industrialisation in capitalist conditions

[475] Ibid.
[476] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (San Francisco: HardWired, 1967), 8.
[477] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[478] Branimir Gušić, 'Bitka za prirodnu okolinu i mi,' [The battle for natural environment and us] *Život umjetnosti* 15/16 (1971): 41.

led to the devastation of nature, as it did not take care of what would happen to the environment in ten or fifty years'.[479]

The book *This Only Earth* by Croatian sociologist Rudi Supek, written in the wake of 1972 UN conference on Human Environment in Stockholm and published in 1973, is not only one of the earliest publications in Eastern Europe on that subject, but can also be perceived as a document of 'Cold War' environmentalism. For example, the prologue of the book contains 'Chief Seattle's Letter to the American President' from 1854 in which the Indian chief replies to the expressed wish to buy their land, by pointing to the differences in understanding of the environment between the white man 'to whom land is enemy that he conquers and then moves on' and the red man for whom 'the land is sacred'.[480] Choosing this letter for the introduction to the book serves not only to illustrate the environmental problems of modern civilisation, but also to indicate the possibility of a non-capitalistic America, by showing native Americans as an alternative. It is hard to determine whether the harsh criticism of capitalist industrialisation was part of the publishing strategy of the authors, or reflected their personal beliefs, but their criticism of socialist industrialisation is in comparison significantly milder. This is despite the fact that in socialist countries, where progress was measured by the number of heavy industry plants, which were not infrequently also erected on sites with no natural resources or in unfavourable locations, pollution was a side effect to which not much attention was paid.

Another project by TOK which dealt further with the problems of the environmental situation of the 1970s involved leaving traces of car tyres along the lines of parked cars and in this way marking the space on the pavement left for pedestrians. The new circumstances that the widespread use of automobiles had brought about were best expressed in a letter to the editors of the Croatian architecture journal *Čovjek i prostor* from 1970, which read: 'A wave of motorisation has gripped our country. Ten years ago it was possible to count on your fingers the number of personal cars, except official ones. Today our streets are crowded with cars and every year there is less space.'[481] This phenomenon is explained by historian Ivo Goldstein, who by emphasizing the 'irrationality of the Yugoslav economy' writes that 'in the 1970s there were twice as many cars in

[479] Supek, *Ova jedina zemlja*, 106.
[480] Ibid., 16.
[481] 'Do kada ćemo uništavati postojeće gradske pejsaže u Zagrebu?' [For how long will we keep destroying the existing city landscapes in Zagreb] *Čovjek i prostor* 209 (1970): 14

Croatia as telephones, because the purchase of cars reflected the level of people's personal standards, while the development of the telephone network reflected social standards.'[482]

So when the artists dipped a tyre in black paint and rolled it along the pavements in the city centre they were commenting on the new situation in the use of city space, but also pointing to environmental issues that were connected to the perception of personal cars as an unjustified means of transportation. Problems were recognised in the compulsion to destroy landscapes in order to build more and wider roads, in unheard of traffic jams, the uneconomic use of fossil fuels and primarily by seeing cars as polluters of air and noise. In the light of discoveries connected to the reduction of car engine emissions, in environmental discussions the question was asked whether these offered a sustainable solution or whether 'is it necessary to radically change the entire orientation towards the personalised motor vehicle', suggesting instead the development of 'cheap, clean and fast' public transport.[483]

TOK also proposed bringing a car tyre into the hall of the Croatian National Theatre, which was not realised in the scope of the Salon exhibition. Instead, the artists placed a tyre in the entranceway of Nama, the main department store in the centre of Zagreb, over which all the visitors had to step, to place the emphasis on the disruption of urban space by cars that were parked everywhere (fig. 81). Indeed, in the early seventies, the streets and squares of Zagreb were crowded with cars, at a time when no parking regulations were in place, which is also visible from photographic documentation of TOK public art projects. While for most neo-avant-garde artists engaged in de-materialised work in the environment the question of documentation was essential and artists were constantly taking photographs of their projects, the case of TOK was somewhat different. Namely, the artists did not document their own works in public space and the surviving record of their actions is a result of photographs taken by professional photographer Petar Dabac, who encountered these interventions on the streets of Zagreb and took snaps of them. This is the reason why there is no complete documentation of all the realised projects, and only after the

[482] Goldstein, *Croatia: A History*, 176.
[483] Nenad Prelog, 'Kurburatore, ljubavi moja,' [Carburettor, my love] *Oko* (Zagreb) 2 May 1973.

photographs were acquired several years ago by the same private collection which also possess the works of some of the TOK members, could they be published together in the same context.[484]

Several other suggested projects, which were not realised but only published as proposals in the exhibition publication, dealt with similar issues, such as the idea of publishing a brochure for the city, envisaged as a combination of the usual text of a city guide accompanying sights of the city that generally remain invisible and would never otherwise make it into a promotional brochure. Also addressing the issue of the medium in relation to the message was their proposal for an intervention on television, which consisted of reading a daily newspaper on screen in order to 'increase diversity and richness in the phenomena of city life.'[485] Further ideas focused on the issue of the gradation of inner and outer space of the city, with the artists' suggestion to exhibit photographs depicting interiors on the exteriors of the buildings. A reverse proposal was to remove a decorative public sculpture of a urinating mannequin from Svačić square and to place it in the corner of SC gallery, where it would have found 'better conditions for appreciation of its plastic qualities', a suggestion which dealt with the translation of outer into inner space, while at the same time expressing critique of traditional monumental sculpture in the city.

Wooden steps erected across the pavement were meant to remind citizens of a forgotten means of orientation in town that used to be expressed in notions of 'up-down' or 'hill-valley' instead of orientation with the help of street names. The recent urban development that in Zagreb was characterised by the spread of the city to the southern side of the river Sava was also included in TOK's proposed projects. Art historian Ljelja Dobronić observes how the post war urban development of Zagreb did not follow the model of 19th century expansion and the extension of existing parts of the city, but 'returned to the old model of scattered urban villages', resulting in new urban settlements that were 'relatively distant and disconnected from older urban tissue'.[486] In order to connect the suburbs which were 'deprived of the fullness of social interactions characteristic of the centre of town', the artists proposed to spread a thin white thread between them, or to install continuous neon lighting along the tram line all the way to Zapruđe in New

[484] See: Sudac, *Budić: Between Gesture and the Program*, 24-48. Petar Dabac (1942) is an experimental photographer and founder of *Spot* Magazine for Photography in Zagreb. See: Sandra Križić-Roban, *Na drugi pogled/At Second Glance: Pozicije suvremene hrvatske fotografije* (Zagreb: Institute of Art History, 2010), 34.
[485] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 160.
[486] Ljelja Dobronić, *Zagreb* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1985), XII.

Zagreb, as a reminder that the 'correct construction of the contents of secondary city centres' was needed.[487]

A further set of projects that were realised had a slightly different focus, as they addressed the issue of the city inhabitants and their human relations, often involving interaction between artists and citizens. One project centred on the marks people leave on the city surface, which involved framing with white tape found entities, such as children's drawings on the street, graffiti on the facades of buildings, or holes in the pavement. In the artists' view, these traces were the result of 'creative or accidental activities' that were usually reserved for private space, so their action of framing offered a new evaluation of the division of space in the city by questioning what is 'common, open and public' and by showing how closely it can be related to the 'closed, private and intimate'.[488]

From marking the traces of citizen's activities in the public spaces of the city, which directed attention to the question of to whom the city belongs, the artists moved on to setting up enlarged cartoons in the city centre that problematized the relationship between citizens (fig. 82). Again, they made reference to the medium in which the work was realised; in this case it was a cartoon which was transferred into reality, not just by its imposition, but by the fact that the background of the cartoon was cut out so that the real city surroundings served that purpose. In the artists' words 'the comic leaves the format of the newspaper and is transferred onto the street, into the ambient of the town', the intention of which for the artists was to step into 'a direct interaction with people' and confront 'their usual way of thinking'.[489]

Onto the clouds that are typically used in comics to deliver a message TOK inscribes short expressions such as 'Inače?' which in literal translation means 'Well?', and in colloquial Croatian was used as a phrase meaning 'what's up?'. This phrase was used to illustrate the communication between two male characters, which for TOK indicated the level of alienation between the citizens and elevated the question of intimacy from the city space to human interrelations. This self-standing cartoon was installed on the main square in Zagreb, while others were spread across the town, including one put in front of department store Nama in Trešnjevka, which showed male and female characters exchanging stereotypical phrases (fig. 83). This kind of communication evokes

[487] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 158.
[488] See: Grupa TOK, 'Grad kao totalno zbivanje'.
[489] Grupa TOK, *7. Zagrebački Salon*, 158.

the insight into modern society by Felix Guattari according to whom 'it is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases and gestures of human solidarity'.[490]

The problem of communication between citizens was also behind the project realised in the scope of the 1972 Zagreb Salon that consisted of printing flyers resembling money, which for TOK was an 'element that describes the relationship between people in time'(fig. 84).[491] The flyer printed on paper that was the standard size of banknotes contained a proclamation that read: 'The city is the territory of our action, the citizen is its protagonist. We declare money to be the agency which in space and time connects people. Group TOK.'[492] The assumption that money has the power to mediate between people has been articulated in the landmark study from 1903 *Metropolis and Mental Life* by German sociologist Georg Simmel, who on the basis of its abstraction of power described it as the key to all exchange in the modern metropolis. He further explains the exceptional power money has in the 'inclusion of the most diverse persons in the same project, interaction and therefore the unification of people who because of their spatial, social, personal, and other discrepancies in interests, could not possibly be integrated into any other group formation'.[493] TOK's emphasis on the power that money possesses to connect people reflected the interpretation that Simmel fore-grounded in his analysis of monetary function. Their attitude to it, on the other hand, was more ingenious, as they were handing their notes out to passers-by on the street, and therefore disrupting the economic model based on monetary policy (fig. 85).

The related issue of the financial side of art in public space was articulated in the catalogue of the exhibition *Possibilities for '71,* which states that such works were 'not made for sale, namely: since they do not have the character of goods, they cannot become a means for making a profit'.[494] This statement also points towards the prevailing negative perception of art as a commodity with market values, which originates in the official socialist ideology that scorned the capitalist drive for profit. Correspondingly, in his overview of art produced in Zagreb in the seventies, art historian Davor Matičević brings up the information that Gudac 'withdrew his works from possible sale or acquisition for the needs of any collection of institution, and offered them for the interested to

[490] Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 44.
[491] Ibid.
[492] A reprint of the flyer was published in the Budić monograph. See: Sudac, *Budić: Between Gesture and the Program,* 42. My translation.
[493] Quoted in Simon Parker, *Urban theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 14.
[494] Matičević, *Possibilities for '71.*

view only in his flat', which indicates an exception in the artist's position, rather than the general rule.[495]

During the 7th Zageb Salon the artists handed out paper money, their postcard of Zagreb, as well as greeting cards that were also printed for this occasion. The cards were monochrome and blank, with black edges and red inside, which provoked recipients to keep turning them over in order to find a message on them (fig. 86). TOK's immediacy in communication with the citizens, who were also their art public, in combination with their projects that were fully dematerialised or used only simple, everyday materials and printed matters, caused problems for local art critics, who were used to more substantial art objects and authorial impartiality, and did not know how to approach art practices of this kind. The inadequacy of their approach is noticeable in their comparison of TOK with 'medieval jugglers and jesters'[496] and subsequently to a 'troop of travelling entertainers',[497] which may well be the reason for assigning TOK a less deserving status within the narrative of local art history.

One project which was not included in the list of proposals sent to the Salon committee, but was realised anyway and became one of the best known actions by TOK, involved the making of banners that were commonly used in public demonstrations. The twist in the TOK banners was that they contained black and white stripes, dots or geometric grids on their fronts, rather than more usual content of portraits of political leaders or written up demands of protestors. TOK re-enacted demonstrations by marching through the streets of Zagreb holding canvases 70x100 cm in size, and protesting with abstract signs that caused confusion amongst passers-by and parodied the role of art at the same time (fig. 87, 88). There was more to their action, which also included an implicit allusion to existing artistic tendencies that tried to obstruct the practices of abstract art and advocated neo-figuration as an appropriate art style for public display.

Apart from references that remained confined to the artistic domain, TOK's procession through the streets of Zagreb also implied a conscious comment on the public protests that had taken place on the same spots in the previous year and were led by the supporters of the Croatian Spring, who had been expressing right wing demands for greater national independence. Gudac talks about the polluted political atmosphere at the time and states that their action expressed

[495] Matičević, 'Zagrebački krug', 26.
[496] Ibid., 24.
[497] Susovski, *Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdesetih godina*, 31.

concerned with the 'double pollution of our living space', the real physical environment as well as the mental domain.[498] The subject of mental pollution was addressed by Felix Guattari in his concise study *The Three Ecologies*, the starting point for which were remarks about the 'ecology of bad ideas' published in the early seventies by anthropologist and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson. Guattari differentiated between three ecological registers, which in addition to environmental and social aspects, also included the third mental register that is exposed to the pollution of mind. Alongside the environmental upheavals resulting from 'a period of intense techno-scientific transformations', Guattari points to the progressive deterioration of 'human modes of life, both individual and collective', manifested in the poisoning of domestic life 'by the gangrene of mass-media consumption', the 'standardisation of behaviour' and the reduction of neighbourhood relations 'to their meanest expression.'[499]

Ideas similar to Guattari's entered the public realm in Croatia in the early seventies in discussion of the role of ecology, which was perceived as 'interdisciplinary, wide and all-encompassing' and characterised as a form of 'politics as well as a way of thinking, at the same time a natural and a social discipline, and ultimately also an ideology that was close or even identical to Marxism'. This definition was part of an article about the new conception of health, which under the heading 'Right to Survival' was described as 'absolute physical, mental and social wellbeing' based on a harmonious relationship between man and his environment. The duty of socialist society, continued the author, is to offer to individuals 'not just bare but also healthy survival'.[500]

TOK's act of purification of the contaminated political atmosphere of Zagreb's public domain through the means of abstract signs, in other words by using the process of abstraction that points towards pure concepts, showed that the artists were well aware of the social conflicts that constitute the public sphere. In their public art projects they dealt with questions of a spatial divide between private and public, as well as asking to whom public space belongs and how it is used, while reflecting on the situation of post-war urban planning in Zagreb and the problems it created for the population. Furthermore, their projects also focused on the constructed image of the city and through their interventions demonstrated an awareness that published matter is a constitutive part of the public domain. TOK also emphasized the social interaction of citizens and commented on the codes of urban communication, including the artists' own engagement in

[498] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[499] Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 27.
[500] Matek, 'Pravo na opstanak', 18.

public exchanges with the citizens. In their approach issues raised by environmental awareness came to the fore and the artists proclaimed these to be the fundamental question of city life in the early seventies.

TOK's public projects reveal the artists' understanding of the context of the city space in which they intervened as both complex and layered with social and political meanings. In terms of the discourse on sites of public art engagements, which Miwon Kwon summarizes in terms of the oppositional mode of integration that assimilates the artwork within the site, versus intervention, which is more interruptive in character, TOK's attitude was neither integrative nor disruptive.[501] Their interactions had the character of mild and minimal gestures of disruption of the everyday, which are more aligned with the ephemeral character of East European conceptual art practices in general. While for example Pécs Workshop's approach to the site was based more on the phenomenological experience of the actual location where their actions took place, which is perceived as a distinctive characteristic of land art, the site in which the Zagreb artists intervened corresponds to the description of a site of art which is not only 'a physical arena', but constituted through 'social, economic and political processes'.[502]

Davor Lončarić, whose broad understanding of environment was referred to at the beginning of this chapter, also addresses the issue of the conception of artistic methods, which 'should not involve an external approach' but instead should originate from 'individually approached problems, which demand appropriate means'.[503] He continues in the same article on 'Environment and Communication' with the claim that 'the role of the environment is to encompass the recipient and the situation from which the meaning evolves', which is a poetic take on the issue of site specific art. TOK's criticality towards the lack of site specificity in contemporary art's public presentations came to the fore again in the discussions that followed a festival organised in autumn 1972 at the Philosophical Faculty of Zagreb University under the motto 'Three Days of Revolutionary Culture', where for the first time there was a direct clash between TOK and the Biafra Group, whose sole agenda was the denunciation of all forms of abstract art.

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[501] On the issues of public art as disruptive or integrative see: Kwon, *One Place after another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. In general, TOK's public art projects do not correspond to the categorisation of site specific art that this publication develops, and the discrepancies between Western and East European art of the time remain visible.
[502] Kwon, *One Place after another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, 3.
[503] Lončarić, 'Okoliš i komunikacija', 18.

Lončarić observed the inappropriateness of Biafra exhibiting paintings in the university hall, as 'painting is a closed system that cannot freely engage in interaction with other elements, and as such belongs to a gallery, and not to an alternative space', while the attempt to deal with an ambient by bringing sculpture from elsewhere in this case 'did not result in revolutionary change'.[504] Their critique of traditional medium of painting and sculpture was reinstated in another article collectively written by TOK where they expressed outrage about the 'wrongly invited group Biafra' and demanded that 'the error of this should be acknowledged'.[505] Furthermore, in their review of the festival they observed that three days of 'pressure-valve release' passed without the stiff behaviour of the audience, as a consequence of which there was a lot of rubbish in the university corridors, asking 'where will this litter hide once the situation at the university normalises?' This shows that TOK saw in litter the traces of the expression of progressive culture, and should not be perceived as puritanical artists that dealt with the issue of waste in a purely nominal manner.

As has been already stated, group TOK did not last much longer as an artistic collective. In the autumn of 1972 they took part in an art manifestation in Graz in which they repeated their procession with abstract banners (fig. 89). The same action in public space was repeated in Belgrade next summer, as part of an event organised by Belgrade Student Cultural Centre.[506] The group also took part in 'Urbofest' in the small town of Pazin in Istria in the summer of 1973 where they realised several projects, including *Urban Graphics* that involved attaching blank posters with an uneven top edge painted red among other posters on the advertising walls around Pazin (fig. 90), along with a collaborative project with children, which entailed producing *Changeable Structures* from reused materials, such as painted wooden planks arranged geometrically on the ground (fig. 91). The collaborative practice with the local community and the use of recycled materials were innovative artistic strategies at the time in Croatia.

It is worth noting that the concept of recycling was mentioned as a novelty in a report on the seminar and commercial exhibition 'Recreation in Nature' that was part of the United States pavilion at the Zagreb Autumn Expo of 1972, which was discussed in a critical tone in a review

[504] Davor Lončarić, 'Dani za revolucioniranje činjenice,' [Days for revolutionising facts] *Studentski List* (Zagreb) 9 January 1973, 20.
[505] Grupa TOK, 'Studentski život,' [Student life] *Omladinski tjednik* (Zagreb) 14 November 1972, 15.
[506] This was also reported in *Novine Galerije SC* 45 (August 1973): 192.

published in the architecture journal *Čovjek i prostor*. [507] As a means of tackling ecological crisis 'the process of recycling' was introduced by the American representative as 'one of the main tasks along with conservation and protection' of the environment, and defined as a 'process of repeated use of products as resource, i.e. non-production of waste'. The report also described the discussion that this novelty raised, such as the question of what the anti-pollution law would mean for small firms which could not pay for it and would therefore be eliminated by the 'big corporations', the issue of selective environmental protection as 'racial segregation', and pointing out that 'recreation in nature is becoming a big business', which was described as a contradiction in terms with environmental protection.[508]

In the fore-mentioned events, including the 'Three Days of Revolutionary Culture', group TOK participated in its extended version, together with the BNK followers, while only Budić, Gudac and Lončarić travelled to an art manifestation in East Berlin entitled World Youth Festival. Their idea for participation in this festival was to cross daily to West Berlin, which as possessors of Yugoslav passports they were able to do, take slides of everyday scenes encountered on the streets and project them in the evening onto the facades of buildings in East Berlin. The artists were denied slide projectors by the organisers and were effectively prevented from realising their plans. 'After this insane social-realistic futility in Berlin', Gudac explains, 'we did not perform in the streets any more'.[509]

Significantly, in the following year in Zagreb there was no continuation or development of public art projects and there was no new edition of the section 'Proposal' of the Zagreb Salon. Matičević speaks of a 'period of standstill' in terms of the manifestation of artistic activities, which he explains through changes in social conditions, as well as the transformation of artistic personalities as a result of more frequent travel abroad.[510] Matičević also quotes Gudac's verdict on the new period, which for him is characterised by 'new models of communication or encroachment into linguistic structures, a move towards greater semantization of art', which Matičević explains as 'the extension of interventions, but not any more in urban or natural environment, but in the ambient of mass media, or domains of media and language.'[511] This was also the moment when

[507] G. Keller, 'Rekreacija i ekologija,' *Čovjek i prostor* (Zagreb) 235 (October 1972): 16.
[508] Ibid.
[509] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/1973', 22.
[510] Matičević, 'Zagrebački krug', 24.
[511] Ibid., 25.

contemporary artists switched to video art, which was in Zagreb linked to the visit of American curator Willoughby Sharp, best known for his early Earth Art exhibition at Cornell University, who 'came with the first videotapes' and was pictured in the Student Centre gallery newspapers under the heading 'mighty mogul of the art scene'.[512]

In the mid seventies Zagreb's city centre became the site of artistic actions by the Group of Six Authors, whose approach to their social environment was best exemplified by Željko Jerman's proclamation 'This is not my world!' written in capital letters on a white sheet during an action in the city and photographed against a facade in the centre of Zagreb. This statement acknowledged that 'society was hard to change' and that the only way forward for artists was to 'radicalise one's own methods in art.'[513] Mladen Stilinović, one of the group's members, illustrated that attitude when he said 'I have never believed that art has any social function whatsoever...I have never shared this kind of optimism.'[514] The Group of Six Authors, who turned up in the art scene several years later, reacted to the earlier generation's 'youthful illusions about the possibility of the direct use of their work' by leaving aside socially-engaged practice in favour of a more cynical and ironic approach.[515]

Arguably, such a turn was only possible after the artists of the early seventies had raised the issues that curator Marijan Susovski identified as 'ethics as a principle of artistic activity', established ideas of the 'social function of the artwork and the social role of artists' and developed conceptual art practices which were characterised by 'analytics that was related to social tendencies.'[516] TOK's contribution was focused on the aspect of contemporary art that took place outside galleries and museums, and offered a critique of such art production, objecting to the assumed fragmentary approach of these works, which were in most cases still preoccupied with the aesthetic qualities of the artworks, despite the fact that they were displayed in the public spaces of the city. TOK's projects intentionally dealt with the context of the public sphere of the city, in its urban, social and political meaning, they involved direct interaction with the citizens and attempted to raise public consciousness about the state of environmental crisis.

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[512] See: *Novine Galerije SC* 46 (September/October 1973): 195.
[513] Branka Stipančić, 'This is not my World,' in *Grupa šestorice autora* [The group of six authors] (Zagreb: SCCA, 1998), 101.
[514] As quoted by Lutz Becker, 'Art for an Avant-Garde Society: Belgrade in the 1970s,' in *East Art Map*, 400.
[515] Matičević, 'Zagrebački krug', 28.
[516] Ibid., 19.

The approach taken by group TOK derived from astute theoretical insights and up to date information about ecological problems, while at the same time reflecting the specific social environment in which these concepts operated. In comparison, the OHO group in their project *Triglav* from 1968, which was also realised in public space in Ljubljana, questioned the role of the natural environment in the shaping of national identity by subverting it within the counter-cultural domain. Equally, OHO's projects in the natural environment indicated a counter-cultural relation to nature, which was in fact also the realm within which the environmental movement was formed in the scope of 1968 social unrest. Only several years later, in the summer of 1972, at the time of TOK's activity, the ecological crisis was widely debated and ecology perceived as a new discipline, with Croatian cultural magazines regularly publishing articles on related topics. However, at the height of a tense political atmosphere in Croatia, ecology also served as a neutralising substitute for addressing political issues that were uncomfortable for the ruling party.

Correlations of Geography, Ecology and Cosmology in the Conceptual Practice of Slovak Artist Rudolf Sikora

The alluring heading *Out of Town*, with its implied prospect of escape, originates in an action carried out by Rudolf Sikora during the Christmas holidays of 1970 on the outskirts of the town of Zvolen in Central Slovakia. It consisted of nine large arrows inscribed with red pigment in the snow all pointing the way through socialist housing estates out towards the fields and woods of the surrounding countryside (fig. 92). In contrast to the Slovenian artists from OHO group who actually moved out of the city to lead a more fulfilling life in a rural commune, for the Slovak artist this was one of the very few occasions when he left the capital Bratislava to work outdoors. Nonetheless, *Out of Town* crystallized as one of the most distinctive works of the Slovak neo-avant-garde, giving the title to a recent survey exhibition of Slovak land art,[517] being recognised for its contribution to the field of action art - at the time one of the most productive areas of Slovak artistic experiments that challenged the 'borders of all traditional media in the name of new alternative forms of art'[518] - as well as being acknowledged as pioneering a 'new art concept at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s'.[519] Outside Slovakia, the work became internationally known in 1972 when it was chosen for the cover of a rare anthology of contemporary Eastern European Art *Aktuelle Kunst aus Osteuropa*, compiled by German artist Klaus Groh.[520]

The intervention in the actual environment that *Out of Town* entailed could also be perceived as a defining moment for Sikora's own practice, which till then had explored the problem of space though geographical studies in traditional artistic media based in painting and sculpture. While the artist admitted that *Out of Town* demonstrated his 'still only felt fear of the polluted environment' expressed through the idea of 'leaving dirty places for clean nature', the arrows on the snow pointing the way out of town towards the countryside would turn out to have propelled the artist towards the exploration of ecological problems and the human relationship to the environment in

[517] Daniela Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art* (Bratislava: City Gallery, 2007). The title of Sikora's work has been translated from Slovak as both Out of the City and Out of Town, in this text the latter is used, in accordance with the artist's major catalogue *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself* (Prague: National Gallery, 2006).
[518] Rusinova, *Action Art 1965-1989*, 261.
[519] Jiři Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times,' in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 13.
[520] Groh*, Aktuelle Kunst aus Osteuropa*.

a more complex way.[521] Furthermore, as the prints *Out of Town* II and III incorporated numbers, toponyms and encoded abbreviations alongside the arrows, some art critics have located in this work the artist's 'shift from action to concept' (fig. 93).[522] The use of arrows as graphical symbols that indicate directions illustrates Sikora's concurrent engagement with geography, however, these would shortly be joined by punctuation signs, the potent symbolism of which was employed by several fellow Slovak artists, sometimes in collaborative works, while the exclamation mark became Sikora's signature.

In the context of the widespread and multifaceted engagements of Slovak artists with the natural environment, *Out of Town* arguably occupies on the one hand a mythical position within the narrative of national land art, while on the other its genuine importance remains somewhat obscured by the lack of more intensive critical engagement with this iconic work. This is evident in the catalogue essay by Daniela Čarna, the curator of exhibition of Slovak land art from 2007, who, after making the claim that Sikora's action could be considered a 'symbolical entry of the artists into nature', proceeds to give a brief description of the work followed by a vague statement that 'this event on the borderline between urban environment and nature belongs to the line of individual private events and photo-monologues', without considering the subject further.[523] This was despite the fact that the whole exhibition was named after this work and photographic documentation of the action received privileged treatment in relation to other Slovak land art projects, as it was reproduced straight after the hierarchically approached works of Western land art artists that Čarna discusses in the opening chapter of the catalogue, revealing her take on land art as a normative and fixed category.[524] Indicatively, the main point of reference for land art in this essay is a special issue of the samizdat series *Jazzová Sekce* entitled 'Minimal & Earth & Concept Art' from 1982, which was edited by art historian Karel Srp, who compiled basic information about major artistic trends in the West.[525] This self-published volume, with only the

[521] Rudolf Sikora in 'Epilogue 2006' in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself,* 275.
[522] Radislav Matuštík, 'Transforming Unity,' in *Rudolf Sikora: Polčas razpadu* (Žilina: Považská galéria umenia, 1994), 6.
[523] Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art*, 19.
[524] On the critique of vertical art history, see: Piotr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,' *Umeni/ Art* 5 (2008): 378-383. Daniela Čarna in her catalogue text does not consider the latest art historical work produced about East European art practice and theory in the historical period, instead the essay starts with a discussion of land art and references to its canonical artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Richard Long.
[525] Karel Srp, 'Minimal & Earth & Concept Art,' *Jazzová sekce* 11 (1982). Artists discussed include C. Andre, R. Barry, W. De Maria, D. Flavin, E. Hesse, D. Judd, J. Kosuth, R. Morris, R. Smithson, L. Weiner, etc.

title in English, was obviously written for a readership in Czechoslovakia during the normalization period, which after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 was generally cut off from international art currents.

Compellingly suggestive of how different the social climate was before the 'consolidation period' is the local art magazine *Výtvarné umení* [Fine Art], which in the course of 1970 published articles about Robert Morris, Jan Dibbets, Arte Povera and included reproductions of Michael Heizer's earthwork *Double Negative*, together with features on contemporary Czechoslovak art. The last issue of the year, however, contained a short announcement inserted between the inner cover and the contents page, which in Czech, Russian and interestingly French declared a halt to further issues of the magazine and its fusion with the sculpture review *Tvar* under the new name of *Výtvarná Kultura* [Visual Culture]. The Organisational Committee of the Union of Czech Fine Artists also informed subscribers that their subscription for 1971 would be transferred to the following year, when the new magazine was due to appear.[526] What this really meant was a symbolic year-long vacuum that heralded systemic changes in the art scene, clearly being only one of many mechanisms that the normalization regime brought to bear on the cultural sphere.

Normalization started after the reformist programme summarised in the phrase 'socialism with a human face' - which was coined in a speech by Alexander Dubček, the young head of the Czechoslovak Communist Party of Slovak origin, who became the political leader of the Prague Spring, or according to some historians 'more commonly referred to as the "Czechoslovak Spring" in Slovakia'[527] - came to a dramatic end with the military occupation of the country on 20 August 1968 by the troops of the Warsaw Pact. It was a gradual process that took several years, starting with mass purges from the party, screenings and intimidations such as signing statements that condemned previous reforms, until society was brought under complete control by the Communist Party.

Sikora's *Out of Town* came about as part of the project *Gaudium et Pax*, that was initiated by Milan Adamčiak (1946), an artist and musician with connections to the Fluxus movement, who during

[526] See: *Výtvarné umení*, 10 (1970).
[527] Karen Henderson, *Slovakia: The Escape from the Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 2002), 22.

the Christmas holidays invited several artists to intervene in the open.[528] Adamčiak and Alex Mlynárčik (1934), who at the time already had a special status in the art scene as a result of the *Happsoc* manifestos and the organization of collective actions such as the *Festival of Snow* in the High Tatra Mountains, met in the central Slovak town of Ružomberok.[529] The artists decorated a Christmas tree in its vicinity, while Adamčiak played a violin, which was later wrapped and left as a present under the tree. Another group of younger artists went to Koliba, a forest park on the outskirts of Bratislava, where Vladimír Kordoš (1945), Marián Mudroch (1945) and Viliam Jakubík (1945) also decorated a tree, organised a procession in masks and used coloured smoke, while Dezider Tóth (1947) chose a deciduous tree in the countryside on which he wrote in white the words for snow in various languages.

Curiously, the artists who took part in this project realised their works either alone or in small groups in different places in Slovakia, but once they returned to Bratislava, the project appeared to lack cohesion, since there was no representation of the actions and no dissemination of documentation in the form of an exhibition or a publication. However, one should bear in mind that *Gaudium et Pax* took place in the early period of normalization in Slovakia, when contemporary art had to adapt to hostile conditions in which galleries or cultural centres no longer offered space for such activity, necessitating the search for new possibilities to continue this kind of practice. In that way, 'nature offered to many the intrinsic field of escape from the contemporary social reality operated by directives',[530] while Sikora's work *Out of Town* metaphorically captured this specific situation.

It seems that for the artists it was important to realise the actions in the open, while the formal aspects of representation were not of primary concern. The peculiar circumstances in which these works were created were also evident in the case of Rudolf Sikora, who spent the Christmas holidays of 1970 with his wife's family in Zvolen.[531] According to the artist, once he made the arrows in the snow, he returned to town 'to look for someone with a camera' who could

[528] Although under the communist regime religion was closely monitored and suppressed and the project's title carries a twist in reference to religious message, this initiative, reportedly, had no religious character. Rudolf Sikora, interview by the author, Bratislava, 15 March 2011.
[529] See: Andrea Bátorová, *Aktionskunst in der Slowakei in den 1960er Jahren: Aktionen von Alex Mlynárčik* (Berlin: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2009).
[530] Rusinova, *Action Art 1965-1989*, 264.
[531] In the catalogue of Rudolf Sikora's first solo exhibition after a decade of having no possibility to exhibit officially, Jiři Valoch incorrectly writes that the *Out of Town* took place on the outskirts of Bratislava. See: *Rudolf Sikora – Prostor a čas* (Dom Kultury, Orlová, 1979), p. 2.

document the action and the photographer he found happened to have only two colour slides, which also got lost over time, and were never published.[532] The rest of the documentation was done with black and white film, and that was the medium in which those arrows executed in red pigment on white snow entered art history.

Although the visual dimension was lost and the red pigment became just a textual element in the description of the work, the question of the use of precisely that colour remains relevant. From red star to red flag, this colour is the supreme communist symbol and artists were well aware of its potential connotations. For example, Polish artist duo Kwiekulik compiled in 1971 *Shades of Red* which consisted of several hundred slides that contained some element of red, referring to the ubiquity of the ideology symbolised by red in an art practice that forged close links to real life and the specific political situation in which it existed.[533] Sikora, who throughout his practice expressed strong political views that culminated in his involvement with the ending of the communist regime in 1989,[534] and who already in 1969 made a series of works as a tribute to Jan Palach - a student whose self-immolation as a protest against Soviet occupation shook Czechoslovakia - today interprets the use of red in *Out of Town* as a first and foremost an aesthetic decision with no political allusions, although he admits to having been aware of Soviet army barracks in the vicinity of the red arrowheads.

Whether or not the red arrows carried political connotations at a time when political reality was omnipresent and artists strove to overcome its banality in their pursuit of more meaningful and pure art that would rise above the daunting everyday reality, remains an open question. Nevertheless, Sikora's engagement with environment can be perceived as sharing common standpoints with artists from other Central European countries considered in this research, from Pécs Workshop to Group TOK, who from the specific socio-political circumstances of actually existing socialism developed the cosmopolitan character of their practice, which intrinsically relates to ecology as an area of knowledge that overcomes political borders and divisions. Rudolf Sikora, perhaps more than anyone, expressed this in his works from the early seventies that connect ecology with the perspective of cosmology, which also provided him with a specific

[532] Rudolf Sikora, interview with the author, Bratislava, 15 March 2011. In the reproductions of the images in Sikora's recent catalogue *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself* the captions also mention in brackets the photographer L. Paule. See: *Rudolf Sikora*: *Against Myself,* 86-87.
[533] For more on 'new red art' see: Łukasz Ronduda, 'Socart: Redefining the Relationship between Art and Politics,' in *Revolution I Love You: 1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy*, 129-133.
[534] See: Helena Musilová, 'The Engaged Art of Rudolf Sikora,' in *Rudolf Sikora*: *Against Myself*, 53-59.

position within the widespread practice of artists dealing with the natural environment in his native Slovakia. The extent and diversity of Slovak artists' engagements in the natural environment at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s are exceptional in the context of Eastern European art practice, where in general artists' commitments to work in nature or deal with environmental issues were more isolated and individual endeavours. It can only be compared, although on a much smaller scale, to a somewhat similar situation in the Czech art scene.[535]

In comparison to Western land art, Daniela Čarna singles out the main feature of Slovak art to be its responsiveness 'to ecological and ethical issues related to the environment discussed by artists and scientists at unofficial meetings.'[536] This certainly relates to the practice of Rudolf Sikora, who was among the leading artists engaged with environmental issues, with many meetings happening in his studio, although Čarna does not refer to him specifically. For example, in an article also named after the same work by Sikora, curator Auriel Hrabušický considers artists who engaged more actively with the issues of ecology in their work and reveals how they all knew each other as they 'used to regularly meet in the studio of Rudolf Sikora in the first half of the 1970s'.[537] However, Čarna's observation about the ecological dimension of Slovak land art cannot be easily applied to some of the best known events that took place in the countryside, which are also included in her overview, such as Jana Želibska's *Betrothal of Spring* from 1970, which had a character of collective ritual and entailed 'a free analogy of folk customs',[538] or Alex Mlynáčik's *Day of Joy. If All the Trains if the World...*from 1971, that involved 300 people taking a train through the countryside to discuss and interpret various artworks in an attempt to fuse art and life.[539] Furthermore, in a short chapter entitled 'Nature Conservation' which focused on environmental art, Čarna does not differentiate between the early seventies when ecology entered the field of artistic practice and the late eighties when activists and artists led by Ján Budaj

[535] Daniela Čarna in her account of land art in Slovakia asserts a distinction between the two related national art scenes by describing Slovak artists' approach as mostly a reflection on natural processes and keeping distance from nature, while 'subordination to natural elements and searching for the mythical unity [is] typical for the Czech visual art scene.' Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art*, 58.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Auriel Hrabušický, 'Out of the City,' in *Slovak Picture (Anti-Picture): 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art* (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2008), 149.
[538] Mária Orišková, 'New Returns to Nature,' in *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, 279.
[539] See: Bátorová, *Aktionskunst in der Slowakei in den 1960er Jahren: Aktionen von Alex Mlynárčik*, 201.

joined forces to turn environmental issues into a political agenda that would eventually assist in bringing down the communist regime.[540]

Among the artists who started to employ references to environmental issues in the early seventies both Čarna and Hrabušický, in addition to Sikora, also mention Peter Bartoš, Juraj Meliš, Dezider Tóth and Michal Kern. Peter Bartoš (1938) was one of the first artists who started to work with earth as an artistic material, using mud and sand and referring to its healing potential by rubbing it on his skin. He was also preoccupied with animals to the extent that he started to work in Bratislava Zoo, and also to breed his own doves. Juraj Meliš (1942), was foremost a sculptor who worked with found natural materials, wood in particular. In his installations such as *Environment II* from 1970, he used coloured branches of dried out trees on which endangered species such as birds were arranged in a style similar to displays in natural history museums. Dezider Tóth (1947) worked directly in nature and his cycle of works entitled *Nature Preservation* involved activities such as treating and symbolically healing trees. Michal Kern (1938- 1994) was interested in dialogue with nature and engaged in direct interventions in the environment in accordance with his statement that 'man should live and work so that nature could accept his work'.[541]

Although sharing sensitivity towards issues of environmental degradation with these artists, Rudolf Sikora would not engage with nature as a practical environmentalist in an attempt to heal or remedy the effects of human devastation of the natural environment. As already mentioned, he rarely intervened in the environment as part of his work, instead ecology for him became a critical issue which he explored in his conceptual art. Sikora, who only in 1969 graduated in painting from Bratislava Art Academy, soon adopted conceptual art practice, while *Out of Town* can be perceived as a work situated at the intersection between action, land art and conceptual art.

'Conceptual art is presented as a truly international tendency', writes Michael Corris and indicates the points of correlation between Western conceptual art and its variants produced elsewhere as 'comprising of a variety of artistic strategies which share two important characteristics: profound scepticism towards the status of the object of art and passionate disavowal of the constraints imposed by artistic tradition (or state) on the formations of new relations between art and

[540] Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art*, 87.
[541] Hrabušický, 'Out of the City', 151.

society.'[542] While the catalogue of the exhibition *Global Conceptualism* held in 1999 in Queens Museum of Art still maintained the distinction between (Western) conceptual art described as a 'term used to denote an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism' and a global conceptualism which was not dependent on physical form and implied a wide range of practices that 're-imagined the possibility of art vis-a-vis social, political and economic realities',[543] later research and exhibition projects conceived on the basis of equity opt for a redefined understanding of the term conceptual art.

This is the case with a publication on parallel research into the art of South America and Eastern Europe entitled *Subversive Practices: Art under Condition of Political Repression 60s-80s/South America/ Europe*, in which art historian Iris Dressler, on the grounds of Benjamin Buchloh's observation of conceptual art as a 'complex range of mutually opposed approaches' that contradict the demand for 'purity and orthodoxy of the movement', uses the term conceptual art in relation to relevant art practices of the 60s and 70s in South America and Europe, notwithstanding the terminological differentiations in various localities, which are registered too.[544] Furthermore, Dressler asserts that the re-evaluation of art from the 1960s to 1980s cannot simply consist of accommodating it within the existing maps and registries of global art history, where some artists 'have been wrongfully left unconsidered', but instead it must 'involve a self-initiated reorganization of these maps and registries'.[545]

László Beke romantically portrayed East European conceptual art as 'flexible and elastic, ironic, humorous and ambiguous, nonprofessional, communicable, always ready to become a social activity of a group of young people or even an alternative moment.'[546] Piotr Piotrowski, on the other hand, relegates these affirmative connotations to mundane descriptions such as 'technically undemanding', 'cheap and relatively safe' and giving 'almost everyone a chance to be an artist',

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[542] Michael Corris, ed. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.
[543] Luis Camnitzer, ed. *Global conceptualism: points of origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), VIII. For the distinction of conceptual art and conceptualism see also: Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002).
[544] Benjamin Buchloh, '*Conceptual Art* 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 107.
[545] Dressler, *Subversive Practices: Art under Condition of political repression 60s-80s/South America/ Europe*, 42.
[546] László Beke, 'Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art,' in *Global conceptualism: points of origin, 1950s-1980s*, 42.

while locating conceptual art at the core of Central European neo-avant-garde.[547] Following the assertion that 'there is a general consensus that Central European conceptual art tended to be much more heterogeneous than its Western counterpart', Piotrowski typically attempts to put this down to the 'specific character of the margin', in difference to centres which 'are committed to doctrinal purity', although he also finds numerous regional examples of the 'classic form of conceptual art based in tautological self-analysis of the art language'.[548]

In the case of conceptual art in Slovakia, art historian Jana Geržova observes that 'no relevant interpretations of the early phases of conceptual art exist', since all the major texts appeared later and one had to rely 'more on oral history than a written form', before she moves on to restate the generally accepted view that the chapter of conceptual art in Slovakia opens in 1965 with *Hapsoc* manifestos by artists Alex Mlynarčik and Stano Filko with theoretician Zita Kostrová.[549] Although this seems to be an early date for conceptual art compared to other art scenes in Central Europe, perhaps it could be explained by Piotrowski's observation that 'Slovakia represents a special case of a synchronic convergence of movements that appeared in a chronological order in the West.'[550]

An attempt to map the new art practice of the time without discriminating against any formal artistic approaches with a special focus on Eastern Europe was Klaus Groh's previously mentioned *Actuelle Kunst aus Osteuropa*, compiled from artists' entries from Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, USSR and Romania. Czech artist and art historian Jiři Valoch called the German artist's anthology 'legendary' and referred to it as an attempt to show 'that even the artists in these countries were examining the same topical issues as those in Western Europe and the United States', while at the same time in Eastern Europe the book circulated information about conceptual art being practiced in the region across firmly fixed borders and 'enabled us to develop contacts' between fellow artists.[551] Groh's choice of Rudolf Sikora's image from the *Out of Town* series no. III as the most suitable to illustrate contemporary art practice of the region - by placing it on the cover - could be interpreted as showing an understanding of the complexity of

[547] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta,* 316. Piotrowski also gives a literature review of conceptual art publications, pointing to general omission of examples from Eastern Europe.
[548] Ibid., 318.
[549] Jana Geržová, 'The Myths and Reality of the Conceptual Art in Slovakia,' in *Conceptual Art at the Turn of the Milennium*, eds. Jana Geržová and Erzsébet Tatai (Budapest: AICA, 2002), 22. For translation of Hapsoc Manifesto see: Hoptman and Pospiszyl, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950s*, 85-87.
[550] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 214.
[551] Jiři Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times', 13.

artistic approaches from the region, which the work, situated on the interface of conceptual, action and land art, vividly exemplified. On the other hand, one is left to speculate whether the codified numbers and letters in the landscape perfectly symbolised the enigma of art on the other side of the Iron Curtain, while the large arrowheads perhaps signified a desire to exit the socialist system.

Life under socialism changed significantly during the normalization period, which dissident Milan Šimečka, who lost his post of philosophy professor at the Arts Faculty in Bratislava in the purges, described as a 'return to order' that had to be restored after the public movements and protests led to an 'outbreak of disorder' that culminated in 1968.[552] Historian Paulina Bren in her recent publication on normalization in Czechoslovakia stresses the regime's call for a calm and quiet life, and endorsement of private citizenship, one which is not concerned with potentially dangerous public affairs, but focuses instead on everyday life, one's family, work and friends and one which 'approaches everything that lies outside it with caution and mistrust'.[553] The imposed distinction between official and unofficial, public and private spheres of life was also used by contemporary artists to privately engage in activities that were not permitted in public galleries.

One such attempt to play on the card of privacy in order to overcome limitations on public representation was the *First Open Studio*, a group exhibition that took place on 19 November 1970 in Rudolf Sikora's house in Bratislava. Preparations for the event started already at the end of August, when Sikora contacted Alex Mlynárčik and invited him to collaborate, while subsequent weeks were spent in 'creative workshops and intensive discussions connecting the young generation of upcoming artists.'[554] Eighteen artists, including academy professors and students, established artists and the young ones, gathered together to demonstrate their inclination to overcome obstacles, such as the banning of art festivals, symposia or exhibitions in art galleries, by taking part in an exhibition in a private house.[555] In her essay about the Open Studio, art historian Eugénia Sikorová explained that the reason it was labelled an open studio was because it welcomed all 'opinions, techniques, generations...' which stood together against any 'restrictions

[552] Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*, 14.
[553] Bren, *The Greengrocer And His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring*, 149.
[554] *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself,* 275.
[555] For more on cultural and artistic response to normalisation see: Zuzana Bartošová, 'Kunst als Raum der Unabhängigkeit,' [Art as space for independence] in *Samizdat: alternative Kultur in Zentral- und Osteuropa: die 60er bis 80er Jahre*, ed. Ivo Bock (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2000), 144-149.

of artistic production'.[556] The significance of the project was described by Igor Gazdík, the only theorist participating, as a 'collective action of first-rate importance'.[557] As a private artistic initiative, it could be argued, the First Open Studio marked the beginnings of unofficial art activity in Slovakia, while by inaugurating the young generation of artists, to which Sikora belonged, it ensured the continuity of contemporary artistic trends in unfavourable social conditions.

A large arrow drawn on the street directed the visitors to the house in Tehelná ulica 32, where eighteen artists installed their works in the courtyard, halls and rooms in the house. The opening event of the evening was *Focus Your Attention* by Marian Mudroch, who invited the viewers to look up to the house chimneys from which coloured smoke was billowing. The artist used blue and red smoke, which with the gray sky in the background created an effect of 'tricolori', white-blue-red, which are the colours of the Slovak national flag, subversively releasing into the air - or strictly controlled public sphere - signs of disagreement and demonstrating the awareness of the division between public and private, official and unofficial (fig. 94). This was emphasized further with the collaborative work by Mudroch, Jakubík and Kordoš, which consisted of several elements, including exhibiting piles of tinned cans, referring to a culture of accumulation of tinned food products in socialist supermarkets. The tins contained 'Bratislava air' and bore inscriptions on the front that read 'Atmosphere 1970' and on top of them 'Not breathable', with allusions to the contained, stiff and tight atmosphere of the period.

Other presentations included a sound installation by Adamčiak, a performance with mud by Bartoš and kinetic objects involving light by Milan Dobeš (1929). The variety of artistic approaches also ranged from rural assemblages by Meliš, conceptual interventions with texts by Julius Koller (1939-2007), to Tóth making an inventory of bricks, referring to the name of the street where the exhibition took place that could be translated as Brick Lane. The event attracted huge interest among the professional public and the most eminent art historian in post-war Czechoslovakia, Jindřich Chalupecký, came from Prague and gave a lecture on the 'State of Thinking About Art after the Duchamp Initiative'. The 'happy selection of the best Bratislava had to offer' was such a

[556] Eugénia Sikorová, 'Nástup jednej generácie,' [The coming of a generation] in *I. otvorený ateliér* [First open studio], eds. M Mudroch and D. Tóth (Bratislava: SCCAN, 2000), 13. The author is the wife of Rudolf Sikora. For detailed information about how the final list of participants was formed see pages 10-11.
[557] Igor Gazdík*, Rudolf Sikora*, exh.cat. (Bratislava: ZSVU, 1989), n.p.

success that the First Open Studio ended up being also the last one, as further editions were not permitted by the authorities.[558]

For this occasion Rudolf Sikora completed a new work that took his concurrent explorations in geography a step further in an act of actually constructing a three-dimensional model of a particular landscape. In the courtyard of the house the artist made a relief pool, 4.5 metres in diameter, which illustrated the configuration of the terrain with elevated land masses and stretches of water of the Makarska Riviera on the Croatian coast, where the artist had been on vacation (fig. 95). This work entitled *Recollection of Dalmatia* was preceded by preparatory studies on paper, and was finally exhibited together with a sheet of paper that served as a caption or cartographic code for the model, with the road map of Dalmatia, a photograph of the work and its label with title, size, material and date in four languages. The scaled down relief map was made in epoxy resin that was coloured in yellow for land and filled with blue water, which are customary in topographical mapping where the same colours are used to determine the differences in the terrain, however, in Sikora's case the element of colour was recognised as reminiscent of 'painterly qualities'.[559]

The emphasis on the painterly aspects in this work are related to the fact that Sikora, until presenting this three dimensional model at the Open Studio, had actually practiced painting, drawing or graphic techniques and sometimes employed plaster relief on his pictures. During his Academy years, after a short experiment with Art Informel, Sikora produced a series of *Stone Landscapes* (1966-69) which were still mostly abstract paintings or drawings economically constructed with several basic forms to which one could trace back contour lines and other topographical signs used in his subsequent cycles (fig. 96). Additionally, Valoch pointed out that already in *Stone Landscapes* some of the 'typical features of the artist's approach' are suggested, primarily the fact that 'the nature around us becomes a subject of his interest'.[560] This is also to some extent visible in his 'typewritten drawings' from 1968/69 which combine textual element and visual structures made on A4 paper with a typewriter, in the form of an artist's diary.

One such page *From a Diary* which in the upper part depicts contours of mountainous terrain in cross section is accompanied with a text that offers a glance into the artist's way of thinking at the

[558] Matuštík, 'Transforming Unity,' 5.
[559] Sikorová, 'Nástup jednej generácie,' 20.
[560] Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times,' 11.

time. It reads: 'Situation: / Diagram M785 laboured uphill out of breath/...its shadow, diagram M145... crept on all fours/ drunkenly behind him.... Conclusion:/ Several years later/ or decade later/ these diagrams were found by chance sleeping sweetly not far from each other in the ice at the foot of the unconquered hill/. What shocked the public most was the fact that while the diagram M785 and M145 had prolonged their lives in the ice, it had never noticed their loss' (fig. 97).[561] From these desultory lines that further underline the intermittent character of the typewriter, one can grasp Sikora's perspective that reaches far into the future and always also looks back.

The long time spans, sometimes reaching from the beginning of geological time on Earth to an undetermined future, such as in his cycle *Cuts through Civilisation* from 1972, are characteristic for Sikora, who equally concentrates on particular moments of history that he wishes to preserve. A previously mentioned series of works entitled *Wall (Tribute to J.P.)* that were an immediate response to the self-immolation of Jan Palach, which Sikora experienced as a sacrifice and expressed through the symbolic motifs of crucifix and the barrier of a wall, demonstrated his critical awareness of the particular historic situation (fig. 98). In several other works from the same period the artist is concerned with the preservation of the memory of landscapes he visited on his travels, such as *Recollection of Dalmatia*.

His earliest works on a similar topic were a series of tempera and gouache paintings *Recollection of Alps* (1967) made during the artist's short scholarship at the Art Academy in Vienna. His impressions from travels to France in 1968 also resulted in several paintings such as the turquoise and green water colour *Reminiscence of Côte d'Azur (Toulon)* (fig. 99). The possibility to freely travel to the West, in contrast to most of the other states of the Eastern Bloc, was for a few years from the mid-sixties an option for Czechoslovak citizens, although the communist authorities were worried about the fact that most people 'spend a relatively short time in capitalist countries' which might lead to 'distorted impressions about life in those states'.[562] On 21 August 1968, the time of Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Sikora was on holiday on the Côte d'Azur, in Monaco,

[561] As translated in: Matuštík, 'Transforming Unity,' 6.
[562] Quoted from the 1965 meeting of Czechoslovak Central Committee's Ideological Commission in: Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV,* 178.

and a few days later in Paris where he was offered a scholarship to stay on, which he turned down, returning to Slovakia in September.[563]

An outcome of his visit to Paris was a triptych *Topography XII-XIV (Reminiscence of Paris 1968)* made in 1970 which combined text with elements of topographical mapping, such as a representation of a mountainous surface, an outline of the River Seine and a marking of historical buildings, in particular the Sorbonne and Le Musée d' Art Moderne (fig. 100). The inscriptions on this *Paper Manifesto*, as the work is also referred to, are re-visitations of May 68 sites and paroles, written across each sheet in French or Slovak and read: 'Une autre Bastille bourgeoise a abatre: après la Sorbonne le Musée d' art moderne' and call for the Museum of Modern Art to close because of its uselessness, or state that 'culture is the inversion of life'. Some of the paroles and places are interconnected with arrows. From a distance of two years Sikora reflects on the revolutionary events in Paris, which were concurrent but overshadowed by domestic unrest in Czechoslovakia, and while he refers primarily to the effect that the movement had on arts and culture, he also stresses the transience of these moments that just stay as manifestos written on paper, never becoming reality. This *Topography* is composed in shades of gray and black and white, in difference for example to his colourful memories from the French Riviera and is more typical of his later work, which is also predominantly monochromatic.

Between *Stone Landscapes* and the cycle of *Topographies* there are several works in ink, collage or oil which are evidence of the artist's interest in the rules of representation of three-dimensional objects onto flat surfaces and are exercises in descriptive geometry. In *Still Life with Descriptive Geometry* (1969) Sikora used space figures of a cone and hexagonal prism, which he applied onto a coordinate system at various angles with the help of millimetre paper as a base for rotations and reflections (fig. 101). The painting *Poetics of Descriptive Geometry* (1968/69) is a freer experiment in geometry with various irregular shapes, containing full and broken lines, dots and intersections, which are the basic terms of geometry (fig. 102). Sikora's preoccupation with questions of shapes, sizes, positions of figures and projections of space demonstrate his affinity for mathematics, a field very familiar to the artist, whose father was a mathematician and who himself as a school boy entered maths competitions.

[563] See: Matuštík, 'Transforming Unity,' 5.

These exercises in spatial relations would be a basis for the artist's later cosmological works, but for a while he became concerned foremost with the topographical representation of landscape. During the year 1970 several such *Topographies* came into existence, mostly anonymous *Pages from the Atlas*, in which the artist depicts differences in elevation of the terrain using coloured tints that sometimes seem to liberate themselves from gravity and float freely on the picture surface. Other motifs that regularly started to appear on these paintings are black squares or rectangles that stand for man-made features such as buildings in populated areas, as well as wide arrows. While the differences in elevation of the land surface and marking of built up areas belong to the topographical and physical maps, the arrow is a more common feature for maps of historical migration, where it indicates direction of movement, used as an orientational tool that points to a certain position or locality.

Sikora's interest in topographies, which he described as 'only a kind of record of the Earth's surface',[564] revealed the artist's preoccupation with the natural, physical environment which became a continuous aspect of his work, while they also show his complex and multifaceted understanding of space in geography. In the above quoted passage on the typewritten drawing the artist, for example, mentions an 'unconquered hill'. The metaphor of unconquered territory is closely related to traditional thinking about Earth as *terra incognita*, as a space that is mysterious and unknown and is related to the desire for discovery. As geographer J.K. Wright suggested, since 'there is no *terra incognita* today in an absolute sense, so also no *terra* is absolutely *cognita*', and therefore the attraction of the unknown stimulates the imagination and 'the more is found, the more the imagination suggests for further search'.[565] In his early work Sikora conveyed a fantasy about the distant future when his own artworks would be discovered under layers of ice in a secret location, revealing his youthful wonderings about the progress of time, comprehension of space and meaning of human existence.

More concrete and practical engagement with the problem of representation of space was a subject of Sikora's exercises in *Descriptive Geometry* where he practiced strict rules of Euclidean mathematical geometry and studied positions, sizes and distances between objects. Critical geographers Neil Smith and Cindi Katz refer to this kind of space understood as 'a field or

[564] Ibid.
[565] John K. Wright, 'Terrae Incongitae: the place of the imagination in geography,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37 (1947): 4.

container, describable by a two or three-dimensional metric coordinates' as 'absolute space'.[566] This Newtonian conception of 'absolute space' was based on the presumption that 'it was geometrically divisible into discrete bits', and traditionally geographers have engaged in 'descriptive studies of social and natural forms located in absolute space and the connections between landscape form and natural processes.' The critique of such an approach that takes space for granted was grounded by Smith and Katz on the point that space is a political issue related to geographical location, social situation and fluid identities.

In Sikora's cycle of *Topographies* one can notice his perception of space as a physical reality, as something objective and possible to reproduce in an accurate manner, such is the case of the *Reminiscence of Dalmatia* where the artist's model is reinforced with the map of the region. There is some similarity in approach between Sikora and the artists of Pécs Workshop who showed an aspiration to get to the bottom of things through scientifically verifiable factors, which might be related to the socialist tradition of nurturing the principles of positivistic science formulated initially by Engels in his unfinished *Dialectics of Nature* from 1883. Despite scientific experiments with basic elements that Pécs Workshop conducted in specific locations in the natural environment, their films and photographic documentation show how an unpredictable 'human element' was a constitutive part of these closely controlled tests. Equally, although Sikora sometimes appears to depict a space as an objective section of physical environment, that particular landscape was often the one which the artist visited on his travels.

In other words, the cycle of *Topographies* deals with the personal geography of the artist who travelled to many of those locations and then reflected on his experience in the series of *Recollections* and *Reminiscences,* which point to his understanding of the correlation of landscapes and memories, historic moments and personal experiences. The interconnectedness of geography, experience and imagination was illuminated by geographer David Lowenthal in 1961 through his observation that any visualization of the world is bound to 'personal experience, learning, imagination, and memory.' He continued that 'the places we live in, those we visit and travel to,

[566] Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, 'Grounding Metaphor: Towards a spatialized politics' in *Place and Politics of Identity*, eds. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 75.

the worlds we read about and see in works of art, and the realms of imagination and fantasy each contribute to our images of nature and man.'[567]

Critical theorists have suggested that it is 'very clear that space is not considered...to be outside of the realm of social practice', while the perception of the world is connected to the embodiment of experience, where travel is increasingly recognised as a 'means of providing experience'.[568] Furthermore, the notion of travel is linked to the formation of identities which are relational and actually established in the course of travel, as Smith and Katz assert that 'travel erodes the brittleness and rigidity of spatial boundaries and suggests social and political and cultural identity as an amalgam'. Interestingly, while Sikora could travel freely his impressions of new places were approached through topographies of the configuration of their physical terrain, even though the artist was visiting towns and cities, sometimes using text to decode his thoughts and experiences. But once mobility became strictly controlled in normalization-era Slovakia, it was arguably only then that artist started to ask questions of belonging and to consciously understand geography as related to issues of political, cultural and social reality.

This shift occurred in parallel with the artist's formal change of practice in the early seventies towards the adoption of the principles of conceptual art. One can observe the development of the artist's engagement with question of representation of nature, where simply painting a figurative landscape in the style of realism was for him never an option, as is already visible in his abstract *Stone Landscapes*. In *Topographies* landscape becomes as Valoch termed it a 'subject of conceptual reflection',[569] as the artist turned to geography in search of more suitable ways to articulate the problem of space. In that process he also exploited the medium of painting to the point that it could no longer offer the artist the possibility for further engagement. Indicative in this development is a work *Topography IV* (1970) in which the artist uses epoxy resin on plywood to create the effect of a raised relief map, still however staying within the format of a picture. *Reminiscence of Dalmatia* presented at the Open Studio demonstrated a shift in Sikora's studies of the Earth's surface as he ventured to construct a three-dimensional model of a particular landscape.

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[567] David Lowenthal, 'Geography, Experience and Imagination: Towards Geographical Epistemology,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51 (1961): 260.
[568] Keith and Pile, *Place and Politics of Identity*, 2 and 20.
[569] Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times,' 11.

If we return our attention to *Out Of Town*, which was realised shortly after the Open Studio, it is possible to perceive the extent of the artist's change in approach. He was no longer concerned with the problem of representation of space, instead he actively engaged with it by directly intervening in the environment. The arrows, which clearly originate from his paintings of *Topographies*, were applied here to indicate a direction towards which the artist wanted to focus our attention. In 1971 Sikora realised another work in the open that marked a specific point on the surface of Earth, which took place in Orava region in Slovakia. With the help of a professional geodesist, who was asked by the artist to make a precise land survey, Sikora was able to identify a specific location and make *The Tribute to Intersection of Meridian λ = 19°12'27.3'' and Parallel of Latitude φ = 49°19'14.4"* (fig. 103). This work consisted of the crossing of two large paper strips with exact information about the geographic coordinates written on them, leaving topographical depictions of land surfaces behind and dealing more directly with the issue of cartography.

Understood as the artist's take on the issue of mapping, this work puts Sikora into the context of other Land and conceptual artists who creatively engaged with cartography. Gilles Tiberghien argued that maps are of special interest for land art due to the fact that artists are interested in 'their analytical connections to the reality, and discrepancy between representation and the reality', while at the same time pointing to the 'connections of land artists with conceptual art'.[570] Among many examples of artists' engagement with the act of mapping, the author also mentions American artist Douglas Huebler who in 1968 created a work entitled *42° Parallel Piece*, in which he marked fourteen cities across the US that lay along the 42° latitude. This conceptual work entailed sending letters to these places, all posted on the same day from Truro, Massachusetts, which were later returned to the sender, as they contained insufficient address information to be delivered, while the presentation of this work in an exhibition context consisted of the postal receipts together with a map of the letters' paths.

On Huebler's map a tick line is drawn across the middle of the United States, applying on the one hand the fundamental artistic practice of drawing onto a geographical scale, while at the same time emphasizing the abstract grid of imaginary lines of longitude and latitude that intersect the planet. Sikora's work does not contain a physical map, instead, the position of this abstract intersection of lines imposed onto the Earth's surface for human needs of travel, navigation, economical and political control is marked directly on the spot. While mapping usually involves

[570] Tiberghien, *Land Art*, 171.

transposing physical reality onto the abstract systems of coordinates, Sikora reverses the process and moves a grid from the paper onto the actual surface of the Earth.

East European artistic approaches to map making were the subject of the travelling exhibition *Cartographers* organised by Croatian curator Želimir Koščević, that also included Sikora's later work. The exhibition demonstrated a variety of artistic interventions and interpretations of mapping across the region, although the extensive catalogue with numerous contributors conceives the subject in universalist terms, while no essay dealt with the issues raised by the exhibited works.[571] In comparison with the cartographic work of OHO Group that marked locations of prehistoric sites on the locality where Slovenian artists conducted their own actions in the open, romantically aspiring to establish a link with the spiritual sites of the past, Sikora's rationale is more scientific and grounded in a geographical understanding of space.[572]

Similar method of geodetic measurement was also used in a collaborative work by Rudolf Sikora and Viliam Jakubík entitled *Foundations of a New Slovak National Gallery Building* (1971) which consisted of photography and textual information about the building site of the new art gallery (fig. 104). The artists asked a geodesist to calculate the geographic coordinates of a sign they placed on the excavations for the foundations and also measure their size and the height above sea level, data which the artists used on the poster that they sent to their friends and distributed further. Valoch writes that 'thousands of copies' were printed and distributed freely spreading a message about the building that was to host the collection of 'all Slovakia's major artworks', but also concealing 'a certain irony because the concept was born at the time when any hopes that the Slovak National Gallery would ever display the kind of work Sikora produced appeared to be in vain.'[573]

Indeed, Sikora managed to have one solo exhibition, predominantly with works from the *Topography* series, organised by Igor Gazdík in May 1970 in the Gallery of Youth in Bratislava, before the normalization commission terminated further exhibition projects in that gallery.[574] He

[571] Želimir Koščević, ed., *Cartographers: Geo-gnostic Projection for the 21st Century* (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997).
[572] For the discussion of geographical space see: Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
[573] Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times,' 14.
[574] On the occasion of the exhibition there was a catalogue published that had the format of a set folded A4 papers which contained photocopies of the exhibited works, with the title, size and specification of the technique, but no text.

had to wait almost a decade till in 1979 he could have another solo exhibition in the small Czech town of Orava, and then another decade had to pass until he was able to exhibit in Bratislava. In the post-socialist period the Slovak National Gallery organised several exhibitions that studiously dealt with the neglected national art of the sixties and seventies, which apart from essays on specific aspects of artistic production under socialism, also included artists' accounts of that period. Reflecting on the sixties, Sikora responded with words like magic, nostalgic, vital era of student revolts, and a claim that the most important thing he learnt in the sixties was 'to be free', an experience that was to be taken away from him in the years to come.[575]

Reminiscing about the sixties in Czechoslovakia Milan Šimečka offers in his *The Restoration of Order* a poetic description of events: 'At that time my country was like a planet which, as a result of a strange combination of circumstances, had slipped out of its orbit and was flying on its own course in the uncertain hope that it might find another orbit nearer the sun. Within the fixed European planetary system this undertaking was quite risky from the very outset' therefore 'they decided that my country was a threat to the order of the universe since it might lead to other planets one day escaping from their orbits.'[576] The cosmic metaphor was a popular analogy in normalization era Czechoslovakia, and many Slovak artists were attracted to it too, including Stano Filko and Julius Koller, with whom Sikora would collaborate on several joint projects in the early seventies, when 'cosmic space became a means of escape from the ever-disturbing social situation' and a 'space beyond the control of real socialism'.[577]

In that sense, there is one little known work by Rudolf Sikora entitled *Czechoslovakia 1969* that is dated to 1969, where the artist used collage technique to express the changes his country had gone through (fig. 105).[578] He divided an elongated vertical sheet into four equal horizontal quadrants that sometimes have winding contours similar to border delineations on maps. The lowest zone is a made of an aerial photograph of a huge mass of people, with obvious allusions to the mass movement of the Prague Spring. This zone flows into the next one, a transition zone that is more abstract and filled with parallel black lines, which is followed by the blue zone of the

[575] Zora Rusinova, ed*., Šest'desiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení* [Sixties in Slovak fine arts] (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 1995), 328.
[576] Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order*, 14.
[577] Aurel Hrabušický, 'Rudolf Sikora – Activist and Observer,' in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 41.
[578] It was exhibited in the solo-show 'Rudolf Sikora: At Last Man Knows...' at Danubiana Meulesteen Art Museum near Bratislava, 12 March – 12 June 2011, and belongs to a private collection. It is not reproduced in any of Sikora's major catalogues.

daytime sky and final one is an image of the shining stars in the night sky. Over these sections rises a cut-off outline of the borders of Czechoslovakia, which in the lowest part remains invisible over the multitude of people, but in the next section the contours are filled with brown, the colour of land. Gradually the colours change as the country ascends, turning at one point into deep red, the symbolism of which in 1969 is clear. The country then turns into a cloudy blue sky and eventually a night sky filled with constellations, as it is elevated into the universe.

Through these dislocations of his country it is possible to perceive the artist's questioning of belonging, of national identity and political reality as well as his positioning of himself as a cosmopolitan citizen. Irit Rogoff defines geography as a site that links together 'relations between subjects and places and grounds and legitimates them', while cartography articulates a sign system for the shifts occurring 'between places, spaces and subjectivities which designate them as locations of identity.'[579] Rogoff also asserts that the question of where one belongs refers to 'dislocations felt by displaced subjects towards disrupted histories'. Dislocations were felt in different ways in Eastern Europe under the communist regime, where inner exile, in other words voluntary or forced withdrawal from public life, was a strategy often used in the region. Furthermore, the Stalinist model of socialist development was based on the concept of a group of separate states, which produced communist élites who were 'inward-looking, they closed their borders and shunned international contact, except for the formal institutional and diplomatic kind.'[580] In that sense, the subjects were not geographically displaced, but on the contrary had to stay in their location and this deprivation of free mobility caused the reassessment of identities, which in the case of Czechoslovakia was even more strongly felt, as they experienced both situations within a very short time.

There are some suggestions of inner exile in the case of Rudolf Sikora, however this seems to be an overstatement, as the artist was always an avid participant in the unofficial art circuit and, with the organisation of the First Open Studio demonstrated his determination to overcome state limitations.[581] He belonged to the circle of contemporary artists that were banned from exhibiting and working in the official art institutions, as their practice did not comply with the instruction to

[579] Irit Rogoff, 'The Case for Critical Cartographers,' in *Cartographers: Geo-gnostic Projection for the 21st Century*, 144.
[580] Alan Dingsdale, *Mapping Modernities: Geographies of Central and Eastern Europe 1920-2000* (London: Routledge, 2002), 146.
[581] Alena Verbanova in the catalogue text in *Rudolf Sikora: Polčas razpadu*, 12.

reinforce socialist realism advocated by the party, although Sikora, Koller and several other artists took part in the 'first all-Slovak exhibition of engaged art' that was held in Bratislava in 1972, which according to art historian Helena Musilova showed 'the complexity of the period' and represented a 'last attempt to maintain the "unity" of the contemporary art'.[582] Also, Sikora's wife, as an art historian specialised in decorative arts, was able to teach at the Art Academy throughout the period, while Sikora got a teaching position only after the fall of communism. He was however able to get commissions for interior designs as 'a day job', possibly because during the academy years he had also studied stage design at the Performing Arts Academy, which in the absurd situation of normalisation Czechoslovakia, where academics even worked as window-cleaners, was not necessarily an advantage.

Indicatively, this points to a loophole left by the authorities who, perhaps also 'thanks to weakness and inconsistency', allowed alternative designers to 'execute their works for architecture', even 'smuggle some of their studio initiatives into the public spaces' and in that way also 'secure material resources and provide space for their private artistic creation.'[583] This shows that reality was not black and white and there were many gray areas between official and unofficial art worlds, which are often missed out in overviews focused on the opposition between the dissident and party structures. As Paulina Bren observes on a more general level, the existing historiography of the 1970s and 1980s 'is most persistently conceptualised in terms of official culture versus unofficial culture, of the first (state-planned) economy versus the second (black market) economy, of the party elite versus the dissident elite, and of politicized public sphere versus the depoliticized private sphere', leaving the gray zone out.[584] Such a combination of official and unofficial spheres was also at play when Sikora realised his first *Time...Space* posters on the occasion of the First Slovak Graphic Art exhibition in Banská Bystrica in 1971, that were printed in 15 000 copies with the support of the Calex factory, the biggest fridge producers in the country, where Sikora held annual workshops with amateur painters over a number of years.

As the title of the poster *Time...Space I* suggests, this graphic work of Sikora dealt with temporal and spatial relations, typically also posing questions about the position of humanity within those parameters. The group of six images show the universe, galaxies, solar system, planet earth, humans and time and space, with several white arrows inserted on them (fig. 106). The textual

[582] Helena Musilová, 'The Engaged Art of Rudolf Sikora,' in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 55.
[583] Rusinova, *Slovenske vizualne umeni 1970-1985*, 237.
[584] Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*, 8.

part underneath contains information about the images, where the artist in a factual and scientific language talks about, for instance, the size of the universe, the distance between stars, the age of planet Earth and the history of life on it. Among other data, there is also information about population numbers in 1800, 1950, the current one in 1971, but also a prediction about the size of humanity in the year 2000, which was the subject of major environmental debates of the time, fuelled also by the book *The Population Bomb* by Paul R. Ehrlich published in 1968, that dealt with the controversial issue of overpopulation.[585]

In the textual component of the poster Sikora also lists some of the characteristics of mankind such as work, love, bravery, devotion, as well as lack of justice, drive for recognition, war, poverty, starvation, ignorance, cruelty, selfishness, fanaticism and constant fighting among people. This blend of human qualities confirms Sikora's approach to the environment as understood as closely connected to subjective ethical experience. In an earlier collage from the *Topography* series entitled *Charts of Good and Evil* (1969), across a background made up of road maps, topographical maps and millimetre paper, the artist arranged sinuous and zigzagging graphs that represent these basic moral judgements of human values (fig. 107). To raise the question of good and evil, deeply rooted moral categories, or to list human qualities that could be classified along this spectrum, is also related to the issue of environmental ethics and human conduct towards the ecosystem that supports life on Earth. The time when the artist was dealing with these problems was also a period of fast growing environmental discourse which started to consider the issues of social justice, economic development and personal wellbeing as interconnected factors that are fundamentally related to ecological crisis.

For the second poster that the artist designed for the exhibition *Time...Space II* in Banska Bystrica, which had the subtitle *Sky – the Gallery of the Past*, Sikora used a circular image of an astronomical map with constellations marked on it (fig. 108). Underneath he gave instructions: '1. Let us look at some of the stars (visible to the naked eye). 2. Let us imagine when the light from these stars set out on its way through the universe. 3. Let us remember what has happened on Earth since that time...'[586] These directions were followed by a list of historic events ending with 9 May 1945 when the Second World War finished. Noticeably, Sikora changed his perspective on the scope of space,

[585] Paul R. *Ehrlich, The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).
[586] As translated in: Matuštík, 'Transforming Unity,'7. Sikora also realised a version of poster in English a month later. Reproduced in: Jiri Svestka, *Zerfall der Symbole: Rudolf Sikora und die Kunst der siebziger Jahre in der Slowakei*, exh. cat. (Berlin, Galerie Ifa, 1993), 12.

which here includes the whole of the universe and is inextricably interwoven with the temporal dimension. The rapid developments in astronomy thanks to space travel and the growing awareness of ecological threats were issues that the artist perceived as closely connected and problematised in his now completely dematerialised means of expression.

Sikora's thinking about ecology was influenced by the book *The Limits to Growth*, which was concerned with the 'present and future predicament of man' and published results of the research conducted by the experts from MIT who were commissioned by the Club of Rome to investigate the 'degree to which the attitude toward growth is compatible with the dimensions of our finite planet'.[587] Remarkably, in laying down the problem explored in this study, the authors use a 'graph which has two dimensions – space and time' to locate 'different levels of human concern' about the future.[588] Sikora's *Time...Space* I and II were the first occasions where the artist started to deal with temporal and spatial axis on which he also inscribes questions about the prospects of human existence, which he would examine further in his 1972 cycle *Cuts through Civilisation* that addresses the effects of the human impact on the natural environment.

According to the artist, he came across *The Limits to Growth* through a Polish samizdat translation and later referred to the report as 'my other Bible' of the early seventies.[589] On closer inspection, there seems to be some inconsistency about the exact time the artist became familiar with this publication, as in the biography of the artist published in the monograph *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself* it states that it was in 1970, however the original was only published in 1972, although the project was initiated at the Club of Rome meeting in 1968.[590] Through Sikora environmental discourse became part of the Slovak unofficial art scene and was later also included in the art historical narrative of the period, in which the Club of Rome's report was referenced as a matter of common knowledge, which has no parallel in Central Europe.[591]

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[587] Meadows, et al., eds., *The Limits to Growth: a Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, 9 and 185.
[588] Ibid., 19.
[589] Rudolf Sikora, interview by the author, Bratislava, 15 March 2011. Also see: Rudolf Sikora, 'Sedamdesiate', 229. The samizdat is untraceable. However, a translation of *The Limits to Growth* appeared in Polish in 1973, published by the state economic publisher. See: Donella Meadows, et al., eds. *Granice Wzrostu* (Warsaw: Pánstwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1973). Notably, Sikora's works which deal with the issues raised by the Club of Rome initiative date from 1971 and 1972.
[590] The last section of the book includes 'Commentary' that describes the process of the project, according to which the first reports were presented in summer of 1971. See: Meadows, *The Limits to Growth*, 186.
[591] Čarna, *Z mesta von/ Out of the City: Land Art*, 13. Also see: Hrabušický, 'Out of the City', 149.

While *Time...Space* II is illustrated with an astral map, on *Time...Space* I the artist uses a picture of Earth taken from spacecraft, an image of the universe taken from a telescope and a bird's-eye-view photograph of a mass gathering of people to illustrate the 'progress of mankind'. This invokes observations by Hannah Arendt, who in her prologue to The Human Condition writes about the launch of the first satellite into outer space in 1957, which she perceived as 'second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom'.[592] Furthermore, Arendt also saw the airplane as a symbol of the loss of earthly sense of distance that created a vertical gap between humans and earth, while before horizontal distance was the norm, which represented a further move away from human's immediate natural environment.[593] Concerned with the alienation of modern world, which she explored through the notions of rootlessness and homelessness, Arendt described a 'twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins'. [594]

Some researchers have suggested that Arendt's theoretical conceptions could have been influenced by the proto-anthropic principle, based on the thesis that without a spectator there could be no world.[595] There are some parallels in Sikora's perception of the theory of human existence in the universe, as the artist stated that his work is 'not about astronomy or visual interpretation' but rather being captivated by the 'efforts of various scientists who are looking for a connection between existence of man and those aspects of physics which are seemingly unrelated to biology'. He further admitted that he identified with the 'anthropic principle' for a long time, while he was still unaware that 'many astronomers, physicists and philosophers' had formulated a principle 'which says in brief that the universe must have such qualities to enable life'.[596] Such observations were the particular focus of several works from 1974, where Sikora depicts the planet Earth seen from the universe with arrows pointing to it that carried the questions: 'Where do I come for? Where am I? What am I? Where am I Going?'[597] The same subject is the topic of another version of *Time...Space* in which the artist wondered 'is the universe within us'. According to Piotrowski, Slovak artists operated within the humanist attitude based on

[592] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 1.
[593] See: David Macauley, 'Hanna Arendt and the Politics of Place: From Earth Alienation to *Oiokos*,' in *Minding Nature: Philosophers of Ecology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 110.
[594] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 6.
[595] See: Barry Clarke and Lawrence Quill, 'Augustine, Arendt, and Anthropy,' *Sophia* 48 (2009): 253-265.
[596] Rudolf Sikora in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself,* 189.
[597] See catalogue: *Rudolf Sikora, Time...Space...* (Orlová: Dum Kultury, 1979), 25.

the conviction that man is at the centre of the world, which 'in the east was seen as a resistance to anti-humanism of communist regimes'.[598]

Cosmology, as well as terrestrial and celestial projections, were frequent topics of the artist meetings that took place in Sikora's studio and became known as 'Tuesdays', which were also regularly attended by Stano Filko and Julius Koller. Filko who was the initiator of 'visual cosmology' from his *Happsoc IV* project in 1968, was 'permanently fascinated by his own experience of clinical death' seeking access to another dimension, cosmic or transcendental, in order to 'merge with the universe'.[599] Koller was acting 'as a domesticated extra-terrestrial' who played tennis with an invisible partner from space and put question mark signs around his surroundings. According to Hrabušický, while Koller and Filko 'seem to come from the other side, from elsewhere', Sikora is more grounded, examining scientific data as an observer, but also more pragmatic in his 'focus on social activities'.[600]

Together with theorist Gazdík they made a collective declaration, each using a distinctive sign: Koller the question mark, Sikora the exclamation mark, Filko three dots, while Gazdík chose a plus sign, which in 1972 was followed by a questionnaire in the form of a designed envelope that on the cover contained these signs superimposed over an image of the universe seen in the night sky. When opened, the envelope turned into a cross, a central section of which contained the punctuation signs, while the vertical wings were made of Koller's and Sikora's contributions and side wings of joint questions about 'the past, present and the future' (fig. 109). While Sikora inserted a stage from his cycle *Cuts through Civilisation*, Koller explored the existence of UFO, and posed a succession of questions like what is your opinion about UFO, do you believe in the existence of UFO, from which civilisation is UFO, what is the mission of UFO, is the any possibility of contact with UFO? On side pages one can read the artists' musings about the world such as: 'Every man has and will have his own inner world. He thinks to know the substance and regularity of the cosmos whose component he is.' They proceed by asking questions about human population and give their predictions of development over the next hundred years, starting with 1969, 'the year man walked on the Moon'.

[598] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 226.
[599] Hrabušický, 'Rudolf Sikora – Activist and Observer,' in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 42.
[600] Ibid.

The Cold War competition between the USSR and the USA, which culminated in explorations of outer space - from Yuri Gagarin as the first man in space in 1961 to Neil Armstrong as the first man to walk on the Moon in 1969 - engendered lively debates that were especially fuelled by the images of the planet Earth as seen from Apollo 8, the first human spaceflight beyond the orbit of the Earth. The discussions about the suddenly perceived 'blue planet', according to David Crowley, ranged from emphasising the fragility of Earth 'at the time militarism and affluence – twin buttresses of the cold war order prevailed', to pointing to an image 'that was not inscribed with borders or political divisions.'[601] In Slovakia, apart from closely observing the space race between the two superpowers, people were also witnessing the rapid socialist industrialisation of a country that till the 1950s had been predominantly agrarian, where suddenly factories were popping up everywhere, turning it 'into the country of contrasts'. According to Hrabušický, 'this environment of contrasts' was productive for Slovak conceptual artists, who started to engage with the topic of cosmology, which was also related to 'general enchantment with outer space, the development of sci-fi and fantasy genres and seemingly imminent possibility of travelling in space.'[602]

Locating the appearance of cosmology as an 'emblematic theme' of Slovak neo-avant-garde art in the turbulent political times between 1968 and 1973, art historian Daniel Grúň distinguished between the early examples in which 'science and technology were used on an instrumental level' and the later shift to emphasizing 'science fiction and futuristic vision of the contact with cosmos', which eventually led to increased differentiation between artistic positions, including those who 'concentrated on ecological problems.'[603] The cosmic expansion in Slovak conceptual art, in addition to action and land art, was a further component that made the character of Slovak neo-avant-garde exceptional and reportedly, the Bratislava art scene became for the first time more advanced than that of Prague.[604] One of the reasons for that phenomenon was found in the fact that in difference to Czech artists who had to deal with the weight of a great artistic tradition of the avant-garde, Slovak artists could freely develop a more radical approach in contrast to the 'conservative historic background of Slovak art'.[605] There is a similar claim made in the case of

[601] David Crowley, 'Looking Down on Spaceship Earth: Cold War Landscapes,' in *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, 250.
[602] Auriel Hrabušický, 'Cosmic Poetry,' in *Slovak Picture (Anti Picture)*, 169.
[603] Daniel Grúň, 'Der Kosmos der slowakischen Neoavantgarde zwischen Utopie, Fiktion und Politik,' in *Crossing 68/89: Grenzüberschreitung und Schnittpunkte zwischen Umbrüchen*, ed. Jürgen Danyel (Berlin: Metropol, 2008), 154.
[604] See: Geržová, 'The Myths and Reality of the Conceptual Art in Slovakia', 22.
[605] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 219.

OHO Group in Slovenia, whose appearance 'produced an impression of a rift' in the conservative environment of the Ljubljana art scene, which was contrasted with the other Yugoslav art centres, such as Zagreb with its strong tradition of modernism.[606]

The exceptional circumstances in which Slovak art of the time operated, in which artists had to adapt to alternative circuits such as holding meetings and workshops in the private studio of Sikora, resulted in several collective art projects. If compared with Yugoslavia again, where the formation of art groups was a widespread phenomenon, in Slovakia it was notably collective projects that artists produced, while no art groups as such were formed in the unofficial art scene. The reason for this might be found in the encouragement by party structures of the formation of art groups that would promote the vision of socialism, as a result of which several officially-supported groups were founded, including the group 29th August, which took its name from the date of the Slovak national uprising for the liberation of the country in the Second World War. Apart from the already discussed collaborative work *(?!+...)*, other collective projects of artists in the unofficial art scene in which Sikora also participated were *Time* I and II in 1973 and *Symposium* I in 1973-74.

In *Time I* artists Koller, Filko, Jan Zavarski, Miroslav Laky and Sikora took as a starting point the caves in Moravia to mediate messages about the meaning and experience of time. While in the first edition of *Time* messages were combined with images of caves, the second edition consisted only of texts in which the artists addressed the past, present and future, where the future entailed 'cooperation with the civilisations of our galaxy.' The first edition of *Symposium* was printed as a collective poster that contained 'information about a friendly meeting' between the extended group of artists who gathered in Sikora's studio during winter 1973-74. When the artists attempted to publish the results of *Symposium* II in 1975, they were stopped by 'direct intervention of the secret police', which made the artists decide to 'freeze the information'. All the collected material, as well as instructions for future generations, were sealed in a brass box and buried in the woods of the White Carpathians near Bratislava.[607]

Such actions show that the artists had a rather utopian vision of the future. Milan Šimečka, who had taught Marxism-Leninism to many of those artists at the Art Academy in the sixties, and who, as Sikora remembers, always managed to smuggle in extra information including poetry by

[606] Denegri, 'Art in the Past Decade,' in *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978*, 10.
[607] Valoch, 'Rudolf Sikora – Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times,' 15.

beatniks from the US, later expressed the need for utopian thinking that originated from the experience of living in actually existing socialism. 'Today's world is in such a state that it needs new utopias', writes Šimečka and continues: 'none of the serious problems facing mankind can be solved by mere pragmatism, if we are just to maintain the present level of development and civilisation, we shall have to gain acceptance of projects which go beyond the everyday and which may in many respects look like utopias, because their realisation will require the overcoming of social selfishness on the part of classes, groups and individuals.'[608]

Interestingly, Šimečka saw in the ecological movement 'the great vitality of the utopia which is trying to preserve for mankind unpolluted air, water, forests, and seas, everything that is still left of Nature, which has been sacrificed to the realisation of another utopia, that of prosperity, and that is the true unnatural demand which is really worthy of man.'[609] A different opinion was held by his former university collegue and fellow dissident from Bratislava Miroslav Kusý, who eventually shared a similar fate, and ended up as a construction worker in the late seventies. In the view of Kusý, expressed in his essay 'Marxism and the Ecological Crisis' which was published in the samizdat *Obsah* at the same time, the ecological crisis in the capitalist world was caused by 'objective factors in the system itself, that could be solved only by a social revolution', while the ecological problems in the socialist countries 'were due to subjective factors – non-socialist attitudes of the people responsible, their lack of discipline, and their 'consumerist' relationship to nature.' The solution for Kusý was in a 'utopian approach' which would be produced by 'ideological training' to result in a change in consciousness, while ecological problems should be dealt with 'primarily by technical measures to reduce or eliminate environmental damage.'[610]

Both these views were expressed shortly after information about the state of the environment in Czechoslovakia, which was intended as a closely guarded report for party functionaries, leaked out and was published first in samizdat, later also spreading to Western media.[611] The state of the environment in Czechoslovakia was described by environmentalist Miroslav Vaněk as catastrophic, caused by the 'megalomaniacal ambitions of communist rule to catch up to and overtake the

[608] Milan Šimečka, 'A World With Utopias or Without them?' in *Utopias,* eds. Peter Alexander and Roger Gill (London: Duckworth, 1984), 176.
[609] Ibid.
[610] Miroslav Kusý, 'Marxism and Ecological Crisis,' *Obsah* (September 1984) as quoted in: H. Gordon Skilling, *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Macmillan Press, 1989), 140.
[611] Vaněk, 'The Development of a Green Opposition in Czechoslovakia: The Role of International Contacts', 173-187.

states of the capitalist West, which were unrealistic, except in one respect: the extent of damage done to the natural environment.' Vaněk asserts that by the beginning of the 1970s the state of Czechoslovak environment had become such a serious issue, 'with ramifications for whole sectors of the population, that the communist regime was forced to pay attention to the problem.'[612]

While the on the one hand, nature protectionists were allowed to operate on a volunteer basis, with no political ambitions, on the other, ecology was formed as an academic discipline for specialists with closely-controlled information. Environmental literature was 'accessible to a very limited number of specialists in central scientific libraries', and in the words of another environmentalist 'even within the environmental movement there were few people who had deep knowledge of the works of the Club of Rome'.[613] This shows the exceptional character of Sikora's practice, who by gaining access to *Limits to Growth* started to address the problem of ecological balance of the Earth, foremost in the series of graphic sheets entitled *Cuts through Civilisation,* that 'depict the occupation and devastation of the Earth's surface'.[614]

The triptych *Cuts through Civilisation* (1972) consists of a cross-section of the Earth, containing geological layers of the planet's crust and atmospheric layers above, while in its central part, which represents the surface, a succession of images show the progress of human society, where one can perceive the change from intact nature to modern civilisation symbolised by the 'unnatural' functionalist style of architecture (fig. 110). While the metaphor of architecture contains elements of dwelling, of being at home and ultimately of belonging, the artist used examples which could stand for both socialist panel housing as well as western modernist estates, pointing to his conviction that environmental crisis was a phenomenon that went beyond cold war divisions, as he explained that 'the devastation knows no borders.'[615]

Such a global approach to the history of civilisation on Earth is also visible in *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet* (1972) (fig. 111), where a similar succession of graphic sheets, which in this case bear inscriptions of the geological terms for separate layers of the earth's crust, from upper layer called sial, through sima, crosfesima, nifesima and finely nife closest to the core of Earth. A similar formula is repeated in the upper part of the montage where the artist lists the layers of the

[612] Ibid., 174.
[613] Miroslav Kundrata, 'Czechoslovakia,' in *Civil Society and the Environment in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Duncan Fisher and Claire Davies (London: Ecological Studies institute, 1992), 34.
[614] *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 274.
[615] Hrabušický, 'Rudolf Sikora – Activist and Observer,' 42.

atmosphere from the lowest layer called troposphere, through the stratosphere which contains the thin layer of ozone, to the mesosphere, thermosphere and finely the exosphere as the outermost layer that marks the line between the Earth's atmosphere and interplanetary space. Once the artist established the vertical cross-section that demonstrates the spatial domain of the planet, on the central part of the sheets Sikora brought in the temporal dimension of the story of civilisational development on Earth, which he depicted this time through the history of architecture. These images show megalithic structures as symbolised by Stonehenge, the Egyptian pyramids, ruins of classical Greek temples, vertically extending gothic cathedrals which significantly have their spires cut off, to modern skyscrapers, with some still having cranes attached to them.

The artist conveyed his vision of the human environment, which could be understood as an exercise in environmental geography in which he deals with the spatial aspects of the intersections of human and natural world, by pointing to geomorphology and meteorology as well as the social conceptualisation of environment, that could be perceived as a more complex, if still scientifically motivated take on the issue of human relation to space. Sikora later recalled that in the early seventies, 'I insisted upon an "accurate" wording of anything related to Time and Space. I scrupulously clung to new scientific formulations, cosmological hypothesis... Now that I look back, I smile at my past desire to "have a kind of clear head", at my desire to "know the answers to eternal questions": Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?'[616]

His desire to know, to name, to assign terms to matter might be connected to the change in social reality since the passing of the liberal 1960s, when the state of things was called by its name and political affairs openly discussed. By contrast, living in real socialism during the period of normalization was, in Šimečka's words, similar to inhabiting a 'country whose economic, political, and cultural life is a daily round of absurdities which are an affront to common sense.'[617] Many intellectuals tried to come to terms with such a situation of 'twisted' reality, while one of the best known formulations was expressed by dissident dramaturge Vaclav Havel in the later 70s, with his call to 'live in truth'.[618] Sikora either opted for scientifically verifiable information or visualised his wonderings through his signature sign of the exclamation mark.

[616] *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 84.
[617] Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia,* 137.
[618] See: Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV*, 97.

One such exclamation mark appeared in red on the last in a row of otherwise black and white images in *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet,* additionally warning about the danger of the end of human civilisation that in the central part of the sheet was illustrated with a catastrophic vision of nuclear explosion. The atomic mushroom cloud entered public consciousness after nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, which were places that Sikora visited during a state-organised trip to Japan in 1973, a year after the artist had applied it in his work to envision the apocalyptic end of civilisation on Earth. The title of the work reveals Sikora's concern with the future of civilisation and warns against the destruction that could result in a 'dead planet'. Addressing the issue of apocalyptic visions during the Cold War, Crowley emphasized the image of 'nuclear desert' that originated from perceiving Hiroshima and Nagasaki as 'perished Earth' as being frequently employed by artists and filmmakers who 'drew a connection between the wilderness and the existential anxieties thrown up by push-button deconstruction'.[619]

In *Cuts through Civilisation* Sikora expressed his concern about 'the damage to ecological balance that would affect the entire world.'[620] His response corresponds to conclusions expressed in the book *Limits to Growth*, which state that in order to ensure the 'survival of human society' it is necessary to 'establish condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future' by setting limits to growth and preparing for 'transition from growth to global equilibrium.'[621] In Croatia, as has been considered in the case of the Group TOK, the public had access to more information and environmental discourse was widely debated, so that the criticisms of the book *Limits to Growth* as formulated during the UN Summit in Stockholm in June 1972 were immediately reported and included in discussions.[622] These were seen foremost in the problem of unjust development and unfairness in denying the rest of the world the right to reach the same stage of economic development, as well as the huge discrepancy in resources used by rich nations in comparison to the amount used by poor nations.[623] In Slovakia, however, access to such information was harder and, as mentioned above, even environmentalists were unfamiliar with the issues raised by the book.

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[619] Crowley, 'Looking Down on Spaceship Earth: Cold War Landscapes,' 252.
[620] *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 276.
[621] Meadows, *The Limits to Growth*, 24.
[622] Nenad Prelog, 'Dilema: stagnacija ili propast,' [Dilemma: stagnation or collapse] *Telegram* (23 June 1972), 9.
[623] Supek, *Ova jedina zemlja*.

Sikora envisaged his own understanding of these issues sometimes in a more representational way, while in other cases he opted to write it down. His *Time...Space X* (1974) serves as a sort of manifesto, where the artist made a print, not dissimilar to his early typewritten drawings, consisting of graphic symbols of stars that are lined up in stripes to create the background of a notebook, while the centre contains the circular shape within which the text written in English in capitals is organised with the help of doted lines and arrows (fig. 112). Here the artist expressed his vision of time that goes back and forward from the present and is marked in the centre as 1974, relating it to the eternal questions of the existence of humanity. When he moves to the coordinate of space, he outlined it as planet Earth, solar system, galaxy, and then returns to 'my room, my town, my country', while the relationship between Earth and man is contrasted with the 'geologically homogenous, calm development' of Earth, which is disturbed by man who 'often dislocates homogeneity of the Earth's surface'. This turns 'man against nature', 'man against man', 'nation against nation', which then results in 'borders between man and man, borders between nation and nation'.

Views expressed on this chart of time and space arguably reveal the position from which the artist spoke, which on the one hand was determined by social and political factors that enforced restrictions on mobility, where borders to the West were so fixed that, as Šimečka ironically observed, 'Bratislava was closer to Moscow than it was to Vienna'.[624] On the other hand, Sikora resisted being situated in those unfavourable circumstances by formulating standpoints that surge in temporal and spatial dimensions that go beyond any borders. While constellations in cosmos were found to be an ideal refuge by many of his fellow Slovak artists, Sikora kept to more realistic ground, which he gained through first a geographical and then an ecological perspective, whereas his cosmological outlook was always informed by astronomy.[625] Possibly drawing on cartographical codes, Sikora's use of texts and languages demonstrated his awareness of the power of naming and assigning, while through his act of choosing foreign languages – English, French or Spanish, he demonstrated resistance to his given locality.

In a related cycle from the same year, Sikora explores the symbol of the exclamation mark, a universal sign that transcends language barriers, by turning it into projections for a 'three-dimensional poster object', covered with words, text and press clippings which 'respond to current

[624] Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order*, 161.
[625] Sikora participated in the meeting of amateur astronomers in 1971, where he gave a lecture about 'Astronomy and Art'. See: *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 275.

problems of the planet Earth' including 'social, political and ecological' issues. The *Exclamation Mark VI* distinguishes itself from various transformations of the sign through the simplicity of its construction, which consists of the planet Earth becoming a dot while a section of universe constitutes the top part of the mark, hovering together in the vacuum of outer space, summarizing his views and also his understanding of the role of art that 'could redeem the world' (fig. 113).

Sikora's axis of time and space stretched over such distances that no history or territory of any state could set a boundary to it. In that respect, Sikora's attitude to national identity is similar to that of the other Central European artists considered here, including Pécs Workshop, who distanced themselves from the idyllic national landscape of the Hungarian plain and opted to work in mining sites, as well as OHO Group, who submitted the prime national symbol of Slovenia, Mount Triglav, to critical questioning, and Group TOK in Zagreb, who purified the political atmosphere after the Croatian Spring movement in 1971. Such positions were motivated by an understanding of the issues of environment as exceeding political and national borders, which Sikora clearly expressed in his correlation of geography, ecology and cosmology.

The exceptional character of Slovak art from the late sixties and early seventies, from collective actions in the natural environment to the opening of cosmological dimensions to art, was also contributed to by Rudolf Sikora, on the one hand by facilitating many of the projects, on the other through his own practice that added complexity to conceptual art. In difference to the aforementioned artist groups, whose activity was of a limited duration, Sikora steadily carried on, gradually turning his focus in the mid-seventies to cycles of *Black Holes*, *Habitats* and *Pyramids*, continuing his artistic practice until today. At the intersection of the 1960s and 1970s Sikora produced some of the most compelling projections about the state of humanity, speaking from the position of his fixed reality that could even so never control his vision.

Embodied Environmental Awareness in the Performative Practice of Czech Artist Petr Štembera

After a decade of highly successful and influential artistic practice that evolved from land art to body art and cutting edge performances, Czech artist Petr Štembera decided with resignation to stop his artistic activity. His last performance, which took place on 20th December 1980 in Brno, demonstrated the artist's frustration with the political situation in Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the suppression of *Charter 77*, a document that summed up the demands of oppositional intellectuals for the government to abide by human rights and freedom of thought and was partly motivated by the arrest of members of the cult anti-regime rock band *Plastic People of the Universe*.[626]

In the first part of the performance, the artist dressed in his best suit stood on his head and sung along to the current Czechoslovak no.1, 'Live as One Should'. This was a popular song recorded by a 'regime rock singer', as art historian Kristine Stiles informs us in her essay on East European performance art, referring to excerpts of a letter that Štembera wrote to her explaining that the pop musician was someone who 'presented himself as a hard man acting very freely after his own will'.[627] The notion of freedom was an essential issue in intellectual and neo-avant-garde artistic circles across Eastern Europe, completely replacing other forms of ideology after the failure of 1968,[628] and in this respect Štembera was no exception. The question of freedom was also addressed in the last performance, in which the artist implicitly juxtaposed the contemporary hit

[626] According to historian Paulina Bren, the passivity among Czechoslovak citizens as a result of communist regime purges that followed the invasion in 1968 lasted until 1976, when it 'finally punctured' after the government trial against 'the nonconformist underground rock band the Plastic People of the Universe.' See: Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV*, 94. The initial text of Charter 77, which was made public in early January 1977 is available here: http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf (last accessed 10 Oct. 11).

[627] Kristine Stiles, 'Inside/Outside: Balancing Between A Dusthole and Eternity,' in *Body and the East*, 19.

[628] For example, as Hungarian writer and oppositional activist Miklós Haraszty explained: 'I sympathised with the movements of '68, which means all of 1968 together – Prague, Paris, The German student movement, and American student movement – and the events of that year made me realise that all we really wanted is freedom. The turn towards human rights and away from other kinds of ideology was in fact the meaning of the Prague Spring for us. We understood that we can only be free if everybody else is free.' See: Fowkes and Fowkes, *Loophole to Happiness*, 43.

song with the other side of the coin, in which genuine musicians were interrogated and imprisoned by the same regime.[629]

The second part of the performance entailed fixing a rope to the ceiling, next to which the artist taped a cutting from the regime daily *Rudé Právo*, with the heading 'Once more on the Petty Bourgeois Attitude', so that anyone who wanted to read the text, had to first climb up the rope (fig. 114). Štembera examined here the production and mediation of information, which had preoccupied the artist since the beginning of his practice, while at the same time the performance pointed to the empty jargon of the official press. Whoever climbed up to read the text did not 'identify with the content', as art historian Karel Srp explained, 'but read it in a distorted way, upside down, just as Štembera sang while standing on his head.'[630]

Not only do we know in detail about the last performance realised by the artist, there are also numerous accounts of the event that was decisive for the beginning of Štembera's artistic practice. This was connected to Štembera's trip to Paris in May 1968, which would turn out to be a life changing experience for a number of reasons. Firstly, Petr Štembera, who was born in Plzen in 1945, was not trained at an Art Academy, but attended classes at the Faculty of Social Sciences, as he had been educationally disadvantaged because of his family background, since belonging to academic and philosophical circles represented an obstacle in a system that privileged the working class.[631]

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[629] The singer of the song in question was the then young Michal David (born 1960), whose fame apparently was relit recently in a wave of communist nostalgia. The title 'Žít, jak se žít má', after which Štembera's performance was entitled, was translated into English as 'To Live the Right Way' in the description of performances in the otherwise Czech language only major catalogue of the artist. See: Karel Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980* (Prague: Galerie hlavniho mesta Prahy, 1997), 48. A more common translation of the title is 'Live as One Should' as is used here. In general, if translations of titles of Štembera's work differ in English, I use the most commonly used one.

[630] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 8. (Translation by Ben Fowkes and the author)

[631] Stiles quotes Štembera's account of his educational background as follows: 'I was not permitted to go to the university and experienced State reprisals (already as a boy of eight in 1958-59) when I was not allowed to go to normal school, but sent across town to a school for children of the intelligentsia run by a very crazy women from the Communist Party...'See: Stiles, 'Inside/Outside: Balancing Between A Dusthole and Eternity', 24. In comparison, Amelia Jones in her study of Vito Acconci refers to the 'normative subjectivity of middle-class masculinity' in the West, whereby class she means 'educationally privileged'. See: Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 104. Štembera was middle class in a society where the working class, at least in theory, was normative and as a result he was educationally discriminated against, which illustrates the difference between the two prevailing social systems at the time.

He started his artistic activity using the medium of painting, reportedly in the manner of Spanish painter Tápies, while at the same time, as art historian Jindrich Chalupecky asserts, he 'experimented with images whose forms would have arisen only by being exposed to the impact of weather conditions such as rain, snow or frost.'[632] When he went to Paris at the age of 23 he visited the May Salon, where he saw 'a ton of paintings and realised that 99 per cent of those had no sense, that is had nothing to do with the real life of the people who painted them'.[633] He became disillusioned with the traditional medium of painting, which in his opinion, both in its 'abstract as well as surrealist stream', was heading into a 'dead end street.'[634]

The other formative experience from Paris, which would turn out to be equally decisive for his later practice, was that he had no money for food and went ten days without eating. 'When you have nothing to eat, you become aware of your existence,' Štembera explained, adding that it took him two years to process that experience, and then 'suddenly I became aware of my body, and actually that body is more important than what I do. The reason why the body can become material for some activities is because it is capable of taking some stimulus (for example, pain) from outside and because it is capable of expressing internal experiences.'[635] These ideas, which reveal the artist's understanding of the body as a medium which takes and transmits information, the primacy of the sensation of pain for the experience of existence, as well as the use of the body as the most direct artistic form of expression, are explored in Štembera's practice in which he developed a distinctive approach to the natural environment and questioned the human position in it.

What happened between Paris and his first performance which took place in 1974 is somewhat obscured in later accounts of the artist's oeuvre, or at least, the activities from that period have not been treated with the same degree of attention as were his performances. In the major catalogue published on the occasion of a joint exhibition of Štembera with Jan Mlčoch and Karel Miler in Prague City Gallery in 1997, the curator Karel Srp refers to 'respect for the artist's wishes'

[632] Jindřich Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění* [On the borders of art] (Prague: Prostor Arkýř, 1990), 136. (Translation by Ben Fowkes and the author).
[633] Petr Štembera answering the question 'Since when do you practice art and why?' in Helena Kontova and Jaroslav Andjel, 'ČSSR Fotografija,' [ČSSR Photography] *Spot - Review of Photography* 11 (Zagreb) 1978: 8. (My translation)
[634] Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění*, 136.
[635] Kontova and Andjel, 'ČSSR Fotografija', 9.

as the reason to start the photographic illustrations of Štembera's practice only with documentation of his performances from 1974, leaving out the earlier works.[636]

Štembera's performances and body art actions have been considered highly important in the context of East European art of the 1970s, as the catalogue of the seminal exhibition *Body and the East* from 1998 well illustrates.[637] Apart from testing the physical endurance of the human body, Štembera also regularly included the surrounding elements of the natural world in his performances, placing his body in the wider context of human existence in the environment. His actions were often performed together with animals including insects, birds, fish and small mammals, while he frequently used natural elements such as earth, stones, wood and living plants in his practice, in addition to those elements that belong to the more human sphere of life, such as cocoa powder, dough, light or acid. Although it has been recognised that Štembera's performances, as Chalupecký providently asserted, 'in an extraordinary way problematised the inter-relationship between man and the natural process, living plants and animals',[638] this relationship has so far never been the specific subject of study of the artist's practice.

Many of the actions that took place between 1970 and 1974 also indicated strong connections with the natural environment. While some involved more daring exercises of survival in nature, others were more straightforward experiments with land art. It is important to note that Štembera's work, although foremost acknowledged for its contribution to performance art, has also always been considered in the context of Central European land art. For example, László Beke mentioned him in his text on art in nature in Central Europe,[639] while Czech conceptual artist and art historian Jiři Valoch discussed his early work as well as his later performances in the essay on 'Land Art and Conceptual Art' for the catalogue of the exhibition of Czech landscape art.[640] Furthermore, Štembera's performances were also considered in a locally much referred to text entitled 'Return to Nature' by František Šmejkal, which dealt with artistic actions in the countryside in the context of the Czechoslovak neo-avant-garde.[641] Nevertheless, even in terms of land art, there is no separate study focused on the work of Petr Štembera.

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[636] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 14.
[637] Badovinac, *Body and the East: From 1960s to the Present.*
[638] Jindřich Chalupecký*, Nové umění v Čechach* [New Czech art] (Prague: H+H, 1994), 146. (My translation)
[639] Beke, 'Central-East Europe', 114.
[640] Jiři Valoch, 'Land Art and Conceptual Art,' in *Krajina/ Landscape*, 29 – 40.
[641] František Šmejkal, 'Navrati k přirodě,' [Return to nature] *Výstvarna kultura* (Prague) 3 (1990): 15 – 21.

This chapter aims to consider Štembera's artistic practice as both continuous and organically evolving throughout the decade, while concentrating on unearthing the link between the artist's work and the natural environment. A persistent relation to the natural world could be uncovered both in his earlier artistic actions which were closer to the experiments carried out by land artists, as well as in later performances that incorporated references to the non-human world. The teachings of Zen Buddhism, which the artist was interested in, as well as his practicing of yoga, had a profound influence on his approach to the natural world. That approach was also determined by existential philosophy, to which the artist himself referred to as formative for his practice, and by phenomenological studies of the body as a means to communicate with the natural environment, which became central to his involvement with performance art. Although latent, Štembera's awareness of the ecological dimension was also present in his understanding of art and the natural environment.

Throughout the 1970s, Petr Štembera worked closely with two other artists – Karel Miler (1940) and Jan Mlčoch (1953), raising the question of whether they formed an artist group, to the extent that sometimes they were even referred to as the 'Prague Trio',[642] which regularly led to joint treatment of the artists' work in art historical accounts.[643] The three artists had different points of departure, as Miler, an art historian working at the time at the National Gallery in Prague, was writing poems in the early 1970s and only gradually became interested in action art. The younger Jan Mlčoch, on the other hand, came from a literary background and worked with Štembera at the Arts and Crafts Museum, deciding to start his own artistic activity only after seeing Štembera's work. After a decade of productive collaboration, they all closed the chapter of active artistic engagement in 1980.

Although working in close proximity meant that they influenced each other's practice, they did not produce common works and each had his own distinctive approach to body and performance art, which on some occasions also contained references to, or took place in, a natural environment. Reflecting on the period, Karel Miler emphasized that 'each of us had something different in mind', so for instance while Mlčoch and Štembera 'worked with ideas', his own practice was concerned with the 'idea not sticking out, with it being implemented somewhere deep in the

[642] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5.
[643] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 370.

background to enable it to become an action which is absolutely minimal.'[644] Miler's method for achieving this was linked to his use of photography, which became a constitutive part of his work, as already in the conception of the action he would have a photo-documentation in mind, while for Štembera and Mlčoch photography was employed in the service of documenting actions and performances as they happened.[645]

During the 1970s these artists socialised intensively and helped each other out; mostly with the organisational aspects of art production, which during the period of normalization in Czechoslovakia had to cope with very specific conditions. The Czech art scene became sharply divided into two separate spheres that rarely overlapped - official culture, which functioned in official institutions, and unofficial art, which 'was semi-private and shown in studios or outdoors, in places that traditionally had little to do with art.'[646] For instance, Miler, Štembera and Mlčoch would facilitate performance evenings together, often in the spare rooms of the museum where they worked, in which, after closing time, they would 'chose a corner and do performances one after the other.'[647]

At the beginning of the seventies, concurrently with his early art projects, Štembera became an avid promoter of the contemporary Czech art in an international context, initiating correspondence and collaborations with artists, curators and gallerists around the world. He used his 'worldwide contacts' to arrange exhibitions for himself and his friends abroad, 'in the form of photography and documentation', as the artist emphasized.[648] A glimpse of the paradoxical situation in which Czech artists operated is provided in Jan Mlčoch's recollection of how: 'We put those few photographs, along with some texts, into envelopes and took them to the post office. They might have been censored, but they were delivered everywhere in the world. We had exhibitions in France, Germany, Japan, wherever we liked, at the strangest possible events.'[649] Štembera's role as 'a communication channel' worked both ways, and thanks to him foreign artists

[644] Interview with Karel Miler in: Barbora Klimova, *Replaced* (Brno, 2006), 49.
[645] This is according to the answers the artists gave to the question about the role of photography in 'ČSSR Fotografija': 10-11.
[646] Piotrowski*, In the Shadow of Yalta*, 248.
[647] Interview with Jan Mlčoch in: Klimova, *Replaced*, 26.
[648] Štembera's interview in: Neuburger and Saxenhuber, *Kurze Karrieren*, 104.
[649] Inteview with Jan Mlčoch in: Klimova, *Replaced,* 24.

including Marina Abramović and Ulay, Chris Burden and Tom Marioni came to Prague in the mid-seventies, and 'all of them stayed at Petr's place.'[650]

In 1970, at the same time as Štembera was typing his statement for *Revista de Arte* magazine from Puerto Rico entitled 'Events, Happenings, Land-Art, etc., in Czechoslovakia', the leading Czech post-war art historian Jindřich Chalupecký published a 'Letter from Prague' in *Studio International*, in which he reported about the latest trends in the country. Among other artist projects, Chalupecký mentioned the actions of Zorka Ságlová, whose work represented some of the earliest manifestations of Central European neo-avant-garde art outings into the countryside. The readers of the magazine also learned that 'the author of this article did not have courage to follow them into such Siberian weather, but those taking part assured him that the result was monumental and beautiful.'[651]

The younger reporter addressed the issue of art realised in the public space of the city or in the natural environment through the metaphor of 'empty frames'. He recognised this phenomena among contemporary artists and listed several artistic projects which involved placing an empty frame into the streets or in the context of a natural setting, including the examples of Richard Long, Jan Dibbets and Robert Withman.[652] In contrast to the medium of painting, to which the frames are connected, for Štembera, whose artistic dilemmas were also linked to the problem of painterly representation, the placing of the empty frames into a new context pointed to 'reality' and 'scenes from life itself', which he perceived as the only meaningful subject of contemporary artistic practice. He also reported on Ságlová's actions, before mentioning his own works in the environment. This account was selected for Lucy Lippard's influential publication *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*, making Štembera the only artist from Eastern Europe, apart from two members of the OHO Group, to figure in the influential overview of the conceptual art of the period.[653]

From both these early reports about new artistic trends at the turn of the decade it is clear that the actions by Zorka Ságlová, represented a significant moment in the unfolding of the Czech neo-

[650] Ibid., 25.
[651] Jindřich Chalupecký, 'Letter from Prague,' *Studio International* 932 (April 1970): 88.
[652] In the context of empty frames an action by Croatian artist Goran Trbuljak from 1970 also comes to mind. The artist threw empty picture frames into the sea, referring to the impossibility of capturing the reality of the sea within the genre of marine paintings. For illustrations see: Šuvaković, *Konceptualna umetnost*, 604.
[653] Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*, 169-170.

avant-garde art. The first action, which took place in April 1969, involved taking 37 blue, green and orange balls to the Bořin fish pond in Průhonice near Prague, where the artist and her friends, including members of the cult band *Plastic People of the Universe*, then threw them into the water, whereby wind and water 'also became part of the game.'[654] Her next project took place in August 1969 in the prestigious Václav Špála Gallery in Prague, where Chalupecký was in charge of the program. Ságlová's exhibition was entitled *Hay/Straw* and consisted of bales of straw and hay freely arranged in the gallery rooms. The artist invited visitors to become actively involved in the process of transformation of the art installation by re-arranging the piles of straw. In Czech art history, this project made Ságlová 'the first artist to exhibit unmediated natural materials as a new artefact' and her gesture provoked comparisons with related developments in international contemporary art, claiming that her project was 'at least equal to Italian arte povera.'[655]

Several more actions followed in the coming years that demonstrate the distinctive character of Ságlová's land art. *Homage to Gustav Oberman* was set in the fields close to Bransoudov near Humpolec, approximately half way between Prague and Brno, in a location that was chosen by the artist because it was known as a place of pagan mysteries. The action entailed filling 21 bags with jute and gasoline which the artist, with the help of her friends, took to the site, which in March 1970 was covered in snow. The bags were arranged into a circle and set alight at nightfall, creating an effect that, as mentioned earlier, Chalupecký described as 'monumental and beautiful'. The homage was to a local shoemaker, who, during the German occupation, allegedly wandered around the hills and 'spat fire as the German soldiers beat him',[656] creating associations at the same time with the more recent occupation of the artist's homeland.

A few months later, in May 1970, Ságlová staged another action, this time in a field near Sudoměř north of Prague, where according to legend Hussite women spread their napkins on the meadow so that the enemy's horses would get entangled, an action that in the end brought victory to the Hussites. The artist spread approximately seven hundred squares of white fabric onto the grass in the shape of a huge triangle. Her collective actions, apart from formal references to geometrical structures such as a circle and triangle, demonstrated the artist's careful selection of sites with historical significance in reference to a specific theme, were conceived as homage and contained

[654] Jiři Valoch, 'Journey of Creation of Zorka Ságlová,' in *Zorka Ságlová*, 51.
[655] Ibid., 52.
[656] Ibid.

ritualistic references, indicating Šaglova's approach to the natural environment as intertwined with cultural references.

In the book *Akční umění* that deals with Czech action art, the author Pavlína Morganová, asserts that this form of art practice, which aimed at overcoming the 'separateness of the world of art from the actuality of life' developed in the Czech Republic since the mid-1960s and was a combination of 'happening, performance, body art and land art.'[657] Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1970s, action art was so closely connected to land art, that according to Morganová, 'in the framework of Czech action art, only a few actions existed that were not at least distantly related to nature or natural elements.'[658]

The widespread phenomenon of art practice in the natural environment - both in the Czech and Slovak parts of what was at the time a single country undergoing significant political transformations - can be interpreted as a consequence of artists being banned from exhibiting in regular art institutions and forced to resort to alternatives, with the countryside providing an unrestricted space for experimentation. Bearing in mind that many of these artistic projects demonstrated a sincere engagement with the natural environment, it is important to emphasize that the aim of this research is not to map all the events and projects that could be related to the environment, but to concentrate instead on the most challenging explorations of artistic relationships to the natural environment, and arguably Petr Štembera's practice deserves such attention.

In the same account of Czechoslovak happenings and land art in which Štembera wrote about Ságlová's outdoor actions, he also added a sentence about himself: 'Petr Štembera stretches sheets of polyethylene between the trees in a snow covered landscape, stretches ribbons in a single colour, paints rocks, etc.'[659] In order to gain a clearer understanding of the artist's early works that took place outdoors, it is important to note that artist was working in parallel on several other projects, including recording his own daily activities using a photographic camera. From the same period also originate some telling drawings, which reveal the artist's concepts envisioned for gallery realisation, precisely at the moment when the disappearance of the

[657] Morganová, *Akční umění*, 7 and 16. (My translation)
[658] Ibid., 59.
[659] Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object,* 170.

possibility to exhibit in a gallery was imminent. In that sense, no further projects by the artist were conceived as gallery installations.

The drawing entitled *Falling Off – Soft Geometrical Environment* (Project) dated November 1969, consisted of two parts representing the beginning and the conclusion of the envisaged project. The first drawing depicts coloured lines stuck to the wall of a room in strict geometrical order, while the other diagram illustrated what it would look like after the audience, asked to unglue the strips, let them freely fall off the wall (fig. 115). From this early example of the artist's work it is clear that he was dealing with the problems of geometric abstract art, which although no longer linked to the medium of painting, was nevertheless applied to the wall, expressing the artist's wish to take it down, liberating it from the rules of two dimensional representation, and deconstruct it with the participation of the visitors.

This work was reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* in 1971, which was organised by Argentinean curator Jorge Glusberg, the founder of the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) in Buenos Aires, who had strong connections with many leading artists and curators, including Lucy Lippard, with whom he collaborated on the landmark exhibition 2. 972. 453. Štembera got in touch with him and was invited, along with several other Czech artists, to take part in the *Arte de Sistemas* show, which also featured the work of about a hundred international artists including Vito Acconci, Richard Long and Christo.

The catalogue, with an introduction by Glusberg, in which he states that 'art system refers to processes rather than finished products of good art', was designed in a uniform graphic style that was characteristic for CAYC publications. It consisted of loose leaflets with the same font and each artist was given the same amount of space, usually one sheet which contained a photograph of the artist and his signature, a short textual description and illustrations of the work. On Štembera's template one can read that 'Since 1969 he realises projects, conceptual and ecological art.'[660] The preferred terminology is significant, especially if we take note of the absence of the term land art, which the artist was well aware of and had used before. This may well indicate his disagreement with the neutrality contained in the term land art, which he exchanged for the more instrumental term 'ecological art' that implies an active attitude to the natural environment, although his works created at the time do not suggest any more programmatic analysis.

[660] Glusberg, *Arte de Sistemas*.

The project proposition *Falling Off – Soft Geometrical Environment* was also reproduced in another publication from 1971, which included works by artists such as Robert Smithson, Jan Dibbets, Eva Hesse, Janis Kounelis and others. It was a book by German artist Klaus Groh entitled *If I Had a Mind...Conceptual Art – Project Art*, which presented art that was conceived, for example, as 'information transmitter', 'a way of behaviour', 'without finished solutions' and 'utopian vision in the reflection of the influences of natural processes'.[661] Such conceptions of art found a strong echo in the practice of Petr Štembera and show that the exchanges the Czech artist initiated abroad served both as a means to promote the art produced in a closed socialist country and in return, as an informative resource that was astutely incorporated into his own practice.

In this publication we also encounter a photograph of one of Štembera's works that was realised outdoors. The photograph shows a winter scene of an urban park with a skyscraper in the distance, while the central perspective is focused on a dark ribbon laid down onto a footpath made in deep snow (fig. 116). The ribbon was not stretched into a straight line, but was left wriggling along the beaten pathway. Compared to the previously discussed drawings, the ribbon in this work appears very similar to the strips that were stuck to the gallery wall in expectation of being pulled down. Here however the artist goes a step further by freeing the line from its geometric straightness and attachment to the wall, by transposing it into the city park and introducing it to 'real life', which the artist perceived to be the main concern for contemporary art.

This work also points to similarities with other artists from Central Europe that have been examined in this study, whose early interventions in the natural environment from the same period also involved placing 'painterly elements' outside the gallery space. Such is the case of the Pécs Workshop artists, who took paper tapes to the surrounding woods and arranged them in such a way as to resemble painterly compositions. Examples from OHO Group's early encounters with land art also entailed placing a white paper strip on the grass to invoke a line, which was coupled with an inversion that was created by walking in the snow, as a result of which a dark line appeared in the landscape. In accordance with their perception of artworks as dematerialised acts of creation, they exposed these elements to the natural processes of the weather and the passing of time, expressing their critique of the traditional medium of painting.

[661] Groh, *If I Had a Mind... concept art – project art*.

The statement that Štembera wrote for the next publication by Klaus Groh, the famous *Aktuelle Kunst aus Ost Europa*, reveals analogous considerations:

> 1) My work has sense only in the time-space relation
> 2) I'm not interested in art, but in active processes
> 3) un-formal work/ constant change/ that is what fascinates me.[662]

The illustration in this book shows the artist kneeling on the side of a fast flowing stream and painting the surface of a stone sticking out from the water. The act of taking a can of paint into nature and painting the surfaces of found materials indicates on the one hand the interconnectedness of early Central European land art with the medium of painting from which it attempted to separate itself, while on the other, it exposed the act of painting to natural processes and critiqued its status of a finished art object.

In the action entitled *Large Pool* form 1970, Štembera formed the mud of a large rain puddle into an 'open triangle', in other words, he shaped two sides of it into a straight geometric form, leaving the third side untouched (fig. 118). The work was made on the island of the river Vltava in northern Prague, and lasted until it was 'destroyed shortly afterwards by rain.'[663] Later, as Srp relates, the artist commented on this work explaining that it 'showed that it was not so important what has been done, as what you are doing',[664] viewing the project more in terms of bodily involvement in the creation of the work, and stressing the aspect of process, rather than perceiving it as an example of his land art activity.

It is however significant to note that the shape the artist decided to create was still linked to geometry, even if partially and fragmentarily, which situates the project in relation to his earlier works in which the artist was still coming to terms with traditional artistic media in the encounter with the natural environment. Indeed, in the text Štembera wrote on the occasion of the exhibition *Nature*, which took place in the Institute of Industrial Design in Prague in 1976, he refers

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[662] Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst aus Ost Europa,* n.p. (My translation)
[663] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5. Srp refers to the island as Trojski, while it is more commonly named as Císařský.
[664] From unpublished replies of Petr Štembera from 1980, as quoted in: Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5.

to this project as dealing with the 'arrangements of the terrain' and 'still solving the problems of fixed and variable plastic forms.'[665]

According to Morganová, Czech land art in the widest sense of the word could be understood to include 'any actions or installations which use natural elements or are realised in the natural environment', and in that way, as long as there is an element of action present, it is 'customarily placed in the context of Czech action art'.[666] Following that logic, she also considers the work of Petr Štembera, which certainly contains elements which easily fit in such a broadly understood category. In this sense, the term 'akční umění' in Czech or 'akčné umenie' in Slovak,[667] meaning simply action art, was used in Czechoslovak art history in the same way as the notion of 'New Artistic Practice'[668] was applied in Yugoslavia as a generic term for the new and often inter-media art trends of the 1970s. While these terms have strong resonances within national art histories, the question of how useful this terminology is in an international context remains, despite the fact that both terms imply the complexity and 'interdisciplinarity' of the artworks created at the time, which would certainly be affected by more rigidly understood categories of land art or body art.

The next work by Štembera positively illustrates the difficulty of assigning it to a single category, as it touched upon land art and body art, also involves an action, and is equally seen as a precursor of the artist's later performances. *The Transposition of Two Stones* took place in June 1971 and the artist described it mundanely as follows: 'I wrapped two large stones and carried them from Suchdol in Prague to Prague-Dejvice'.[669] The series of photographs depict the stages of the artist's action, from wrapping the stones into a net that served as an improvised carrier (fig. 119), to putting the heavy stones onto his back (fig. 120), and finally a shot from the distance showing the artist on his way (fig. 121).[670]

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[665] Petr Štembera, 'Umění a Přiroda,'[Art and nature] samizdat, 1976. (Translation Ben Fowkes)
[666] Morganová, *Akční umění*, 60.
[667] See, Rusinova, *Umenie akcie 1965-1989*.
[668] Susovski, *New Artistic Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978*.
[669] Karel Srp, *Petr Štembera: Performance* (Prague: Situace, 1981), 4.
[670] Srp writes about only one of the photographs remaining from an original six that depicted the stages of the process, from finding the stones, lifting them, moving them and placing them in new location, which, in the middle of the seventies, were shown together with a map of the area. See: Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5. Four of the photographs from the series *Transposition of Two Stones* are published in the on-line collection of LACMA – Los Angeles County Museum of Art. See: collectionsonline.lacma.org (last accessed Oct 2011). This reveals the problem of Štembera's work being scattered around various art institutions, private collections and publications, without a comprehensive catalogue or index that would collect all the data about his practice.

This action, which again took place in green areas of the northern districts of the city of Prague, where the artist used to exercise in the open, was described as 'one of the first works in which he made use of his body.'[671] The question of the relationship to the natural environment that arose from this work was addressed by Karel Srp through the observation that 'the main aspect of the *Transposition of Two Stones* was not related to nature but to his own elemental physical actions'.[672] Such an interpretation comes as no surprise, bearing in mind the fact that the focus of Srp's text for the catalogue of *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch* was on Štembera's performances and in general did not consider his earlier work, even though the framework of the exhibition was a retrospective.

While Srp maintained the dualism between the human and natural world by disregarding the environmental aspect of the work in favour of bodily experiment, for Jindřich Chalupecký these stones were 'not an object of use to which the artist was indifferent, but a piece of nature bearing witness to its own significance' and the work equally awoke an 'awareness of the body and the indivisible awareness of the world'.[673] The reflexive attentiveness to which Chalupecký refers reflects a phenomenological understanding of embodied consciousness, which inhabits space and time in a physical sense.

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* from 1945 emphasized the body that 'is no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it' and understood the world as 'no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought.'[674] In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations in relation to nature, the visible horizon and the 'world' have been interpreted as referring to Earth, the experienced unity of the enveloping world, and as the 'intermediate and mediating existence between ourselves and the universe' as we live within the biosphere of the Earth.[675] Merleau-Ponty's insight about the body as a means of communication with the world had profound influence on the artist, who not only referred to the theorist in connection with his

[671] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 66.
[672] Ibid, 5.
[673] Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění*, 138.
[674] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routlegde, 1998), 92.
[675] David Abram, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,' *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 101 – 120.

performances,[676] but also took the opportunity in interviews to clarify that 'my body is a medium through which I may come to know the world' and 'every human activity is in its own way a reflection of the relationship of man to the world around.'[677]

These ideas were also explored in relation to the artist's everyday activities, which he perceived as experiential processes and documented in a series of photographs, including ones that show sequences of buttoning up a shirt, doing up shoelaces or rolling up sleeves (fig. 122). A further set of photographs illustrated the act of typewriting, while some copies of *Photographs of a Book Being Ripped Apart* dating to 1970 are kept in the National Art Library in London.[678] In the booklet entitled *Private Activities Ed. Nr.1*, which was conceived as the first in a series of publications of International Artists Cooperation under the custodianship of Klaus Groh, Štembera did not even resort to the use of photography as a means of mediating information, instead only using words to describe those activities. One action per a page was noted down in English and German as follows: to sleep, to get up and to lay down, to wash, to take on and to take off, to eat and to drink, to smoke, to officiate, to write, to read, to speak, to love, to go.'[679]

These basic activities resonate with French existentialist theorist Gabriel Marcel's observation that the 'individual tends to appear both to himself and to others as an agglomeration of functions.'[680] Marcel analyses how man identifies with his functions, which are arranged according to a timetable which determines how many hours are given over to each function, from the functions of sleep, pleasure, relaxation and hygiene to the function of sex, and so on. Criticising the organisation of life according to such a schedule as empty and hollow, he arrives at the problem of mystery, which exists as the indivisible 'union of the body and the soul' and as 'my own presence to myself.'[681] Similarly, while Štembera reduced his activities to bare functions, or as Chalupecký poetically described them as 'mental monochromes', they still implied the aspects of process and embodied experience.

[676] See: *Petr Štembera, Karel Miler and Jan Mlčoch*, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Remont Gallery, 1976), 6.
[677] Štembera in: *Flash Art* 68-69 (October-November 1976): 31.
[678] Petr Štembera, 'Photographs of a book being ripped apart,' (Prague: 1970).
[679] One example is held in Artpool archive. No ref.
[680] Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1956), 10.
[681] Ibid., 19.

As a matter of fact, Štembera named Gabriel Marcel as one of the existentialist philosophers that had a particular influence on his art practice.[682] While on the Western side of the Iron Curtain this was the period when post-stucturalist theorists came into the spotlight, in Czechoslovakia the existentialist stream of philosophy, which was inaugurated at the 1963 conference on Kafka that attracted many reform-minding intellectuals, was still a matter of lively debate. This 'bourgeois worldview' became a thorn in the eye of the communist party to the extent that on one occasion it was even proclaimed that a 'major task of normalization would be to help to overcome the cult of this nihilistic philosophy.'[683]

Along with existentialism, phenomenology was also a hugely influential school of thought in Prague at the time and was centred around the philosopher Jan Patočka. A student of Edmund Husserl, Patočka was a respected scholar whose long term assistant at Charles University happened to be Štembera's stepfather.[684] Although Patočka was 'not a political philosopher', he was a signatory to and one of the spokesmen of Charter 77, as a consequence of which a few weeks after the document was made public, the philosopher was brought in for interrogation by the secret police and died in custody.[685] Among the small audience that attended the performances of Štembera and his colleagues, a significant percentage was made up of philosophers and theorists from the Patočka circle.[686]

The factuality of Štembera's practice at the time was also characteristic of his project *Weather Forecasts* from 1971, which was conceived as a version of mail art. Recognised as one of the first artists in Czechoslovakia who 'already in 1970' was using mail art 'not only to send the photographs of his Land Art installations, but also his conceptual books,'[687] in his latest series he set about exploring the modes of information transmission, both in practical and theoretical terms. With the help of a typewriter the artist noted down on the postcards factual data from the meteorological reports that were broadcast on the radio. The cards contained the annotation of

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[682] Ludvík Hlaváček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. Let,' [Remembering the action art of the 1970s] *Výtvarné uměni* (Prague) 3 (1991): 66.
[683] Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV*, 68.
[684] Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění*, 136.
[685] Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.
[686] Jan Mlčoch recalls that among the 'ones who watched our activities' were Ludvík Hlavaček, Ševčiks, Petr Rezek, Mirek Petriček, Ivan Chvatik and Jiři Nemec. See the interview with Jan Mlčoch in: Klimova, *Replaced*, 23. Apart from Jiři and Jana Ševčík, who were art historians, others belong to the theoretical circle.
[687] Jiři Valoch, 'Incomplete Remarks Regarding Czechoslovakian Mail Art,' in *Mail Art: Ost Europa in Internationelen Netzwerk* (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum, 1996), 61.

place and date for which the forecast was done, followed by the numerical information which was sorted under the four columns of altitude, atmospheric pressure, temperature and dew points (fig. 123). He distributed the cards among friends and posted them to many addresses abroad, including to the Hungarian curator László Beke, who received these broadcasted weather reports and subsequently included them in the East European section of the exhibition *Global Conceptualism* held in Queens Museum of Art in 1999.[688]

The *Weather Forecasts* examine information transmission and means of communication and are related to the influential take on the theory of information as expressed in Marshall McLuchan's famous aphorism 'The Medium is the Message'. In that sense, they correspond to a previously mentioned work of Croatian Group TOK, who under the same influence also used postcards to draw attention to the problem of the medium in transmitting the message, subversively choosing to highlight the pollution of the city in the space usually reserved for strategically promoting the most desirable views of the town, while the message – 'Greetings from Zagreb' remained the same.

Štembera was interested in McLuhan's ideas to the extent that he even translated some of his texts and distributed samizdat versions among his colleagues. Vladimír Ambroz, an architect and artist from Brno, later recalled: 'I remember when I got my hands on Petr Štembera's translation of McLuhan's Medium is the Message. I have to admit I did not understand it too well, since the term global village did not exist here. I remember thinking he was exaggerating.'[689] It is evident from this how geographically influenced the reading of McLuhan was, and the concept of the 'global village' meant very little in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, where the normalization regime had reinstalled strict Soviet rule, leaving its citizens feeling cut off from the rest of the world.

The screenings and purges that started after the Soviet invasion hit especially hard in the cultural and academic fields. As historian Paulina Bren explains, the 'humanities based intelligentsia' were seen by the authorities as ideologically more radical, and therefore made to suffer more than the 'technical-based' stream who, the party believed, had the capacity for more 'rational thinking'. Bren also makes the point that the experience of normalization was different in the Czech Lands than in Slovakia, as the purges 'decimated' the Czech intelligentsia much more thoroughly, with

[688] Beke, 'Conceptual Tendencies in East European Art', 45.
[689] Vladimír Ambroz interview in: Klimova, *Replaced,* 17.

the effect that Prague became, as Heinrich Böll expressed it in 1972, 'a cultural cemetery.'[690] Štembera talked in an interview about the 'concentration camp called the Czechoslovak Socialist (better: Soviet) Republic', and in such circumstances his art served as a 'means of expression, a means of non-verbal communication, a way to be free.'[691]

On another occasion, Štembera also emphasized that in such times of communist repression, when 'artists had to conduct their activities in secret, clandestinely, in a private circle of friends' they felt the need to communicate beyond that circle, and 'communication by means of photographs and texts was becoming increasingly important.'[692] As has been already stated, Štembera was an avid networker, and had since the early seventies been in correspondence with numerous members of the international art world. For example, the book *Aktuelle Kunst aus Ost Europa* starts with the words 'Petr Štembera (Prague) sent me in autumn 1970 a text by Josef Kroutvor... ', in which Klaus Groh informs us that Štembera asked him if he knew any possibility for publishing that text. This not only reveals the mode of Štembera's communication, but also shows how the whole project, which created a new picture of contemporary art production on the other side of Iron Curtain, was started in the first place.

In retrospect, the project *Weather Forecasts* provoked a degree of astonishment amongst his mail art recipients, as well as for art critics, who were used to perceiving Štembera's practice through the essential involvement of the body as the object of his art, in other words through the prism of body art. For Jiři Valoch, this project meant 'rigorous exclusion of the subject from the realisation of the work; his role being reduced to that of a mere middleman in the transfer of information.'[693] Karel Srp also observes that these meteorological reports have nothing in common 'either with him or his body or with the recipient of the information,'[694] while for Chalupecký these postcards represented a 'challenge to which the recipient of this card could have replied only from his own experience.'[695]

Sending out *Weather Forecasts* was both a means of communication and a way to emphasize the problem of information transmission. Although at first sight, what it carried was banal, objective

[690] Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV*, 45.
[691] Petr Štembera interview in: Neuburger and Saxenhuber, *Kurze Karrieren*, 104.
[692] Hlaváček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. let', 66.
[693] Valoch, 'Incomplete Remarks Regarding Czechoslovakian Mail Art', 61.
[694] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5.
[695] Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění*, 137.

and neutral scientific data, it is important to note that the artist did not choose to send, for example, football scores, but precisely factual information about changes in the weather system. The phenomenon of the weather is an element of the biosphere, belongs to the Earth and is something that everyone is exposed to regardless of the part of the world in which one finds oneself. Furthermore, weather is not subject to political decisions, and as such, it represents both the abstract notion of freedom and signifies one of the most universal bodily experiences, which was another of the tropes of neo-avant-garde artists working under socialism, namely, the longing to be equal citizens of the world. As Piotrowski observed, the artists 'viewed themselves in universal, rather than regional categories' which gave them 'a sense of being part of global art culture' and functioned 'as a form of a compensation for their isolation.'[696]

In the years 1973 and 1974, Štembera engaged in some extreme endurance tests of the body, reflecting on the experience of hunger from his Paris days. The information about these activities was mostly conveyed in the form of written reports, for example: 11-14 June 1973: four days without eating/ first day without drinking; 1-4 January 1974 and 10-13 March 1974: four days and three nights without sleep; 10-23 August 1974: fourteen days without eating.[697] Through these actions, which could be understood as taking the exploration of basic and everyday bodily activities a step further, Štembera deprived himself not only of worldly pleasures, but also of the basic necessities of food, drink and sleep.

Abstinence from food, drink and sleep is related to asceticism, which in its original meaning of *ascesis* implies discipline, physical control and endurance and is connected with the experience of pain. The methods ascetics use to elevate themselves into a different state of mind are described as a succession of sequences that start with a 'rigid diet, then isolation, sleepless nights (vigils), hard physical work' and so on, with a special focus on the 'effects of isolation and a restricted diet.'[698] The element of isolation was present in Štembera's ascetic exercises on those occasions when he would spend nights in the countryside, living only off the products he would find there, as shown in the photograph *Eating Seeds during Some Days of Asceticism* from 1973 (fig. 124).

[696] Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 241.
[697] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 5.
[698] Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43.

The multitude of ways in which Indian ascetics have lived throughout history was described by Mircea Eliade in his study of *Yoga*, in which he mentions hermits who retire to forests, those who eat 'fruits, wild plants, or roots', those who sleep on the ground and eat only 'what falls on the ground', those who live like pigeons from what has been dried by the sun' and the ones who 'live on cow urine and dung'.[699] This insight into Asian ways of practicing asceticism is not only relevant for understanding Štembera's *Ascetic Actions,* but has also resonances with some of his later performances, which contain elements of ascetic discipline, deprivation and pain.

Eliade asserts that according to the doctrine of yoga there is a basic equation between pain and existence, as 'human experience of whatever kind engenders suffering.' He goes on to explain that 'the body is pain, because it is the place of pain', which is not something negative or leading to despair, but rather 'a cosmic necessity' as, through karma, humans 'possess capability to pass beyond this condition and abolish suffering'.[700] This is inherent to the four 'Noble Truths' of Buddhism, which are: 'Suffering is inherent in life. Suffering is caused by craving. Craving and hence suffering can be destroyed. The Holy Eightfold Path is the course leading to this.'[701]

As the artist stressed on many occasions, he was interested in the teachings of Zen Buddhism and translated some of its texts from English into Czech.[702] Although officially published books were not available, Zen Buddhism spread among the Eastern European counter cultural circles through American influence, especially in connection with the Beatnik poets. For example, Allen Ginsberg came to Prague, where he ended up being crowned king of the 1965 May Day Parade, before being expelled by the authorities as an 'American homosexual narcotic hippie – a poor role model for Czechoslovakian youth.'[703]

For Štembera, the influence of Zen Buddhism was not just a matter of theory, and he actually practiced yoga, without which he 'would not have been able to realise a whole lot of things.'[704] Asked about this in an interview made by Karel Srp in 1981, Štembera described the correlation with his early works in the natural environment, which led to more daring experiments in the physical sense, as a result of which he became conscious of his own body. He also refers to his

[699] Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 139.
[700] Ibid., 11.
[701] As quoted in: James*, Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 5.
[702] Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. let', 66.
[703] See: Fowkes and Fowkes, *Revloution I Love you: 1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy*, 232.
[704] Srp, *Petr Štrembera: Performance*, 3.

harsh experience in Paris, and 'in this connection yoga came into picture.' When these experiences 'fused together', the artist explained, some 'rigidly ascetic pieces emerged from all this.'[705] In his text on 'Art and Nature' from 1976, Štembera described these ascetic exercises in which he would not eat or sleep for days as 'examples of an attitude to life, rather than purely artistic pieces.'[706] Such an understanding might be related to the artist's perception of his own practice as divided between the pre-performance phase and that which followed after December 1974, when he realised his first performance.

Although the focus of this chapter is on the relation of Petr Štembera's practice to the natural environment, his practice was also 'human-centred' and there are numerous works which at first sight contain no direct reference to the theme of this research, but are nevertheless insightful for understanding that relationship. Such is the case with his first performance, which dealt with an anthropocentric theme par excellence, namely, that of the ancient myth of Narcissus, a beautiful young man who fell in love with his own reflection gazing at himself in a pool, a subject that Štembera would return to several times in his decade-long career. In *Narcissus No.1*, which took place on 28 December 1974, Štembera stood in front of a table covered with a tablecloth, on which he placed the different instruments used in the performance. Above it, he placed a photograph of himself rather than a mirror, and lit candles around it (fig. 125). He then mixed his own blood, urine, nail clippings and hair in the bowl on the table where the instruments for obtaining these substances were held and then drank the mixture, while looking at his portrait.

For Kristine Stiles this action recalled 'shamanistic and voodoo practices for accumulating power, protecting against evil spirits, and generally guarding the soul.[707] Another scholar recognised in it a 'perversion of Eucharistic ritual' which merged 'Christian and pagan elements in a spiritually and politically charged scene, presenting self-absorption as a sacred state of being', concluding that in the context of Prague in the aftermath of 1968, 'the vision of an individual refusing the outside world and becoming an autonomous unit, independent of others and society, would have been easily interpreted as a political critique.'[708]

[705] Ibid.
[706] Štembera, 'Umění a Přiroda', 3.
[707] Stiles, 'Inside/Outside: Balancing Between A Dusthole and Eternity', 24.
[708] Lara Weibgen, 'Performance as "Ethical Memento": Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia,' *Third Text* 96 (2009): 63.

While the first interpretation strongly emphasized the work's ritualistic character, which implies symbolical reconnections with the mystical powers of a primeval order with strong religious undertones, Štembera explicitly explained in his first semi-officially published catalogue in 1981 that 'in Narcissus I didn't want to go the route of the holy man; spiritual motives were absolutely irrelevant here.'[709] The other take on Štembera's performance was to fix it firmly within the socio-political situation after the crushing of the Prague Spring, placing seventies Czech performance art in direct relation to the self-immolation of the student Jan Palach, the impact of whose suicide was 'still lingering in individual and public memory.'[710]

Phenomenologist Petr Rezek, who was a witness to the performance, which became one of the subjects of his influential analysis of Czech action art, concentrated on the moment after the performance ended in which the artist attempted to set alight the photograph used in *Narcissus*, but it would not burn. The theorist was moved to conclude that 'anyone who begins by looking at himself ... will never succeed in finding the path to himself, since understanding of oneself is only possible through the understanding of others.' [711] Rather than stressing the representational character of the piece as Rezek did, in the artist's view, the undertone of his action was 'discovery of one's own body, of physical experience and physical being in the world'.[712]

In that sense, this act reconnects with his ascetic explorations that preceded it, and the inclusion of blood, urine, hair and nail clippings situates the body within its earthly existence. These substances accentuate the body's exposure to natural processes, which are in a state of constant change and flux, as a consequence of which, for example, nails and hair grow. However, the artist's act of consuming these substances is the moment when the body becomes what Merleau-

[709] Srp, *Petr Štembera: Performance,* 3.
[710] Weibgen, 'Performance as "Ethical Memento": Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia', 64.
[711] Rezek, 'Encounters with Action Artists,' in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950s*, 223.
[712] Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. let', 66. Another attempt at a strong reading of this performance was in the case of Zuzana Štefková, 'Gender Aspects of "Abjection" (theory – discussion – sources),' *Ateliér* 4 (2008). The author approached it from a psychoanalytic point of view, interpreting Narcissus as questioning 'the precondition of the normative heterosexuality' and in that sense Štembera's *Narcissus* challenged 'the traditional masculine self-stylization of the artist and opens a way to a reinterpretation of the importance of the body liquids; it enables him a symbolical return to the pre-Oedipus' unity of the mother and the child (the subject and the object).' Štembera's take on psychoanalysis corresponded to the existentialist-phenomenologist view, which aimed to propose a philosophical alternative to psychologism. Štembera expressed his dislike for the Vienna Actionists, a group of artists who violently attacked the body in a 'perverse end of the century atmosphere', stating that 'Freud could only exist there.' See Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. let', 66.

Ponty described as a seat of perception and the vehicle of being in world, the point at which the artist becomes acutely aware of his bodily experience.

The use of his own blood, which was taken with a syringe from his vein with help of Mlčoch (fig. 126), relates this performance to the experience of pain, which was further explored in a series of subsequent actions that included acid, fire and broken glass as props for self-inflicted pain. One characteristic of pain, according to Elaine Scarry, author of the book *The Body in Pain*, is its 'unsharability'. The unsharability of the feeling of pain is ensured through its 'resistance to language', as cries and sounds through which pain is expressed lead to a state that precedes language and therefore the author states that physical pain 'does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.'[713] There is a parallel to Zen Buddhism here, nor only in its understanding of pain, but in the significance of non-verbal communication, according to which the insight into Zen is not preconditioned by understanding the conceptual or internal relatedness of things or philosophy of emptiness, but instead by simply practising Zen, 'matters will resolve themselves of their own accord, so that through the practice one will come directly to experience the world in the way Buddhist texts describe it.'[714]

The relatedness of pain to non verbal communication and the emphasis on the importance of physical practice were frameworks within which Štembera's exploration of performative practice developed. In addition, the historical context of post-1968 Czechoslovakia was another point of departure, as Štembera explained that in the situation of 'false communication' that the communist regime was emitting after the Soviet occupation, which resulted in a 'growing social and cultural disintegration' that affected personal life, the artists were moved to 'create a direct, immediate communication based on live physical presence and contact.[715]

While in the sixties many live artistic actions took place on the streets of Prague in direct encounter with the citizens, what followed after 1968 art historian Jiři Ševčík described as 'the cleaning of public space' as a consequence of which Czech 'performances moved inwards.'[716] In the mid-sixties Milan Knižak could express his dissatisfaction with the state of art as well as life by pointing to a need for an alternative through his provocative actions on the streets of Prague,

[713] See: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
[714] James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 129.
[715] Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akčni uměni 70. let', 66.
[716] Jiří Ševčík, 'Between a Shaman and a Clown,' in *Body and the East*, 46.

which challenged the assumptions of 'normal' behaviour, as he would for example lie colourfully dressed on cardboard and read a book, tearing and throwing away each page after he finished.[717] Štembera and his colleagues working after 1968 did not have such opportunities, as the clearing of public space of any unpredictable artistic interventions was literal and the artists, longing for direct communication with the audience, had to find appropriate locations for realising their actions. In most cases they used the attic of Saint Agnes Convent, which was a part of the National Gallery that was not open to visitors. This was where Karel Miler worked, and the artists, who 'never asked for permission', simply used that space and organised performances for a small audience – 'there were usually eight to ten of us' remembers Mlčoch.[718]

However, Ševčík's observation of Czech art 'moving inwards' did not only refer to locations for actions but also indicated the developments in artistic focus. While in Slovakia, as was shown in case of Rudolf Sikora, artists under the normalization regime tried to overcome the objective limitations of freedom of expression or free travel by expanding the mental field into cosmic dimensions and projecting their desires into the universe, the Czech artists took the opposite direction, withdrawing back into themselves and focusing on their own bodies as sites of artistic expression.

One of the most compelling of Štembera's performances took place not in the museum, but in a ruined derelict house that used to stand on the left side of the bridge to Klárov, on the opposite side of which was the Arts and Crafts Museum. 'It was there, on that spot,' remembers Mlčoh, 'that I grafted a branch onto Petr Štembera's arm.'[719] The performance *Grafting* happened in April 1975 when the artist decided to implant a shrub of a fruit tree under his skin, in order to demonstrate his unity with nature (fig. 127). In the artist's words, he wanted to 'make contact with the plant, to put it in my body, to be together with it as long as possible.'[720] The methods he chose for doing so were those used by farmers, in other words, pruning and dipping the plant into an aggressive chemical solution and then binding it strongly to the other variety, usually another plant of the same kind, to improve the quality. As a result of leaving the plant in his arm all day, 'by

[717] See: Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 230-232.
[718] Mlčoch in: Klimova, *Replaced,* 26.
[719] Ibid., 25.
[720] Stiles, 'Inside/Outside: Balancing Between A Dusthole and Eternity', 24.

the evening it was swollen enormously' and Štembera explained he 'had to go to doctor with an infection.'[721]

Shortly after *Grafting*, the artist realised another piece which he described as 'after three days and nights without sleep I spent the fourth night in a tree' (fig. 128). Although this work clearly followed the line which the artist had explored in his ascetic exercises, there is an additional element to the conception of this performance. Namely, while in the earlier actions, the artist's focus was on the bodily experience of the deprivation of hunger or sleep, here he added a new task and challenge to the body, in trying to spend the night up in the tree. In another work, which took place in the summer of 1976, Štembera dug a hole near the roots of a tree with his own hands, emphasising the fact that he did not use any other tools, and that this was the spot where he would 'occasionally spend the night' (fig. 129).[722]

It is remarkable that in all three performances - *Dwelling*, *Sleeping in a Tree* and *Grafting*, the artist explored the problem of human belonging to the natural environment using his body as the main means to both communicate with the environment and to receive impulses from it by exposing it to extreme conditions. Without an attempt to offer any final answers, Štembera questioned the limits of the possibility of experiencing unity with the natural world, which in his practice is not a neutral environment helplessly exposed to the wrongdoings of human civilization, but a place equally shared with animals and plants. His non-instrumental and non-programatic approach to the natural environment does not offer easy interpretations in the context of neo-avant-garde art's treatment of the problem, which are generally more human centred.

When in 1984 František Šmejkal wrote his influential text dealing with artistic practices in the natural environment in Czechoslovakia since the late 1960s, he choose the catchy phrase of a 'Return to Nature' for the title, explaining that in interpreting 'this return to nature I have deliberately stressed mystical and ritual meanings, because exactly this aspect of contemporary art seems to be extraordinarily relevant at the present time. Not of course in the sense of a return to some kind of archaic or primitive form of life, but in the sense of linking up with the anthropologically constant, life giving sources of the past.'[723] Revealing that his motivation was influenced by Lucy Lippard's recently published book *Overlay – Contemporary Art and the Art of*

[721] Petr Štembera interview in: *High Performance* 4 (1978): 21.
[722] Štembera in: Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 37.
[723] Šmejkal, 'Návraty k přirodě', 15. (Translation Ben Fowkes)

Prehistory, he structured his text using the criteria of contemporary artists whose works 'use ritual models for their actions in nature', to which the author assigned a large majority, while considering separately those who work 'with the contrast with nature' or by 'placing alien elements' in it. Štembera's performance *Sleeping in the Tree* was considered in the first category, as it resembled 'medieval mystics', while *Dwelling* was also situated there, as it implied an 'ancestral experience of nature'.[724]

As it has been already pointed out in relation to Štembera's practice, overtly ritualistic, mystical or spiritualistic interpretation of his work undermines his more sensible, experiential and embodied approach to the natural environment. Theorist Elizabeth Grosz in her study of the treatment of the body through the history of philosophy, which she reveals as largely preoccupied with separating the mind and the body, recognises in Descartes the moment of the 'separation of soul from nature'. In her view, Descartes distinguished between the 'thinking substance', which was not part of nature, and 'extended substance', which functioned mechanically according to the laws of nature. In that way, by creating the mind/body opposition he succeeded in linking it with the foundations of knowledge itself, which 'places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body.'[725]

The Cartesian divide between mind and body and consequently of natural sciences and humanities were also foundations for Marxism and as such implemented in socialist societies, which made the phenomenologist theory of the situated body that is reintegrated both with the consciousness and with the surrounding world and attuned to things as they appear, freed from any objectification, radically alternative. In that sense, Štembera's performances are similar to Knižak's public actions of the sixties, which, as Piotrowski observed, only by pointing to the 'meaninglessness of daily existence and conventions of "normal" behaviour' could be interpreted as political, because in a totalitarian political system just looking for an alternative, even without a political program, 'had an explicit political significance.'[726]

On closer inspection, what makes Štembera's actions related to the natural environment challenging, for instance in the acts of spending a night in a tree or under it, is his reintegration of the human body with a natural environment devoid of any hierarchical point of view of human

[724] Ibid., 18.
[725] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.
[726] Piotrowski, *Under the Shadow of Yalta*, 232.

dominance. Instead, through his non-human behaviour, he implicitly implied the existence of animals, which would briefly appear in some of his future performances. Noticeably, for the most daring act of union with the natural world, Štembera chose a plant, rather than another 'sentient' being.

In terms of Zen Buddhism, all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature or awakening and in some cases this is extended to the 'Buddha-nature of mountains, trees, and rivers.'[727] These ideas of an expanded moral community were reflected in developments within green theory in the 1970s. For instance, an organic wholeness in which 'all organisms are equal in intrinsic worth' was the basis for the influential distinction made by Arne Ness in 1973 between 'shallow' and 'deep ecology'.[728] In 1972, as mentioned earlier, environmental theorist Christopher D. Stone posed the question 'Should trees have standing?' that problematised the issue of legal rights for 'natural objects', while the question of the consideration of animal rights was most prominently raised by philosopher Peter Singer, who in 1975 published the book *Animal Liberation*, adding the term speciesism to those of racism and sexism, as equally discriminating.[729] In short, this was the era of the expansion of ecology as a discipline, of the flourishing of environmental activism, and the broadening of environmental ethics, although the transmission of these ideas to Eastern Europe was effectively blocked by the Iron Curtain.

The communist governments of Eastern Europe followed the Soviet model which 'maintained Marx's nineteenth-century understanding of humans as distinct from animals.'[730] If the official Soviet attitude to animals could be summarised, it could be told by the story of Laika the dog – the first space traveller - who was sent in 1957 on a one-way journey into space. The terrible mistreatment of the animal was no different to the brutal official attitude to the environment, while to make matters worse, human rights were not in a better situation.

As a convenient consequence of not taking part in the UN conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, the governments of Eastern Europe managed to avoid the question about the state of the environment in their countries. In Czechoslovakia, which in the early 1970s came to

[727] James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 64.
[728] See: Bill Devall and George Session, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1985), 67.
[729] Smith, *Thinking Through the Environment*, 147 and 211.
[730] Kathleen Kete, 'Animals and Ideology: The Politics of Animal Protection in Europe,' in *Representing Animals*, Nigel Rothfels, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 30.

hold the 'first and second place in destruction of the natural environment, especially in the north Bohemian basin which was 'among the most polluted regions of the world' the effects of pollution were so bad that it had 'ramifications for whole sectors of population.'[731] The regime managed to maintain the 'blockade of the information about the state of the environment' until 1983, when the report leaked out and was made public both at home and internationally. However, taking part in the Helsinki conference on Security and Cooperation in 1975 and signing the Act on human rights brought some 'debate about the environment', and was a trigger for *Charter 77*, which summed up opposition views and was presented to the government early in 1977. *Charter 77* contained such an impressive list of demands and instances of abuse of human rights that environmental concerns did not seem such a priority, and were not explicitly mentioned in the document.

Štembera's practice gradually changed in the aftermath of the severe repression of the *Charter 77* signatories and their supporters, becoming more socially and politically oriented, as a consequence of which he would also demonstrate a different attitude to the role animals played in his performances. Before that transformation of focus, Štembera staged the performance *Parallel Deprivation (with hamster)* that took place in February 1976 (fig. 130) and was described as follows: 'After three days, which we had both spent without any liquid intake, I offered myself and a hamster wine to drink, every morning and evening over the next few days. The action was to and did end when one of us, (in this case the hamster) took a drink.'[732]

This performance is clearly in line with Štembera's ascetic exercises in bodily deprivation, the difference here being that the artist was not alone, but in the company of a hamster, which was placed in a box and was given food but no drink. Štembera also explained that he did not like wine, in that sense he put himself in the same situation as the animal. Compared with other actions that he made around that time, which included extinguishing a fire on a string with his own blood, jumping blindfolded over fire and acid and drinking wine with smashed mirror in it, the performance with the hamster comes across as rather mild and non-violent, with the concept of sharing the same experience with another species coming to the fore.

[731] Vaněk, 'The Development of a Green Opposition in Czechoslovakia: The Role of International Contacts', 174.
[732] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 34.

In the piece entitled *Three to One Possibilities*, which was realised in Prague in August of 1976, the artist carried out a performance with ants. At the beginning of the action, ants were released from a box and given three options. The first was to go towards the light that was lit, the second was to move towards the sound that the artist produced by knocking together stones, while the third possibility entailed going towards the jam that the artist spread on his fingers. The ants chose the third option and started to eat the jam, then the artist also joined them in eating jam from his fingers, and the ants with the jam. The artist described how the ants were also biting his tongue, but as he points out, 'if the ants had chosen the first or second option, they would be free.'[733]

The artist's attitude in this performance is similar to the previous one, as he puts the insects and himself in the same position of them eating him and he eating them, preserving at the same time the edginess and harshness that is characteristic for his practice. Asked about the reason for performing with animals, Štembera explained that they belong to the outside world that he encountered especially in the countryside, where 'humans become more aware of their existence' and so 'I automatically included them among the things I did'.[734] In that sense, it is significant that with animals, whose natural habitat is outdoors, the artist performed inside, in the human environment, and in exchange he would occasionally opt to sleep in the trees or on the ground, which are habits more common of animals then humans.

The photographic documentation of the performance *Sleeping in the Tree* shows that in order to sleep in the tree the artist did not necessarily need to go to the woods – a tree in the street would do (fig. 131). The *Dwelling* took place just outside Prague in Bojanovice, while the ascetic exercises, as well as his land art projects, were done in the green areas of the city or on the island on Vltava also in Prague, while the performance that most directly thematicised the unity with nature – *Grafting*, happened in an abandoned house in the centre of town. Almost paradoxically, for Štembera nature was an indivisible part of his urban life, he did not need to make trips to the countryside to find it.

As already stated, there is so far no substantial study of Štembera's work in relation to the natural environment, while in the interviews that were conducted with the artist, there appears to be no direct exchange about the meaning or importance of nature or the natural world for the artist. Perhaps this indicates the status of the environment in public consciousness in general, as

[733] Štembera interview in: 'ČSSR fotografija', 8.
[734] Srp, *Petr Štembera: Performance,* 4.

although it is important, it does not quite make it onto the priority list. There is however a relevant essay on art and nature that Štembera wrote on the occasion of the rare group exhibition entitled *Nature*, held in Prague in the summer of 1976.[735]

In his short but well informed and lucid take on the issue of art and nature, Štembera pointed out that till the mid-1960s, nature was only an 'object of representation' for art, subsequently becoming 'a direct medium' for artists working across various tendencies from Arte Povera, Conceptual Art to Land Art and so on. 'The artists of the second half of the 1960s conceived the world', writes Štembera, 'as something which was in constant motion, constantly changing, as something which, to be perceived and felt, must be perceived with all the senses, not just the eyes' and therefore 'the materials of nature, which, through their changeability, contain the aspect of time, are the most convenient medium.' This observation certainly rings true in relation to the artist's own work that disclosed an experiential and sensuous approach to the environment, never failing to show the fluidity, formlessness and instability of natural materials.

Furthermore, among the early examples of artists working directly with and in nature, Štembera mentions Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, however, the artist observed that the 'closest contact with nature is exemplified by the work, or more correctly, the attitude to life, of Alan Sonfist and Newton Harrison.' This showed his understanding of the differences in approach between artists engaged in making earthworks and those with a more ecological attitude to nature, among which Sonfist and Harrison were the most sophisticated, and demonstrated how well informed he was about developments in international contemporary art.

Acknowledging the diversity of the activities and attitude of artists working directly with nature, both internationally and in the context of Czechoslovakia, Štembera concluded that this 'perhaps indicates the turn in the thought of artists, who, just like numerous architects, town planners, ecologists, economists and others, have reached an awareness of the indispensability of nature for human beings in the present and perhaps also for their future survival ...'[736] Štembera's insights about the importance of paying attention to the natural environment as a fundamental condition for sustaining future life on the planet show that despite deprivations in the sense of the free

[735] Artists participating in the exhibition were: Jaroslav Andel, Peter Bartoš, Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch, Petr Štembera, Petr Turo, Jiři Valoch.
[736] Štembera, 'Umění a příroda', 3.

availability of information, the same ideas about the state of the environment were expressed synchronously across the globe.

Štembera's text on art and nature from 1976 is also a document of the fact that the artist was well aware both of the multitude of contemporary artistic approaches to the natural environment and of the ecological imperative of the protection of the planet, which according to the artist, had reached the point of uncertainty for future life on earth. However despite familiarity with the environmental issues, his practice did not act as agency for promoting these ideas. In his performances there is no environmental program to counteract pollution, nor reference to scientific argument of the limits of the natural resources left on earth, as they were addressed in the works of Rudolf Sikora and group TOK. Furthermore, his distinctive approach to the natural environment was not motivated by the romantic call for a 'return to nature' that was nostalgically proclaimed by the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, nor was it related to OHO's concern to achieve spiritual links with sacred places on earth and to establish the cosmic unity with natural forces, that started with their land art projects of 1969.

Neither conceived as instrument for illustrating environmental agenda nor search for spiritual path of existence, Štembera's approach to the environment is rather an embodied and experiential enquiry into the possibility of a non-hierarchical relationship to the natural world. In that sense, it could be compared to the 'anti-humanist' phase of OHO's practice of *reism*, that focused on the world of things without an anthropocentric appropriation of them. According to Zabel, 'instead of a humanistic position, which implies a world of objects dominated by subject' in their *reist* phase OHO wanted to achieve 'a world of things, where there would be no hierarchical difference between people and things', while the approach to such a world is 'based on observing' rather than an action.[737] Štembera's practice entailed a non-hierarchical understanding not of objects, but of a natural world that consisted of plants, animals and humans without superior positions, while in his case the right approach is not observation, since the primacy of pure visuality is substituted here by active embodied experience.

When American artist Tom Marioni came to Prague in September 1975, Štembera and he performed together in a piece called *Joining*, the aim of which was to join the bodies of the Western and Eastern artist into one (fig. 132). In a sense, this was another in a series of unions,

[737] Zabel, 'Art in Slovenia since 1945,' in *Aspects/Positions*, 150.

but this time between two members of the same species who were socially, politically and culturally separated. It consisted of the artists drawing two big circles under their arms that spread onto their fronts, one circle was made from condensed milk the other with cocoa, in the centre of which they released 'hungry ants' that either moved towards the food or stayed in the middle and started to bite them.

Later Marioni wrote his impressions from Eastern Europe in the text entitled 'Real Social Realism' where on the one hand he observed how small the Earth has become, since artists 'not only in America, but all over the world' have started to produce dematerialised works of art, while on the other he emphasized that in the market-free conditions of Eastern Europe, the 'art object is automatically less important than in the west', and therefore if artists wanted to explore their philosophical ideas they can 'do so in making actions.'[738] His revelation that although 'conceptual art is strong in Eastern Europe as well as in the west', the individual work of artists in the East, 'show how clearly their culture differs from other cultures in the world', might mean perhaps that he did not enjoy those ant bites that much, and the attempted 'union' had a questionable outcome.

In her comparison with Western performance art, which was formed in relation to the art market, curator Zdenka Badovinac observes that the condition of East European market-free performances meant for the artists 'their personal freedom' and expression of 'artist's autonomous creativity, which was under attack from the prevailing spirit of collectivism' and therefore performances in the East 'particularly in the sixties and seventies, acquired a special utopian dimension.' However, Badovinac continues, the performance art of the period in both East and the West did not show 'any essential difference', disagreeing with the assumption that oppressive regimes in Eastern Europe were reflected in 'greater aggression of East European artists towards their bodies' and pointing out that torture of their bodies was present equally in the performance of Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Petr Štembera and Marina Abramović.[739]

However, when Chris Burden, who visited Štembera in Prague in 1977, returned the hospitality the following year and invited the 'Three Europeans' – Richard Kriesche, Gina Pane and Štembera to Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, he introduced the Czech artist with the words: 'We

[738] Tom Marioni in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 777.
[739] Zdenka Badovinac, *Body and the East*, 15-16.

cannot view the work of Petr Štembera except in terms of his political situation, that of a socialistic structure that discreetly encourages consumerism and capitalism… Štembera is an ascetic, and both his performances and his daily living habits seem to be a comment on the hypocrisies of the socialist system he lives in.'[740] These thoughts of the American artist expressed how deeply perceived was the divide between the artists on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, and that the political situation was inextricably attached to the reception of the Czech artist, even though his practice aimed at avoidance of such readings.

Despite taking part in numerous exhibitions across the globe during his decade long career, the visit to Los Angeles was Štembera's only trip to the West as an artist. He saw a performance by Terry Fox there, met Alan Kaprow, and realised one of his own daring performances, which involved crawling on ground that was covered with razorblades and moving towards candle lights (fig. 133).[741] Later he compared the experience of performing at home and how performances functioned in an American context, expressing his frustration with the local approach: 'With us in Czechoslovakia hardly anyone says anything about the performance, nor do you hear anything about whether it was good or bad, or contributed anything at all to the spectators. I think that the critical faculty capable of judging these things is absent. In America the majority of people have something to say, even at the risk that a big row would blow up.'[742]

Towards the end of the 1970s, when the cultural situation was getting even worse with arrests and persecution of public intellectuals, Štembera's performances became not only more radical but more politically explicit. His last one, described at the beginning of this chapter, included references to popular culture and the mass media in Czechoslovakia at the end of the decade. During his visit to Wroclaw in 1979 he raised the question of Polish history and the political present in one action, while another performance realised there involved a living animal. The artist covered a chicken with a net and placed it between a radio and a television set that were both turned up loud, while he read a newspaper and even tried to feed the chicken with it, which meantime was trying to escape (fig. 134). The performance ended when the chicken gave up attempting to escape. This was the first time that Štembera used an animal in his work for the purposes of a metaphor for the human condition, as he explained that this was 'exactly what they

[740] Chris Burden, *Polar Crossings: 3 Europeans* (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1978), n.p.
[741] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 76.
[742] Srp, *Petr Štembera: Performance,* 3.

are doing with us, how they are manipulating us,' referring to the propaganda mechanisms of the communist regime, which was driving its people to destruction.[743]

In a performance realised in Bratislava in 1980 he 'swam with fish' as he was lying naked on the ground under a table with a heavy fish tank on it, and with his nose blocked he simulated swimming moves, dragging the table with him, while the audience observed it in anticipation of whether the tank was going to fall on him or not (fig. 135).[744] Although in this performance he puts himself in an equal position of swimming with the fish, it is obvious that he swam 'like a fish out of water', which is another allegory for human situation. These final performances indicated a departure from his initial artistic preoccupations, which entailed a non-instrumental approach to animals. Although in the context of Central European neo-avant-garde art animals did not feature prominently, on the rare occasions when they were present, they generally stood as metaphors for the human situation. One of the most vivid examples of this is the work of Hungarian artist István Haraszty who in 1973 made an installation entitled *Like a Bird* with a mechanical cage that had the doors open as long as the bird was sitting on a twig, but as soon it wanted to escape, the doors would automatically close. As was mentioned earlier, this work, which was interpreted as a critique of the political situation in Hungary, was a trigger for the closing of the Balatonbolár chapel exhibitions.

Štembera's disillusionment with the political situation was so overwhelming that the artist began to realise that his work exploring 'physical risk and personal commitment had somehow become less important' in comparison with 'the people around Charta 77, who risked far more and every day.'[745] His preoccupation with existentialist and phenomenological questions that he had explored through his earlier actions became less relevant and was replaced 'by a more clearly defined content' that was characteristic of his latest performances. However, even that move towards more conceptual investigation of the political reality that surrounded him did not bring fulfilment, as it became increasingly visible that 'all that has to be done in this field' of performance art - has already 'been done'.[746]

[743] Srp, *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, 1970-1980*, 70.
[744] Ibid., 47.
[745] Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akční uměni 70. let', 67.
[746] Štembera in: Neuburger and Saxenhuber, *Kurze Karrieren*, 103.

It was not only the political situation in his country and personal exhaustion with the medium of performance that made the artist reconsider his commitment to art. He was also dissatisfied with the art world in general, with the predominance of the art-market, as well as with the curatorial practices that he came across. While previously Štembera accepted numerous invitations to take part in exhibitions by sending his photographic materials through the post, during 1980 he wrote several letters to curators and gallerists vividly explaining his opinion about such shows. His critique of curating stated that all the organisers of such shows have to do is to think of a name of the exhibition, 'only a name of it, and very vague one – which can take up to five minutes' and then send invitations to 'hundreds of artist around the world' asking them for photos, postcards, letters, books to be sent to them – 'with no return'. In Štembera's view this was 'cultural imperialism and exploitation' which not only resulted in an 'absurd blend', but was an effective way of getting the artworks for free, as they remained in the ownership of the organisers. Giving them the advise that exhibition making is 'very hard mental work' as he knows from his years-long work in the Museum, he informed them about his decision to decline to take part, adding just in case in a P.S., that 'this letter isn't meant as part of your "show".'[747]

Many artists from his generation felt similarly at the beginning of the 1980s and changed their attitude to art. For example, Croatian artist Sanja Iveković did a series of drawings in 1981 entitled *Waiting for the Revolution (and Getting Old)*, which depict a girl waiting for a frog to turn into a prince, but the frog only changes colour, through which she distanced herself from the revolutionary seventies. In 1980 Mladen Stilinović did a series of paintings entitled *Submit to Public Debate*, consisting of empty phrases and political slogans inscribed not on revolutionary red, but on a pale pink background, pointing to the decay of both political ideology and the revolutionary spirit of the previous era. These artists had all been known for their performances in the 1970s, which corresponds with the statement of Marina Abramović, who said that when at the beginning of 1980s a lot of artists moved to painting and returned to their studios, she went to nature to work in deserts.[748] This cannot however be applied to Štembera who, together with his closest colleagues, simply stopped producing art for good.[749]

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[747] Two letters dated 2 April and 21 April 1980 are kept in Artpool archive in Budapest. No ref.
[748] Interview with Marina Abramović in Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionkunst in Europa* (Munich: Prestel, 1993), 142.
[749] Asked what he did after, Štembera replied that he kept working in the museum and started to teach Aikita karate. See, Hlavaček, 'Vzpomínka na akční uměni 70. let', 67.

In the decade of the 1970s in which he was active as an artist, Štembera contributed significantly to the field of performance art as well as to the discourse about artists' relationship to the natural environment, demonstrating the importance of the embodied experience of the natural world. In his daring actions and performances he broke the barriers alienating humans from other species in his direct, technology-free and non-hierarchical approach to animals, attunement to plants and awareness of natural elements and processes. An implicit consciousness of the environmental crisis that looms over the future survival of life was also expressed in his writings, and is an additional reason to consider his compelling oeuvre in the context of uncovering the connections of ecological awareness in Central European neo-avant-garde art.

Conclusion

Writing on the state of Czechoslovak art as a contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *Works and Words* held at De Appel in Amsterdam in 1979, which also included contemporary artists from Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, Czech curator Jaroslav Andel observed that 'the contemporary artist seems to be resident of a global art village with no borders', and asked 'how is it possible that in very different conditions the same artistic expressions can spring into existence?'.[750] He notes that although the art pieces of neo-avant-garde artists from socialist countries 'might look similar to the Western ones', they also 'may have different meanings in their original contexts' and possess 'a different status in the two systems.' For Andel the problem is 'not unconnected to the changes which took place during the 70's and from a distance of a decade he could distinguish 'a special shift' of the art in the 1970s compared to the 1960s, which had 'an optimistic flavour' and were characterised by 'a number of mutually different art movements, more or less associated with different art centres', while 'the characteristic aspect of the 70s seems to be a wide international stream of Conceptual and Action Art spanning the whole world', which, as Andel pointed out, had lost 'its optimistic undertones'.

While his perception of the more optimistic 60s in contrast to the 70s is clearly bound up with the seismic changes in the socio-political situation in Czechoslovakia after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the forceful 'normalization' of the 1970s, from the position of which Andel was writing, nevertheless his observations about the global character of conceptual art and its specificities related to the locations of its origin are still relevant questions of art history, while comparative studies of global art history of the period have only recently started to appear. Although inevitably inconclusive, a chronologically organised critical reader compiled by Will Bradley and Charles Esche on *Art and Social Change* could be a relevant contemporary point of reference here, not only because many of the ecology-related art practices considered within the scope of this dissertation could also be perceived as 'antecedents of contemporary activism', the uncovering of which was a motivation behind the publication, but also because of the expressed

[750] Jaroslav Andel, 'The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation,' in *Work and Words: International Art Manifestation*, Josine van Droffelaar, Piotr Olszanski, eds. (De Appel: Amsterdam, 1980), 69. Among the participants in the exhibition that took place in September 1979 were also Petr Štembera, Vladimir Gudac, Sándor Pinczehelyi and Károly Halász, considered in this dissertation.

understanding that since 1968 was 'a year of political turbulence on several continents', the selection of artists entries therefore had to reflect 'the wider geographic range'.[751] Even though the authors acknowledge the change of art geography in the wake of 1968, they explain that the publication follows the 'globalisation of modernism', which implies a 'conception of art' understood as the 'modern, Western one that has been disseminated around the planet as the social, economic and political conditions and institutions that support it have been replicated.'[752]

Precisely warning about this kind of danger of perceiving globalisation as the spread of Western domination worldwide was addressed by Piotr Piotrowski in the paper 'Alter-Globalist Art History Seen from East European Perspective', in which the author also raised questions about the relevance of post-colonial studies, instrumental in the establishment of global art history, for Eastern Europe.[753] According to Piotrowski, 'most of the scholars, whether they come from the Global South or from the West, not only from the US, but even from Western Europe are completely neglecting the inner European tensions', acting as if Europe was 'simply a homogenous continent'. This indicates a peculiar situation in which Eastern European art history operates in a tension between the inadvertent post-colonial reduction of the region to 'eurocentrism' on the one hand and exposure to 'westernisation of global art' on the other, while the author calls for a complex comparative and 'alter-global' approach to art history.

In that sense, a comparative analysis of neo-avant-garde art produced in several socialist states of Central Europe in the light of its diverse relations to the natural environment and existing ecological discourses of the 1970s, which this thesis proposes, is a contribution to the understanding of regional art history as well as global art studies of the period, while it also offers input to the emerging scholarly field of art and ecology.

Although it could be geographically expanded to include other countries of Central Europe, where relevant examples of Polish neo-avant-garde art as well as some practices of Romanian artists from the 1970s would form a constituent part,[754] the scope of this research has been geographically limited to only three former socialist states of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and

[751] Bradley and Esche, *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, 11.
[752] Ibid.
[753] Piotr Piotrowski, 'Alter-Globalist Art History Seen from East European Perspective,' paper delivered at the Ludwig Museum Budapest on 4 April 2012 as part of the series 'Theoretical and Critical Problems of the Margins Today' organised by Hedwig Turai. The publication is forthcoming, autumn 2012.
[754] See for example catalogue: Sturz, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe.*

Yugoslavia. Bearing in mind that the latter two were federations, the aim was to demonstrate the dynamic differences in the art scenes not only between different states, but also between individual republics within the states. This is especially relevant in light of post-communist developments of regional art histories, which often either approach the historic periods uniformly without differentiating between specific artistic climates, for example, those of Zagreb and Belgrade, or focus solely on national artistic developments to the extent that they ignore the intricate web of connections and influences that existed between art centres within the formerly existing states and across their borders.

Furthermore, the thesis deals with the specific historical period of the early 1970s in the light of the changes in cultural spheres brought by the social and political upheavals and disturbances of 1968, recognising the more systematic appearance of art practice in the natural environment as well as art's engagement with environmental problems, which corresponded with the moment when ecological crisis was for the first time perceived on a planetary scale. The identified period does not exhaust the artistic engagements with ecology under socialism and, for example, another impulse could be recognised in the late 80s, generated by the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and accelerated by the dawn of 1989, when art and activism merged with environmental demands. Equally relevant are contemporary art's takes on sustainability highlighting the issues related to the consequences of globalisation for the region, while research could also focus on the earlier period of state socialism and investigate, for instance, the status of environment in the art of socialist realism.

Despite the assumed uniformity of the socialist states of Eastern Europe, where totalitarian ideology gave 'a semblance of being completely homogenous and unified, with social divisions completely masked', which according to Slovenian theorist Aleš Erjavec, intentionally prevented 'the subject to achieve any critical distance from that ideology',[755] the special status of neo-avant-garde art, which functioned precariously in such totalitarian societies, demonstrates unexpected diversity in its approach to issues related to the natural environment. The Eastern European artists who around 1970 started to work directly in the natural environment developed distinctive attitudes to it, which ranged from research into the possibilities of art entering into dialogue with the environment to exploration of living in harmony with nature. Furthermore, the artists also addressed the problems of ecological crisis and attempted to raise environmental awareness

[755] Aleš Erjavec, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, 8.

among socialist citizens, included not only planetary but also cosmic dimensions in their conception of environment, or turned their attention towards the sensibility for other sentient beings of the planet. Such a variety of artistic approaches to the natural environment demands recognition, as the artists responded to the challenges in inventive ways and experimented with innovative art forms, which extended from interventions both in public space as well as in natural environments to conceptual projections and performative actions at a time when art and life became indivisibly interlinked. The unfavourable conditions in terms of exclusion from institutional channels of support in which these art projects were generally conducted were also turned into advantages for a paradoxical freedom of expression.

Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of such tensions could be seen in the practice of Petr Štembera, who on the one hand participated, although in many cases in absentia, in the most cutting edge events, exhibitions and publication projects abroad, while on the other he carried out his daring performances and endurance-testing body art pieces completely privately or for a small intimate circle of insiders. His successive line of performances which addressed the problem of belonging in relation to the natural environment were often realised with the participation of animals including a hamster, fish, ants and hen, whose equal and non-hierarchical treatment by the artist was in sharp contrast to communist authorities' instrumental approach to animals. Štembera's involvement did not end in joint performances, as the artist went a step further in identification by sleeping in tree branches or in dug out holes in the ground, while such expressions of unity with the natural environment culminated in grafting a shrub into his own arm. His actions conveyed his belief that the world has to be perceived with all the senses - not just the eyes, while at the same time this was not only a neutral exercise in phenomenology, as often portrayed in the literature, but rather evidence of heightened awareness of 'the indispensability of nature for human beings', at a time when a 'turn in thought' occurred among artists corresponding to similar anxieties felt by 'architects, town planners, ecologists, economists and others' about future survival.[756]

Rudolf Sikora approached the problem of natural environment from a diametrically opposed position, thinking in terms of space, as in geometry, geography and astronomy, rather than through a focus on bodily senses. While his early cartographic works were a result of the reminiscences of his travels around Europe, once the freedom of travel was restricted in

[756] Petr Štembera, 'Umění a příoda,' samizdat (June 1976).

normalization Czechoslovakia, the issues of borders and questions about identity started to appear, propelling the artist to comment on the discrepancies of an age in which space travel was opening up new horizons, while totalitarian regimes attempted to control individual movement. For Sikora, the predictions expressed by the provocative study *Limits to Growth* indicated the catastrophic state of human presence on the surface of Earth, exemplified in his sequential studies of human progress from Stonehenge to the explosion of the atomic bomb. At the same time, despite the efforts of the communist authorities to hide the scale of environmental pollution in the country and prohibit access to environmental literature, Sikora's critical engagement with environmental problems in his conceptual artworks challenged such attempts and pointed to the inevitably cosmopolitan character of ecology, unconstrained by borders of any kind.

For group TOK the concern for ecology crystallised from their analysis of the specific urban environment of the city of Zagreb, where they saw the environmental pollution caused by emissions from industrial plants and unprecedented number of personal cars, as well as the issue of waste interconnected with the social problems of use of public space and the relationship between citizens, which they addressed in about a dozen precisely conceived public art interventions. Through their theoretically informed projects they also polemically commented on the existing conventions of the local art world and critiqued non-engaged public art displayed in town, while their own practice could be viewed as reflecting the concurrent trendiness of ecological attitudes that could be picked up from numerous articles published in art journals and cultural magazines in Croatia at the time. In fact, whereas other socialist countries attempted to hide the signals for ecological alarm and to prevent ecological discourse entering the public sphere, in Croatia, which because of the nationalist demands of the Croatian Spring movement became the most politically unstable federative republic of Yugoslavia, ecology was not only tolerated, but could be perceived as serving as a practical substitute for more explicitly political discussions.

Despite dealing with ecological problems and questioning the relationship to the natural environment, Štembera, Sikora and Group TOK approached it from their urban perspective, working in public space and the green areas of capitals, and only occasionally venturing into the countryside for the realisation of a work. This was also in the beginning the case with OHO group who started with their outdoor projects in the open spaces of the city of Ljubljana. Soon however their practice moved to the countryside where they realised process-oriented works and body art

experiments, before their attention turned to investigation of cosmological, spiritual and esoterical dimensions, practice of Zen Buddhism and exercises of 'schooling' among the group members. Their counter-cultural orientation, amplified by some members' visit to Findhorn, a religious commune in Scotland, motivated them to experiment with communal living in their own rural commune to which they retreated, leaving behind all involvement with the institutions of the art world. Once the artists began to live off the land, their thinking about the environment also got more practical, which would turn out to be a long lasting preoccupation for the individual members of the group. Their previously rebellious life-styles and subversive artworks, in which they did not hesitate to challenge national preconceptions or conservative worldviews of 'self-managed socialism' in Yugoslavia, ended with voluntary withdrawal from the public eye.

Pécs Workshop's short excursions into the countryside were motivated by a desire to escape from the control to which they were subjected in the small town of Pécs where they lived and worked. Their interpolations of abstract elements into the natural environment were experiments with the possibilities of art exiting the traditional formats of painting and sculpture, however their land art projects never crossed the line of the division between art and life, as seen in the previous cases – that would occur in some individual member's subsequent conceptually informed projects. Nevertheless, the artists consecutively chose sites for their experiments which had been altered by the exploitation of natural resources such as wood, sand and stone, placing paper rolls in a sand mine and arranging paper sheets in stone quarries and freshly de-forested areas at a time when ecological discourse was practically non-existent in Hungary. Although somewhat isolated from the main currents of Hungarian neo-avant-garde at the beginning of 1970s, Pécs Workshop realised a systematic series of land art pieces, which were not only exceptional within national art history, but are also special documents of the time of the region in general.

To uncover the intricate relationship of neo-avant-garde art to the natural environment under socialism, my research often encountered a void in art-historical sources, as not only art, but equally art history was often divided between the version written for official state institutions and the unofficial stream, which dealt with the art that also existed outside bureaucratic state structures. Furthermore, navigating Eastern European art history under socialism and after 1989 regularly entailed reading 'between the lines', resorting to interviews when necessary and having an awareness of existing praxis of encoding and decoding of art-historical facts that was an

everyday reality for the participants of the socialist art spheres.[757] The situation differed from one country to another depending on the cultural policies which existed in each of them and which as a consequence might have resulted in a somewhat distorted image of art created at the time.

For instance, in Yugoslavia the soft self-censorship of Yugoslav art historians who narrated official art history, which was inclusive of the new artistic practice, embraced the institutional critique directed towards art institutions but avoided art that more directly questioned political and social structures, as was shown in the case of Group TOK, which might have resulted in an image of new artistic practice that is 'not particularly interested in this [political] issue'.[758] In contrast to the Yugoslav scene, Hungarian art history was more sharply divided between the official line and the view expressed in samizdat publications. As a result, neo-avant-garde artists were excluded from the official neutralising narratives, and their practice could later be recognised as presenting a 'rather unique instance of the politically engaged neo-avant-garde art'.[759]

Researching the practice of Petr Štembera is also suggestive of how Czechoslovak art history functioned at the time, as can be sensed in Chalupecký's account from the late 1980s of Štembera's short 'Czech bibliography' that could be reduced to four entries and - 'that's all'.[760] What the author did not express, but was implied in the reference to the national paradigm, is the fact that most of the sources from the 1970s, the time that Štembera was actively involved in the art world, came from the international art press, including regular articles in the magazine *Flash Art*. The importance of *Flash Art* in promoting Czechoslovak artists, at a time when it was not possible to write about them at home, is indicated in the fact that in a 'chronological survey of political and cultural events in Czechoslovakia 1970-1989' there is also an entry about the marriage of Gianfranco Polity, the publisher of *Flash Art* to Czech art historian Helena Kontová in

[757] The challenges in writing Eastern European art history was a topics of several conference papers co-written with Reuben Fowkes, including: 'The Challenge of Post-National in Eastern European Art History' delivered at the conference *Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe after 1989* organised by Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, held at Moravian Gallery, Brno, November 2010; the paper entitled 'The Post-National in East European art: From Socialist Internationalism to Transnational Communities' delivered at the conference *The History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* held at The Centre for Contemporary Art, Torun, Poland, September 2010. Publication of the latter is forthcoming in 2012.
[758] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 313.
[759] Ibid., 278.
[760] Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění*, 134.

1974.[761] The situation could be described as the reverse in the post-communist decades, where apart from several interviews with Štembera published in English, the catalogues and texts on the artist were written in Czech alone, which could be recognised as a dominant tendency across the ex-socialist states to recuperate national art history.

While Rudolf Sikora's major catalogue *Against Myself* from 2006 was published bilingually in Slovak and English, the trend in Slovak art history, engaged in the meticulous 'writing up' of history of art from the socialist period, as seen in the catalogues of the survey exhibitions organised by decade of the 60s, 70s and 80s, has been to publish only in Slovak.[762] A similar inclination is also visible in Hungary where major publications on the art from the socialist period, such as the monograph on neo-avant-garde art in Balatonboglár, were published just in Hungarian, as were all the sources on Pécs Workshop. In the case of Yugoslavia, already in the late 70s and early 80s when major survey exhibitions reviewed the neo-avant-garde art, the accompanying publications were in parallel published in English, which is a general practice also in artists catalogues. While research into the neo-avant-garde art of Central Europe requires the reading of local languages, as this thesis demonstrates, the contribution to the availability of information in English, 'a contemporary lingua franca' as Piotrowski observed, is clearly necessary in order for 'comparative Eastern European art history to be written'.[763] What Croatian conceptual artist Mladen Stilinović provocatively expressed in 1992 with his work 'An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is no Artist', seems to still be a vital issue for national art histories of the region, apparently reluctant to reveal their findings internationally.[764]

The differences in artistic status between the artists considered in the scope of this research are also reflected in the number of published sources about them. For comparison, while OHO group enjoyed the sympathy of the art history of the time, resulting in numerous references, the more explicitly socially engaged practice of group TOK was not a popular subject for socialist art critics, and as a result the artists were asked to write about their practice themselves. This has not changed since and it was Vladimir Gudac, the only survivor from the core members of the group,

[761] See: *No Cage for me: Czech and Slovak Art 1970-1989 from Collection of Olomouc Museum of Art*, ed. Stěpánka Bieleszová (Olomouc: Museum of Art, 2008), 237.
[762] See for example *Slovenské vizuálne umenie 1970-1985,* ed. Aurel Hrabušický (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2002).
[763] Piotrowski, 'Alter-Globalist Art History Seen from East European Perspective'.
[764] See: *Mladen Stilinović: Sing*, ed. Branka Stipančić (Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011), 153.

who recently wrote a short text about the activity of TOK.[765] A somewhat similar case is perceivable in the post-communist historiography of the group OHO, as the accounts were often based on Marko Pogačnik's narrative of the group's activities, as he stayed in Slovenia, while Miljenko Matanović and David Nez, both living in the United States, were rarely approached, only recently giving interviews about the OHO years, as a consequence of the first re-union of the group since the 1970s that took place in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 2010.[766] Despite the uneven statuses of the artists and artist groups in national and global perspectives, which are also determined by the mechanisms of socialist and post-socialist art histories, arguably all of the artists dealt with in this dissertation deserve detailed and critical attention.

Apart from relying on published sources, important access to the art practice of neo-avant-garde artists is provided by photographic documentation of their projects, as well as artists' writing from the time the art pieces were produced. Remarkably, all the artists covered in this research have used texts, either as guidelines to the photographic documentation or as part of their conceptual art practice. While the public art of the group TOK was preceded by written proposals of the projects, published in the catalogue of an art festival, in addition to which they also wrote articles in cultural magazines elucidating their point of view, the photographic documentation of their actions and interventions was carried out by a professional photographer. Petr Štembera, who used concise textual descriptions of his acts in relation to photographic documentation of his performances, explained in an interview in 1978 that 'photography is, like text, the document of what I did', distinguishing in that way his practice from his colleague Karel Miler, for whom photography was employed to capture the visual form of an idea.[767] Štembera was also the author of numerous articles published abroad and essays delivered at home, while he also gave numerous interviews in which he explained his art practice. The land art actions of the Pécs Workshop were recorded on photographs and films, where detailed and sequential documentation was also part of the outcome of their experiments in the natural environment, which also included precise textual information about date, time, participants and set tasks for the actions. In the conceptual practice of Rudolf Sikora and the OHO Group texts appear as constitutive parts of the works,

[765] Gudac, 'The TOK Group during 1972/73'.
[766] Interviews were conducted by Beti Žerovac and published on www.artmargins.com. 'OHO after OHO: One Day Retrospective' was held at Museum of Contemporary art in Zagreb on 4 September 2010. See: www.avantgarde-museum.com.
[767] Petr Štembera in: 'ČSSR fotografija', 9.

sometimes reduced to signs or incorporated in graphs, while in other instances the works consisted entirely of text.

The artists did not only use texts in relation to photographic documentation of their projects, or as a customary part of their conceptual practice, but also wrote articles in subsequent periods in which they outlined the history of their activities, published monographs with preserved documentation and archived their own works, as has been already shown in the cases of the considered artists. The widespread practice of self-historicisation is not only characteristic of the artists which are part of this research, but could be seen as typical among Eastern European artists, the reasons for which are already implied in the complex circumstances in which art history functioned as a discipline under socialism, and also expressed in the view of Slovenian curator Zdenka Badovinac, according to whom 'the local institutions that should have been systematizing neo-avant-garde art and its tradition either did not exist, or were disdainful of such art, [as a result] the artists themselves were forced to be their own art historians and archivists'.[768] There are several more issues which come to the fore when considering the selected artists and artists' groups, which are not necessarily related to the subject of ecology, but rather belong to the more general aspects of neo-avant-garde artistic practice under socialism, such as the question of collectivity, the phenomenon of 'short careers' and the more recent positioning towards the art market.

The question of whether the artists were working in groups or individually and what could be the possible reasons for such self-organising appears even at a glance over the titles of separate chapters of this research. Although 'collective creativity' according to WHW, a Croatian curatorial collective who explored the theme in the form of an exhibition of the same name in 2005, 'is not restricted geographically' nevertheless, as they state, it 'is especially interesting' from the perspective of the "New Europe".[769] Their description of the 'emancipatory aspects of collective work where collaborative creativity is not only a form of resisting the dominant art system and capitalist call for specialisation, but also a productive and performative criticism of social institutions and politics', although written from a post-socialist perspective, still indicates how strong the critical legacy of East European artistic tradition of collective work was.

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[768] Zdenka Badovinac, *Interrupted Histories*, exh.cat (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), n.p. See also: Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, 'Innovative Forms of Archives, Part Two: IRWIN's East Art Map and Tamás St. Auby's Portable Intelligence Increase Museum,' in *e-flux Journal* 16, 2010.
[769] WHW (What, How & for Whom), 'New Outlines of the Possible,' in *Collective Creativity*, 14 -15.

What is more, collectivity was considered as one of the seven 'sins – or virtues' of Eastern European art in another show from 2005 entitled *Seven Sins: Ljubljana – Moscow,* which challenged the stereotypes of the art created in the region, as according to the curators, the 'idea of collectivism is connected in essential ways to the communist system and its heritage'.[770] The sin of collectivism, ensuring its place next to faults such as utopianism and unprofessionalism, was related to common property and the structure of society under socialism and was also reflected in the formation of art groups in Eastern Europe, although, as the curators explain 'in socialist states the idea of collectivism was not necessarily homogenous'. In their depiction of collectivity, Badovinac, Misiano and Zabel observed that 'the parallel collective experience in many instances represented a mode of social resistance that may be seen as a counterpart to the political activism of Western civil society', while the isolation of the region 'only served to intensify collective creativity.'[771]

When considering the issue of collectivity in regard to the artists considered within the scope of this research, no simple generalisations based on the fact that some artists worked in groups, while others pursued individual practice, are possible. Namely, while the character of the collectives as groups varied according to the nature of their organisation, often keeping the authorship of works separate, individual artists regularly collaborated with other artists or produced works collectively, which clearly points to the described 'plurality of collectivism' under socialism. Furthermore, while in Hungary the Pécs Workshop was practically the only artist group at the time, in Yugoslavia the forming of artists groups was so common that according to Piotrowski, Yugoslav neo-avant-garde artists 'tended to form collectives'.[772] Nevertheless, the reason for forming their collective, Pécs Workshop put down to the neutralisation 'of conservative pressure' from outside as well as the social aspect of 'working, reasoning and discussing together',[773] which are quite typical for the formation of artist groups across Central Europe and correspond to the observations of Jadranka Vinterhalter that the main motivation for establishing artists groups after 1968 in Yugoslavia was that it 'offered a feeling of togetherness and moral power', rather than concrete program or manifesto.[774] The exception from this is the activity of

[770] Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano and Igor Zabel, *Seven Sins: Ljubljana – Moscow* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2005), 8.
[771] Ibid., 9.
[772] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 304.
[773] Ferenc Lantos, 'Some Reflections on the Creation of the Pécs Workshop,' in *Pécs Workshop 1970-1980*, 2.
[774] Vinterhalter, 'Umetničke grupe – razlozi okupljanja i oblici rada', 14.

TOK, who came together as a group precisely because of the common cause, as they wanted to realise a series of public art projects. The character of OHO Group, which Vinterhalter takes as the forerunner of numerous groups in Yugoslav new artistic practice, changed over the course of its existence from a loose collective in the 60s to the exploration of group-being through the process of schooling towards the end of the decade, which turned in 1971 into an experiment in communal living, which took the equivalence of art and life to the extreme.

The situation in Czechoslovakia differed both from Hungary and from Yugoslavia insomuch as the formation of artistic groups was encouraged by the official state institutions with the aim of promoting the socialist realist art agenda in the consolidation period of the 1970s, while neo-avant-garde artists often organised collective actions mostly in the countryside, but tended not to form fixed collectives. In the early 1970s Rudolf Sikora organised and participated in many collective events and collaborated on numerous projects with his fellow artists including Julius Koller and Stano Filko, but their cooperation did not lead to the formation of a group. Somewhat different was the situation of Petr Štembera, whose practice is often viewed in connection to that of Karel Miler and Jan Mlčoch to the extent that in some cases they were referred to as the 'Prague Trio'. However, collaborations between the three friends were focused on organisational aspects of art praxis, rather than the production of common works.

Collective creativity of the neo-avant-garde under socialism, whether judging from specific artistic accounts or from curatorial research into the issue, has been also linked to providing a sense of resistance to the dominant system. By working, discussing and socialising together the artists created liberated zones in which it was possible to overcome or at least neutralise the limitations imposed by totalitarian society. Such spaces could be compared to Felix Guattari's concept of 'existential Territories' that are connected to all three registers of ecology, understood as environmental, social and mental domains. According to Guattari, in capitalist societies, in which he also included 'truly socialist countries' it is not only 'species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases and gestures of human solidarity' and it is therefore necessary to obtain 'a bare minimum of existential Territories' which are constituted by 'spontaneous social ecology' and are concerned with 'intimate modes of being'.[775] In that sense, neo-avant-garde artistic communities across the states of real existing socialism created a heterogeneous cartography of such existential territories precisely by employing modalities of 'group-being' and very often found

[775] Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 44 and 64.

locations in the natural environment or countryside as most suitable for their gatherings, as can be illustrated by the Hungarian example of Balatonboglár meetings.

The existence of artist groups is affected by various factors, which also contain, in the words of Želimir Koščević - 'the deadly virus of group activities' when collective work stops and the 'groups get transformed, dispersed or completely disengaged and dissolved'.[776] Such transformations of collective working occurred in the activity of Pécs Workshop which after several years of intensive socialising and working together became a looser collective in which the artists pursued solo careers, but came together for exhibitions or collective publishing endeavours, which is a practice that has lasted till today. On the other hand, Group TOK existed for only a short period of time, disintegrating once the artists encountered obstacles to their envisaged projects, and the artists continued to work separately. However, for several artists discussed here these ruptures were more dramatic, and actually involved giving up participation in the art world or making the decision to close the chapter of art altogether.

For Petr Štembera the decision to give up art practice in 1980 for good came from his disillusionment with performance art in the light of the political situation is Czechoslovakia, where the political dissidents and signatories of Charter 77 'risked far more and every day' and was aided by his frustration with the mechanisms of his participation in the international art world. Interestingly, this was also a collective action as all three friends – Štembera, Miler and Mlčoch - came to a decision to abandon art practice at the same time. For OHO Group the impulse to withdraw from the art world came sooner, only after a couple of years of intensive activity of the group when they decided in spring of 1971 to found a rural commune and to live and work there. Although there is a post-history of the OHO group members who after the transformation of the group continued in various ways with their art practice, the group was included, together with the Czech artists, in the group exhibition entitled *Short Careers* which was held in Vienna in 2004.[777] The artists presented in the show were according to the curators 'all committed to the performative and conceptual attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s', while the reasons for their final acts were vaguely put down to 'convergences of political and social considerations' and 'private and public spheres'.[778] Although many questions remained unanswered regarding the phenomenon of giving up art practice, what is apparent from this show is that this is not

[776] Koščević, 'Umjetničke grupe u poslijeratnoj umjetnosti u Hrvatskoj', 80.
[777] See: Neuburger and Saxenhuber, *Kurze Karrieren*.
[778] Ibid., 12.

something specific to artists involved in the problematic of art and ecology, but rather something observable across the wide spectrum of artistic engagements, and in this case in relation to the international neo-avant-garde.

Eastern European neo-avant-garde art was practiced in market-free conditions. In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *Possibilities '71* that took place in the public spaces of Zagreb and in which the young generation of artists who become known as the representatives of the new artistic practice participated, the curator stressed the social role of art, since the artworks created were 'not made for sale, they have no character of goods, they are the common property of all citizens and the socialist society.'[779] The attitude not to perceive art as a commodity was shared by many Eastern European conceptual artists, while around the fall of communism worries about the future surfaced: 'What will it be like, will it be guided by the spirit of solidarity and cooperation?', while at the same time hope was expressed that the commercialisation of the art scene could be resisted, as in Eastern Europe 'such achievements of Western civilisation were not needed.'[780] As it turned out the changes brought by the collapse of communism and adoption of liberal capitalism in Eastern Europe were not reflected immediately in the sphere of neo-avant-garde art, and even in 2008 Boris Groys, in his book *Art Power* conceived as an overview of the current state of art, boldly asserted that the 'notion of art became almost synonymous with the notion of the art market, so that the art produced under the non-market conditions was de facto excluded from the field of institutionally recognised art' and claimed that official and unofficial art of former socialist states 'remains almost completely out of focus for contemporary art history and museum system.'[781]

The situation has significantly changed since, as for example Tate Gallery recently adjusted its policy of collecting, which was 'traditionally focused on art from Western Europe and North America' to expand 'its holdings of modern and contemporary artworks from Latin America, South-East Asia and Eastern Europe'.[782] Also, in 2009 Museum of Modern Art in New York started its global research program 'Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP)' which focuses on Fluxus from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Japan. The leading art institutions are following

[779] Matičević, *Mogućnosti '71*.
[780] Speech of Rudolf Sikora at 1990 exhibition *40 Czech and Slovak artists* in MAK Vienna, in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, 287.
[781] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008), 5.
[782] See: *www.tate.org.uk/about/our.../collection/about-the-collection, last accessed 5 May 2012.*

in the footsteps of, for example, Art Collection of Erste Bank, which 'explores art production in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe' with a specific focus on 'conceptual tendencies and key artistic movements of the 1960s and 70s',[783] as well as private collections among which Croatian based Sudac Collection is especially relevant, as it contains in some cases a substantial number of artworks and archival material of OHO Group, Pécs Workshop, TOK Group and Rudolf Sikora.[784] Piotr Piotrowski in his recent essay considered Eastern European conceptual art to be an example par excellence of 'alter-global art history' based on the fact that the artists questioned the dominant art system and political structures. The changed circumstances in which these works are perceived today, the fact that they are sought after by major art collections, their regular presence in international exhibitions, which is reflected also in the research interests of contemporary art history, arguably shows that the visibility of the neo-avant-garde art produced under socialism today is as much a factor of globalisation as of its perceived alter-global potential.

Neo-avant-garde art created in the aftermath of 1968 reflected the social and the political atmosphere, adopted subversive practices and made its own daring contribution to those challenging times, which is more clearly noticeable from the changed mood of the end of the 1970s, when the potency of the moment gradually faded away and artists' practices adapted at different rates to the new circumstances. Sándor Pinczehelyi, who in the early 70s questioned the personal consequences of communist ideology by famously imposing a hammer and sickle onto his self portrait, in 1980 made a series of photographs entitled *Makó Sketches* after a small town in Hungary on the River Maros (fig. 136). In those photographs the prime socialist icon of the five pointed star found itself next to a can of Coca-Cola, the supreme symbol of Western desire, both fished out in a net, as if they were rubbish collected from the river, so as not to pollute the environment. This was a clear message of disillusionment with existing ideologies, expressing a distance from previous more sincere engagements with political reality. In the 1980s Hungary's economic situation improved and the regime 'was interested in cultivating the country's liberal image' by promoting neo-expressionist artists, who mostly evolved from the earlier neo-avant-garde, by organising major exhibitions abroad to 'provide evidence of cultural modernisation…unthinkable just a few years earlier.'[785]

[783] http://www.kontakt-collection.net/concept, *last accessed 5 May 2012.*
[784] The collection is also available on www.avantgarde-museum.com *last accessed, 5 May 2012.*
[785] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 405.

In Czechoslovakia after the publishing of Charter 77 the dissident role-models posed a challenge for radical artists to follow, prompting Petr Štembera and his colleagues to completely give up art practice in 1980, while the slowly encroaching ideas of postmodernism created a tension between alternative culture which 'had preserved the notion of art as eschatological project' and the theories of postmodernism that 'were perceived as provoking a disintegration of values'.[786] In Slovakia, the last decade of socialism saw a slow elimination of the separation between official and unofficial art, however the more socially and politically aware actions of the neo-avant-garde gradually gave way to events that were 'focusing more on artistic aims that were free of consciously aspiring to intervene in public life', while the exhibitions tended to focus on specific artistic mediums, so that 'ideological concerns could be pushed into the background'.[787]

A similar atmosphere was also palpable in other countries of Central Europe. In Croatia the socially-engaged projects of TOK group were met with reserve, the festival in the public spaces of the city did not take place the following year, while around the middle of the 1970s the next stronger artistic impulse in Zagreb came from the Group of Six Authors, who declared their views with a large banner displayed on the streets of Zagreb reading 'This is not My World', clearly distancing themselves from the previous utopian visions of changing the whole society (fig. 136).[788] 1980, the year that Tito died, 'marks a symbolic divide between a period of relative political, ethnic, and social stability and the beginning of the end of the Yugoslav state' wrote Aleš Erjavec observing how in art a 'turn to the pictorial took hold'.[789] In Slovenia after 1980 an exceptional form of 'post-avant-garde' emerged with the rock group Laibach, the artistic group Irwin and the movement called Neue Slovenische Kunst, which 'came into existence in the depressive atmosphere of the end of industrial age', using early and later avant-gardes 'as a quarry for materials to be recycled in a postmodern setting'.[790]

Following the changes in the art scenes which evolved over the decade, artistic engagements with the questions related to the environment also become rarer, although the impetus from the environmental side did not quiet down, as the information about the state of the environment kept coming. In Czechoslovakia it was in 1983 that the carefully protected data about ecological

[786] Jana and Jiří Ševčík, 'Mapping Czech Art,' in *East Art Map*, 186.
[787] Beata Jablonská, ed., *Osemdesiate: Postmoderna v Slovenskom výtvarnom umení 1985-1992* [Eighties. Postmodernism in Slovak visual arts 1985 -1992] (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2009), 278.
[788] See: Stipančić, 'This is not My World', 96.
[789] Erjavec, 'The Three Avant-gardes and Their Context: The Early, the Neo, and the Postmodern', 56.
[790] Ibid., 60.

pollution leaked and was published at home and internationally, while in Hungary concerns over the building of a dam on the Danube between Slovakia and Hungary and its possibly disastrous effect on the environment mobilised the public in 1984 to protest and found the *Danube Circle* which 'explicitly attacked state socialism, pointing out the dysfunctioning of the system' and demanded the state authorities make the information publicly available.[791] However, one catastrophic accident that happened in the USSR altered the region's biosphere and changed Eastern European environmental history for good.

On April 26 1986 one of the four reactors at the Chernobyl nuclear power station exploded and large amounts of radioactive contamination were released into the atmosphere spreading across the whole continent, which was first reported from the Swedish monitoring stations, while Soviet authorities attempted to keep quiet about the accident. What happened in Chernobyl 'seriously undermined the supposed superiority of Soviet science and technology, providing a powerful example of the drawbacks of the giganticism associated with Soviet ambitions' and represented a 'major blow to the legitimacy of scientific socialism.'[792] In the light of the catastrophe and once again perceived imminence of the ecological imperative for survival on Earth, Guattari noted 'Chernobyl and AIDS have dramatically revealed to us the limits of humanity's techno-scientific power and the "backlash" that "nature" has in store for us.'[793]

The accident of Chernobyl impacted the environmental movements across the region which now demanded freedom of information and the active tackling of environmental pollution and also turned it into a political goal that would help bring down the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. The ruptures in social tissues and political structures around 1989 brought a new set of circumstances and invigorated contemporary art to respond once again in activist and engaged way to the new realities, while many artists considered here also took an active part in the events. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Eastern Europe saw the disintegration of its geo-political divisions and a rise of a whole new spectrum of identitarian questions, some also touched upon here.

This dissertation on Central European neo-avant-garde art's response to the emerging ecological consciousness has drawn attention to the environmental aspects of those artists' practices which

[791] György Enyedi and Viktória Szirmai, 'Environmental Movements and Civil Society in Hungary,' in *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe*, 151.
[792] Tickle and Welsh, *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe,* 12
[793] Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 42.

are evidently present, but have not been adequately highlighted before, while it has also discussed artists whose practice was preoccupied with the topic, but was generally overlooked in the subsequent studies of neo-avant-garde art. Furthermore, while in some countries of Central Europe where there was a stronger intensity of artists working in or with the natural environment, this study has concentrated on the cases where the artists demonstrated a more thorough involvement with ecology, while in the countries where such engagements were rare, it looked at artists who most consistently worked in relation to the natural environment. Clearly, these diverse engagements with the natural environment informed at various degrees by the emerging discipline of ecology constitute a part of much wider and more multifaceted manifestations of Central European neo-avant-garde artists' approach to the environment; nevertheless the artists considered here convey the remarkable complexity of such art practice that precariously existed under the socialist system.

Whether they found their expression in performance, public art, land art or conceptual projects, their works bore the characteristics of the concurrent tendency to de-materialise the art object, and therefore left no material or physical remains of their activities in the natural environment, but ensured their presence in art history through photographic documentation and archival materials. Working from specific positions and with different affinities, their approaches to the problematic of environment varied significantly, yet they all articulated a cosmopolitan voice which commented on the nationalist trespassing of nature, the communist denial of the environmental crisis and spoke about an burgeoning ecological imperative that spanned the globe and could not be confined within any imposed borders.

Their practice evolved in a specific historic moment, in the aftermath of the ruptures brought by the unrest of 1968, when the political uprisings, social movements and the spread of hippie culture that attempted to undermine the established order of the world affected the whole planet, for the first time conceived as a 'global village'. The attitudes and approaches to environment of the young generation of Central European artists were on the one hand synchronous with other artistic impulses from around the globe which voiced unprecedented awareness of the looming ecological crisis, while on the other the specific circumstances in which the many filters of the Iron Curtain acutely influenced the flow of information and exchange resulted in exceptional contributions to the convergence of art and ecology.

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