

# Untitled<sup>42</sup>



Benoît Maire — Matthew Darbyshire — Babak Ghazi — tranzit —  
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Jülius Koller, UFO, Nautische, 1970

# tranzit: an institution without institution

BY TOBI MAIER

The tranzit network programme was conceived in 2001, when curators Mária Hlavajová and Kathrin Rhomberg were undertaking research for Manifesta 3 and Rhomberg mounted the exhibition 'Ausgeträumt'<sup>1</sup> at the Vienna Secession (2001/2002). A reaction to the brain drain from the region after the fall of the Berlin wall, the NGO has since implemented itself first in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and later in Hungary with a more 'representational unit' in Austria. Furthermore, the initiative stems from a motivation to act upon the difficulty of communication between the former Eastern bloc states, the desire to create a platform where things can happen, where ideas can be accommodated and people invited to introduce familiar local contexts to a wider audience. Funded by savings bank *Erste*, which under the *Kontakt* tag is also developing a collection of Conceptual Art from similar geographical boundaries, tranzit's aim is to 'overcome the isolation of contemporary art from former Eastern European countries'<sup>2</sup> and as Jiří Ševčík (the curator and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague) put it, to move away from "demands for compensation, emancipation and a new cartography"<sup>3</sup>. When the network was founded at the beginning of the millennium, the entire art world seemed to be struggling with the notion of national representations, and elsewhere others organised a critically received series of Balkan focussed exhibitions<sup>4</sup> making exactly these demands.

The objectives tackled by the tranzit network through publishing projects with local artists, co-productions of new work and the establishment of discursive initiatives such as the 'Free School for Art Theory and Practice' in Budapest or collaborations with gallery spaces such as *display* in Prague are on the one hand aimed at researching historical, and often marginalised, positions in depth whilst on the other aimed at educating and supporting emerging artists and curators. Because tranzit is not so much a collective of artists but a curatorial and art historians network, the programme can be viewed as a matrix providing sustainable support for artists without relying on state sponsorship. To a certain extent tranzit is therefore building on the legacy of art as social practice, developed from the avant-garde movements in the former so called socialist countries and the desire to promote the diversity of Eastern European artists in an envisaged revision of commonly accepted art historical discourse.

In writing on the work of Slovak artist Július Koller, writer and curator Vit Havranek remarked, "In the political system, full of invalid rules, the discovery of a world, in which rules are valid is an enjoyable discovery."<sup>5</sup> These ephemeral situations, where chance often plays a decisive role, can be observed in much of Koller's practice, which has emerged during the cold war period and whose trajectories are being documented through tranzit's work in recent years. Similar to Guy Debord's idea of *dérive* where "usual motives

x x x

3. září 1977  
Praha, Václavské náměstí

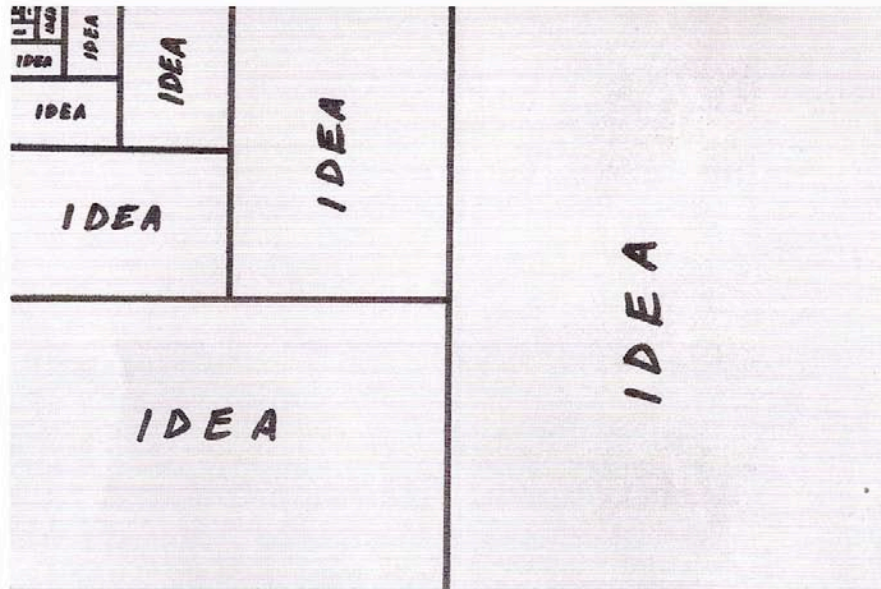
Na eskalátoru... otočen hledím do očí člověku,  
který stojí za mnou...



"KONTAKT"  
3. září 1977  
Praha, Spálená a Vodičkova ulice



Jiri Kovanda, *Kontakt*, Prague 1977

Julius Koller, *Idea*, 1975

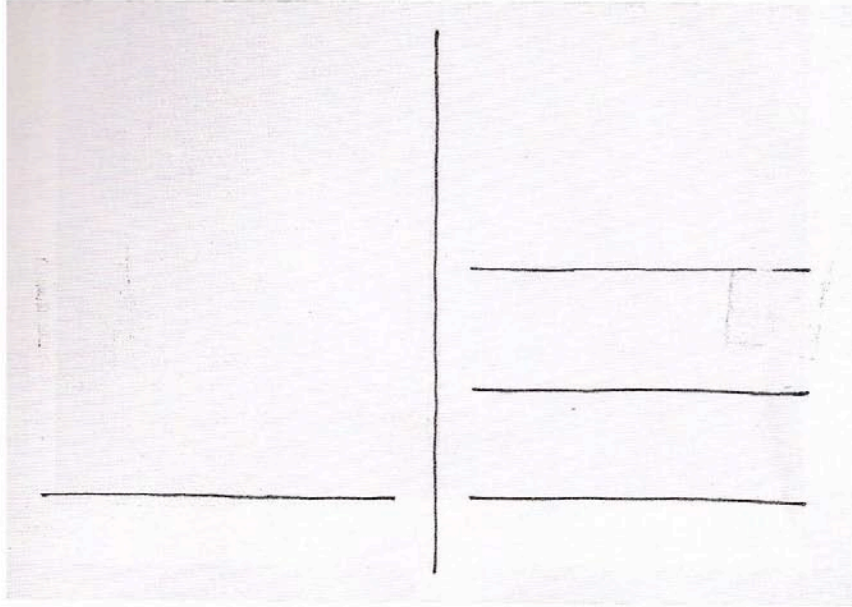
for movement and action” are dropped and “let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find”<sup>6</sup>, Situationist attitudes can be located in many works of Koller and his Czech ‘counterpart’ Jiri Kovanda.

Koller appropriates everyday activities, such as table tennis, and proposes a more effective communication between individuals and society. In 1970, referring to the UFO – a frequently occurring fascination at that time – Koller invented the ‘Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations’ and created in yearly intervals, flying cultural situations, cultic cultural situations, objective cultural situations and so on, ‘Anti-Happenings’ that demonstrate conceptual acts or objects. Also a founder of *Group 42*, a proto-Situationist collective founded in Prague during World War II, Koller’s work took to using formalistic trademarks such as question marks, Ping-Pong balls, or wave lines.

Czech artist Jiri Kovanda’s *Theater* (1976) shows the artist standing in front of the Prague theatre performing gestures and movements with passer-bys not suspecting that they are watching a performance. Similar to Koller, Kovanda used to perform in everyday settings, thus evoking a Situationist approach to his work. Originating from a lack of studio and exhibition space and commenting on the crisis of authorship and the absence of authorial intention, Kovanda, in the 1970s, moved towards the heavily

supervised and controlled public domain without attracting much attention. Avoiding large gestures the artist rejects communication, yet creates an apparent directness under the romantic layers, something that perhaps becomes most apparent when rubbing his body against the gallery walls<sup>7</sup> or turning around on an escalator to establish eye contact with the person behind him<sup>8</sup>. Part of a formerly unofficial art scene, Kovanda’s actions, which bear a certain similarity to Vito Acconci’s ‘following pieces’, are made accessible for a wider public only through documentation, if he cares to take a picture.

While Koller and Kovanda have reached significant international visibility, the collective political if not dissident efforts of artistic practice pre-1989 becomes more apparent, however, in the work of two other artists, Tamas St. Auby and Rasa Todosijevic. St. Auby comes from a part of the Hungarian scene, which remains obscure and unprocessed. The artist researched and collected the works and documents of the Hungarian unofficial art scene of the 1960s, in order to present them in a specially designed transportable multimedia study environment. On first sight the work is reminiscent of a monument by Thomas Hirschhorn. The artist has put a lot of work into documenting this history of Hungarian (Conceptual/Actionist and Pop) art, which continues to be disregarded as directors from the socialist era still reign at



Július Koller, *No more art.*

institutions such as the Ludwig Museum (Budapest).<sup>9</sup> The question arises, what can be done from a Western perspective about this incomprehensible omission? Is the presentation and reception in a Western art context a good enough tool for pressurising local authorities? In other words, when St. Auby's *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum – Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Actionism in Hungary during the 1960s (1956 – 1976)* is presented at the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Berlin this autumn, how does this affect the reception of the works at home, if at all?

Rasa Todosijevic was born in 1945 (one year after St. Auby) in Belgrade. As a painter, sculptor and performance artist he was one of the initiators of the Student Cultural Center (SKC) and new art in Belgrade's early 1970s (together with Marina Abramovic among others) and has since written many essays on the theory of art. A little known piece of his is the text work *Who Makes Profit on Art?* (1975)<sup>10</sup>, which presents a long list of all those who are profiting from art making. Todosijevic had an impressive vision when drafting this statement, that increases in relevance once reviewed and put in the context of the emergence of an omnipotent art market and collateral withdrawal of state responsibility in the public sector, where public art spaces are forced into ambivalent relationships with private donors and sponsors and initiatives like tranzit are only made possible through their cultivation.

As Jelena Stojanovic writes when referring to the Situationists, "the *internationaleries* strongly believed [...] that the very existence of collectivism profoundly challenged any form of specialization, spatialisation or demarcation"<sup>11</sup>. tranzit is a collective of sorts, operating in the mode of post cold war functionalism, which aims at breaking geographical marginalisation through enhanced operation outside of borders, with the view to establish other network participants in the region. Thus one of the annual tranzit meetings took place recently in Bucharest, where, as curator and critic Marius Babias put it in an article for the German newspaper *tageszeitung*, "culture is the mop and bucket brigade of the economic transition period in Romanian society"<sup>12</sup>. With the main art institution (MNAC), in Bucharest, operating in such a powerful position but creating 'entertainment' rather than a frame for dialogue and laboratory for local production, the establishment of tranzit in other transitory countries should be welcomed. The question emerges: how transitory is tranzit? Are the 'targets achieved' once the market has followed and the artists have found a representational force in a commercial gallery and to what extent is tranzit part of the bucket brigade, in this economic transition period, when thinking about its enlargement parallel to the *Erste* bank's own expansion?

An attempt at trans-localisation and also re-contextualisation started in December 2006 when the Frankfurter Kunstverein



Installation views, *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum - Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Actionism in Hungary during the 1960s* (1956-1976) MAMCO Geneva, 2005.

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1976



JULIUS KOLLER

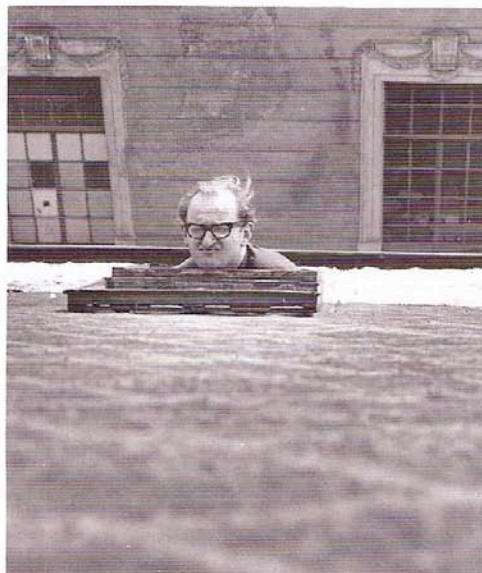
UNIVERZÁLNÝ FANTASTICKÝ OTÁZNIK



Július Koller, *UFO, Objekt-Selbstpor*, 1970

collaborated with the tranzit network programme within the context of its platform 'Speaking of Others'. The project titled *Auditorium, Stage, Backstage – An Exposure in 32 Acts*, was the brainchild of four tranzit project leaders Georg Schöllhammer (Austria), Boris Ondreicka (Slovakia), Vít Havráněk (Czech Republic) and Dóra Hegyi (Hungary) together with the Kunstverein director Chus Martínez. It provided a first time opportunity for 'the four tranzits' to come together for a joint exhibition. As bizarre as Július Koller's actions sometimes seem, his empathy for rules was translated into the strict schedule of this exhibition, which spanned different generations of artists. On the top floor of the Frankfurter Kunstverein a backstage area was set up as the storage space from which each artist's work took to the stage (fully fitted with black curtains) for up to three days, thus being exposed, highlighted and put 'in the focus' of the viewers experience and institutional discourse. An auditorium with chairs, which were once deported from West German flea markets to Prague and now returned for a second life in the gallery context, provided for the viewers comfort. While historical film works such as Tibor Hajas' *Self Fashion Show* (1976) and Ernst Schmidt, Jr.'s *Doppelprojektion* (1969) were also shown, the commissioning of new performance works or the setting of a platform where historic evidence could be contextualized within a different rhetorical context, facilitated artists by offering a chance to develop new work within an unfamiliar environment.

Through the juxtaposition of historical positions with those of younger artists from the region, the existence of a continuation of their peers' legacy in the younger artists work can be detected. Yet the type of *dérive* that Debord drives on in his theories is less discernible in the works of those artists whose careers started after 1989. I am thinking here of artists like Roman Ondák, well known in the UK since showing his queue *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003) at Frieze Art Fair in 2004, and himself instrumental in mounting Koller's show at Kölnischer Kunstverein (2003), but also others like Czech artist Jan Mančuška. In Frankfurt, Mančuška conceived his first performance work *The Invisible - Acting in Sequences* (2007), a situational performance (done with the participation of local actors), which the viewer would encounter throughout a visit to the institution. The artist, who often creates installations or text based works that relate to his own and other people's individual experiences in daily life, wrote a script for eight actors impersonating three different characters: Karel, his wife Alana and a nurse. Similar to the artists' installations, the perception of this work was designed to be dependant on the viewer's specific decisions and reading direction. A Situationist in modern life, Mančuška drew the attention away from historical domains and instead involved the visitor in his own narrative of a contemporary relationship tragedy. Once the last leg of the performance had occurred and the nurse, addressing the visitor, added "I'm curious what else we can expect from



Julius Koller, UFO, *Angriff*, 1970

you today,” some of the visitors were left – alienated in front of a glass of water by Jülius Koller<sup>1</sup> and a reading table – to their own devices with tranzit publications and artist monographs that introduced the multitude of works ranging from video to painting, from sculpture to the performance around them.

Many visitors to the Frankfurt project were antagonised owing to the fact that the exhibition required a substantial investment of time, as references drawn from a knowledge of Western Conceptual Art were of little help in grasping the meaning and contexts from which the works on display originated. The project in Frankfurt and coming initiatives like the hosting of tranzit Slovakia by Kunstverein Munich or tranzit.cz by the Societé anonyme / Le Plateau in Paris can thus be seen as a bifurcation point in some of the networks practice. After having attained a strong local visibility the project leaders are now also acting as ‘ambassadors’ for their local scenes and histories. Thus they ‘overcome the isolation’, (Hlavajová) and what the late Igor Zabel lamented when he spoke of ‘exclusion from the universal art’ through a collaborative effort.

1. There is no translation for the German word “Ausgeträumt” in English. In simple words “Ausgeträumt” means something like ‘out of dreams’, ‘disenchanted’ or ‘decidedly stopped dreaming’ [http://www.secession.at/art/2001\\_ausgetr\\_e.html](http://www.secession.at/art/2001_ausgetr_e.html)  
 2. Hlavajova/Rhomberg *tranzit: With Three Years of Hindsight*, p.16, tranzit.at  
 3. In *kontakt... works from the collection of Erste Bank Group*, MUMOK, Vienna p.38

4. i. In autumn 2000: ‘In Search of Balkania’, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria, curated by Peter Weibel, Roger Conover, Eda Cufer.  
 ii. In spring 2003: ‘Blood and Honey. Futures in the Balkans, The Essential Collection’, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, Austria, curated by Herald Szecmann.  
 iii. In autumn 2003: ‘In the Gorges of the Balkans’, Kunsthalle Friedericianum, Kassel, Germany curated by René Block.  
 5. Vit Havránek in *Jülius Koller Unverzahn Futurologische Observatorium* ed. Kölnischer Kunstverein & tranzit, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003 (p.153)  
 6. Debord, Guy, *Theorie of the Dérive*, International Situationiste, no.2, December 1958  
 7. xxx *Pressing myself as close as I can to the wall, I make my way around the whole room; there are people in the middle of the room, watching ... November 26 1977*  
 8. xxx *On an escalator ... turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing behind me.... September 3, 1977*  
 9. During the so called ‘socialist’ era Mrs Katalin Neray was one of the employees of the Institution for Foreign Cultural Contacts, filtering all cultural material coming in and going out of Hungary. After the political change in 1989 she was nominated to be the director of the Kunsthalle of Budapest, and since 1993 she is the director of the Ludwig Museum and the Contemporary Art Museum of Hungary. In 2006 she was reappointed without a call for tender by the socialist government run Ministry of Culture, and she continues to deny the existence of the almost one thousand two hundred works included in the Portable Intelligence Increase Museum.  
 10. It is possible to listen to a performance of *Who Makes Profit an Art?* On <http://www.radiodays.org/program.php?day=19>  
 11. In *Collectivism after Modernism*, Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette ed., University of Minnesota Press p.18 (2007)  
 12. [www.taz.de/pt/2007/03/08/a0154.1/text](http://www.taz.de/pt/2007/03/08/a0154.1/text), 8.March 2007  
 13. *The Glass of Clean Water*, 1964