

## Fine Arts / New Media

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### **In memoriam Július Koller (1939 - 2007)**

In the night of 18th August 2007, the Slovak artist Július Koller departed from this life completely unexpectedly at the age of 68. The cause of death was a heart attack. A constantly active sportsman during his life, he leaves behind one of the most consistently distinctive oeuvres of conceptual art in the region of the former Czechoslovakia.

Born in Piešťany, 85 kilometres from Bratislava, in 1939, Koller studied painting at the conservative Bratislava Academy of Art from 1959 to 1965, a time of new political departure and the imminent Prague Spring. The sense of political upheaval, as well as contacts to international artistic movements, above all that of Nouveau Réalisme, inspired Koller to move away from the classical form of picture and to take up a position that was critical of modernism and influenced by the Situationist International and the deconstructivist impulses of Dadaism. In 1967/68 Koller painted a series of pictures using white latex paint, in order to be able to paint on a variety of surfaces, such as hardboard or cardboard. In their execution, these "Anti-Paintings" display numerous references to "Drip Paintings", Abstract Expressionism and Tachism, although they nevertheless also tie in with Koller's concept of "Anti-Happenings", which had dominated a large part of his work ever since the mid-1960s.

Koller's manifesto on the Anti-Happening, dating from 1965, is less concerned with translating an artistic action into reality than with creating scope for thought and thus placing the subject in a relationship to the real world. In the catalogue on Koller's first large-scale exhibition at the Cologne Kunstverein in 2003, the curator and art critic Georg Schöllhammer formulated those artistic principles as follows: "In contrast to Duchamp's transposition of any object into the sphere of art by means of simple displacement, Koller's strategy consists of using real objects, the real world and everyday life as an already given programme."

The use of everyday materials in Koller's pictures testifies to the step which he took in the direction of anti-aestheticism, often also transporting the paintings into a three-dimensional form of assembly and using the installational moment in space to call into question conventional models of presentation. The blurred aspect of the apparently monochromatic white likewise counteracts the strivings of Minimal Art to place the form and materiality of art at the forefront of the (aesthetic) experience. It is in these pictures that a question mark appears for the first time, which from then on Koller employs as a constantly recurring element in textual works, conceptual photography and performances.

In 1970, after the repression of the Prague Spring and the start of the "years of normalisation", Koller developed the figure of the U.F.O.nauts, in which he himself appears in the picture as an actor, in order to immerse himself in numerous operations within the subject's sphere of thought, as he had demanded in his manifesto. In this way, Koller enters upon a path that is beyond any predominant political reality in Europe and at the same time makes a connection to the utopian concepts of the international artistic

productions of the 1960s. The consequence of this position, in which the individual letters “U.F.O.” take on various connotations and become “universal philosophical or physcultural operations“, runs through the whole of Koller’s artistic career and makes his work one of the most stringent oeuvres in the region.

In recent years, Jlius Koller frequently collaborated with Kontakt Das Programm fr Kunst und Zivilgesellschaft (‘Kontakt The Programme for Art and the Civil Society’), as well as with Kontakt Die Kunstsammlung der Erste Bank-Gruppe (‘Kontakt The Art Collection of the Erste Bank group’) and many of his works provided the source of the titles for many of our activities.

We deeply regret his unexpected passing, which constitutes a great loss for the art world. The collection of the Erste Bank Group owns a large part of Koller’s white anti-pictures, as well as numerous text maps, concept photographs, manifestos and installations. It seeks to continue to take the responsibility for presenting Koller’s work internationally and to study it academically in its entirety.