

Life in the 5.4.3. Dimension

A retrospective in Bratislava rediscovers the work of Stano Filko

Georg Schöllhammer

The tower, orientated to the four points of the compass and coded with the colours of a psycho-physical guidance system, this large scaffolding unit that Stano Filko had erected in front of the entrance to his retrospective in the tranzit.workshop, seemed to rise up from a recumbent position. The long forgotten and marginalized master of Slovakian contemporary art had painted the façade of the old prefab factory on the edge of Bratislava, situated next to a mega-mall constructed by the Soravia brothers, with a legend about this project. In it, as in a revision book, one could catch up on the central concepts of the continuous and never-ending flow of production from which, since the beginning of the sixties, a body of work has fed that, in a metaphorical sense as well, transcends all dimensions.

The environment in the hall itself, which was composed of wall paintings and installations, historical work complexes and re-arranged archive materials, video and kinetic objects, spanned five dimensions. A spatial object that penetrated and connected these imagined dimensions and their »chakras«, their conceptual manifestations, stood like a kind of wormhole between the formal aggregates – a time portal that drew a dynamic trace through the hall. Rocket-like objects, painted red, blue, yellow and white in indigo-black surroundings, a chair revolving around itself as the representative of a subject inserted and imagined into this system, a mirrored hall as a place of self-referential contemplation: Filko has derived all of this from 12 conceptual complexes, »chakras«, and colour-coded it. In this universal system of references, colours stand for spatial concepts and states of being: red denotes a dimension that Filko calls biological, the biological space, green represents the social, the space of the political and social relations. White stands for a sphere of being; it is the colour of ontology, of being-related space. Blue shades represent the dimension of the cosmos in Filko's relational system. And black, an always indigo-tinged black, is the symbol for the space of the subject, the ego.

The historical retrospective in the tranzit.workshop hid behind a panel construction that was set up close to the wall of the exhibition room. Textual and conceptual works that the artist has executed since the mid-sixties appeared there. Filko, who was born in northern Slovakia in 1937, studied at the conservative School of Applied Arts in Bratislava at the end of the fifties, and then monumental painting at the Academy of Arts from 1960 to 1965, practising it as well. In 1964 he began to build environment-like »altars of the present«. He joined in the work of the Happsoc group formed around Zita Kostrova and Alexander Mlynarczyk, which developed a locally transformed form of object-happenings from their contacts with the Paris Nouveau Realisme as represented by Pierre Restany and Yves Klein, among others. And, in fact it was due to Restany that the work of this group became known all over Europe at that time. In Filko's psychedelic environments, objects and mappings, which draw on McLuhan's media theory and situationist architectural fantasies, there was, even then, a manifest will to subject the fragmentation of subjectivity in the bureaucratic and organisational apparatuses of the real-socialist societies to form-critical analysis and to transfer this criticism, so to speak, from the real to the symbolic.

Filko takes his inspiration from modernist architecture, situationist extension fantasies and an existence philosophy that the Slovakian intellectuals invented in those years as an antidote to the materialism of Leninism. The titles of his works back then were full of cosmological terms and cybernetic imagery, such as »Universal Environment« and »Poetry about Space-Cosmos« etc. He developed an original amalgam of Fluxus strategies, Pop adaptations and architectural critique of functionalism, together with a variety of theatrical, surreal elements, to form a method that allowed him to use material from everyday cultural production. The technologies to which Filko refers, such as cosmonautics, inscribe their spatial characteristics into the environments and concepts and are present as visual metaphors for the status of the subject in modernity, but not just that: a whole cluster of spatial concepts grows up around the mythology of Spaceship Earth, the cockpit, the phantasm of the exposed pilot, and increasingly the idea emerges of being able to include the different stimuli and Pop, Flux, Nouveau Realisme, Dada – everything – in the system of art. »Happsoc« (an invented name combining »happy« and »socialism«), the most famous work by Filko, Kostrova and Mlynarczyk, declared the whole of Bratislava, with all its fixtures and fittings, to be an art work between the socialist May Day holiday and the old national

public holiday on May 8.

Two near-death experiences, one after an accident that took place while he was playing as an eight-year-old and another when he lost consciousness a few years later after an electric shock – Filko was clinically dead both times – later formed constantly cited and commemorated biographical markers for the transcendental ideas of the concepts, which he developed still further. Since the late sixties, there have been cosmologies in his conceptual notations: for his series »Assoziation« (1970), Filko measured the distances between the trees in a park and put signs on them, imagining the trees as individuals, which bore the relational figures that resulted from these measurements. The element of allegory, the element of the de-personalisation of the artist's personal experience of rebirth took a more and more central position in his works from the mid-seventies on. Filko's installations and mise-en-scènes, the meta-disciplinary language that they use, return again and again to this point, which he calls one of authenticity.

In 1974 Filko, Milos Laky and Jan Zavorsky presented a conceptual environment in Brno: »A White Space in a White Space«. The heart of this installation, in which Western conceptual ideas, with the universalising gesture typical of Filko, are overwritten by metaphysical concepts, consists of long, white rolls of canvas with a strip of white paint in their middle applied with a roller. Photographs that have had their subjects painted away with white paint and white pillars form part of the contents of the room, which was the subject of four manifestos between 1977 and 1980 that place it in a transcendent frame. As if it were a paraphrase and critique of the texts of American conceptualism, one of the 12 points of the first manifestos states: »white immaterial space in the white endless space«, and under the points 2 and 10 is written: »With the transcendence of the borders of the objective world we become aware of the endless void in which we unfold our thought« and »Pure sensibility is our creative method«.

Sensualist cosmology, mythologisation of the technological euphoria of the sixties, development of materially coded parallel worlds and systems of reference, »becoming the universe« (Jiri Sevcik): formally, Filko renders these motifs of his work in para-scientific systems, in sequences, codes, layers and a never-ending restructuring and rearrangement of the work. The assemblages and collages, the text works and environments, which are subordinated to the leitmotifs of the colours and a terminology of double concepts, following the categories of 12 so-called chakras, in which elements from Filko's life history and terms from astrophysics and ontology, among other things, are juxtaposed, reflect a deep, even psychological impulse. But they go beyond this codification and this referencing, and aim for something more universal: the unresolvability of the fact that the representation system of art, like life, is full of contradictions and conflicts. From the mid-seventies, Filko used his categorical system, which he had also often prepared in manifestos. After his emigration in 1981 from the bleak Czechoslovakia of the post-68 era, which took him via Germany – and documenta 8 – to New York, where he lived largely in isolation until his return in 1992, this system developed and became more differentiated. Filko not only develops dimensionalities, but fills them with new terminologies as well. »Autonomexistence«, »physopsychics«, »actioreaction«, »astrocomologinomy«, »physicosmologysophy« - a diversified terminological system, assigned to the various colour spaces and dimensions of the work complex, henceforth serves as an aid to navigation and translation in Filko's alternative cosmos, identifies meaning.

The simultaneous fragility and presumption that characterise Filko's work, the unwavering constancy of his working method, his rejection of every form of self-historicisation, the cosmological dimension of his conceptual framework and the immense wealth of materials and forms in his work complexes, which are precariously stored in two overcrowded studio buildings in Bratislava and Filko's town of birth – each in itself a kind of Merzbau – have made him one of the most important figures of reference for a new generation of internationally successful artists from Bratislava. It is also to them that we owe this universalising – in the true sense of the word – retrospective, which has reopened a perspective on an important body of work within European contemporary art.

The exhibition »UP 300.000 km/s« was on display from 28 October 2005 to 31 January 2006 in the tranzit.workshops Bratislava. In autumn 2005, the monograph »Stano Filko« by Patricia Grzonka was published by Arbor vitae, Prague.

Translation: Timothy Jones