

Jan Verwoert
**World as
Medium: On the
Work of Stano
Filko**

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1. *Totality as Point of View, Medium, and Mode of Address*

Stano Filko's work is never just *about* the world. It *is* world. Because Filko speaks world. World is his medium, his language, his means of artistic production: using the medium of world Filko produces (anti)happenings, environments, installations, objects and diagrammatic drawings of all kinds. Some look very different from others. But that is the freedom of a mind that speaks world. It can choose the means and materials that seem apt in a given situation. What matters first and foremost is that each and every work articulates a particular stance, attitude, and point of view: it *addresses* the world as a whole from the *limits* of that world, that is, from the point where a world begins and ends, where α and Ω coincide. In each work Filko projects a view of the world as a whole by formulating conditions – and formalizing terms – under which the world could be viewed as a whole. When Filko builds an immersive environment, these terms and conditions are spelled out in a *spatial* and *physical* manner. But they can equally be rendered in a purely *semiotic* form, as a paradigmatic system, when he draws up diagrams and scribbles words on a sheet of graph paper. And finally (the conditions for articulating) a world can simply be given in a *thought*, as in the pivotal *HAPPSOC 1* piece, in which Filko and Alex Mlynárčik designated all life in the city of Bratislava as a work of art for the time between May 2 and 8, 1965.

This is a provocation! And to see why, we have to grasp the radical sense of possibility with which Filko confronts us: in his work a world can be articulated through spaces, signs, and thoughts alike. From the point of view of his production, therefore, the spatiophysical, the semiotic, and the speculative (and to this we may add the spiritual, political, and sexual) are alternative *prisms*, but, practically speaking, as prisms they are tools with similar use value. As an artist Filko can use all of them. So, when it articulates a world, a diagrammatic drawing or simple gesture in principle has the same status as a fully designed room installation. Even the smallest thing can show the big picture. These are conditions of autonomy produced within a material practice: Filko creates the freedom to define the value of any artifact or sign according to his own terms, that is, according to the terms of the world systems that he constructs.

To speak of artistic “world systems” in a certain modernist tradition would seem to direct us back to the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And surely, the totality of a world is the dimension that Filko lays claim to as the very premise of his thought and work. Still, given its specific history, to use the term

Gesamtkunstwerk may actually be misleading here. For with Filko a certain form of materialism – a (mocking) spirit of analytic pragmatism – always also prevails, as a counterweight to the furor of thinking the absolute.

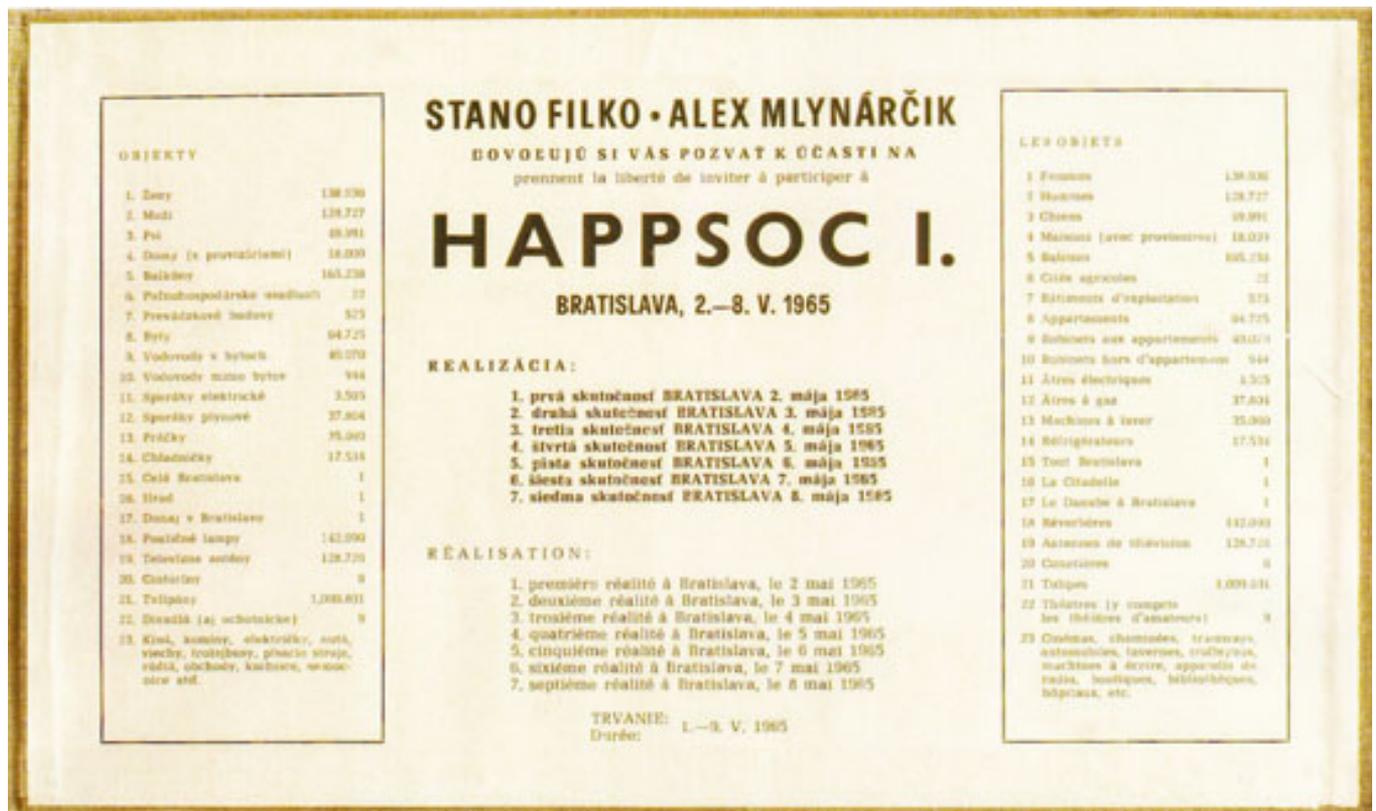
HAPPSOC 1, for example, was announced by a simple invitation card to the city-wide artwork, listing among other things the materials used in the work: “138036 women, 128727 men, 49991 dogs, 18009 houses, 165236 balconies, 40070 water pipes in homes, 35060 washing machines, 1 castle, 1 Danube in Bratislava, 22 theatres, 6 cemeteries, 1000801 tulips (...) etc.” The grand gesture of seizing a whole city with the sublime force of one thought is thus offset by the modest form of its announcement (a small card) and the laconic enumeration of the mundane parts of the whole. The manner in which the grand and small, the sublime and mundane are made to play off of each other in the form of this piece conveys a liberating sense of irony. It shakes off the curse of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to which its historical proponent, Richard Wagner, fell prey. Hooked on the furor of the absolute, Wagner had no chance but to inflate his work to ever more ridiculously grandiose dimensions. Filko, on the contrary, understands the semiotic – the suggestive power of even the smallest sign or list of numbers – as

a means equal to that of the grand theatrical gesture. Wagner could only go big; Filko can go big *and* small, as he wants. There is a rough-and-readiness to his work throughout, precisely because it comes from a place where thinking the whole allows him to operate freely and, if need be, to also trust a fragment – e.g., a list ending on “*atd.*” (*etc.*) – to fully articulate a world.

This is why Filko’s work has a lot to offer to a contemporary meditation on how art engenders forces of resistance, freedom, and criticality: he shows how artists and thinkers can tactically claim a *world (totality)* as their point of departure, medium, and mode of address – and, in doing so, create *zones of autonomy* that liberate them to act artistically, go big or go small, and freely negotiate the value of artifacts and ideas.

Indeed, a key characteristic of Filko’s practice is that the act of articulating totality in his work is inseparable from a motion of *zoning*: in the process of progressively unfolding the principles of his work over the years, Filko designated and developed five different zones, within which he situates individual works, projects, and bodies of ideas. Each zone is described by a color: Red, Green, Blue, White, or

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Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik, *HAPPSOC*, 1965. Invitation for the performance of the same name.

Black (indigo).¹ Instead of a mythology, what this system offers is a topology of zones, or rather: a cosmology of *horizons*. For each zone articulates the world in total, yet in the light of one particular *aspect* of the world. Red articulates the world in total from within the experiential horizon – from the point of view and via the medium and mode of address – of the erotic; Green, from within the horizon of the sociopolitical; Blue, from within the horizon of the cosmic; White, from within the horizon of its possible transcendence; and Black (indigo), from within the horizon of the ego and its transformations.

To interpret this effort of zoning one's oeuvre as the idealist endeavor to erect a metaphysical system, a Hegelian megamachine, would be tempting. And indeed one could possibly portray Filko as the engineer, machinist, and pilot of such a metaengine-powered multiterrain vehicle. The point one shouldn't miss, however, is that beside and beyond idealism, there is always also another spirit at work in Filko's machinery, of a more materialist, pragmatic, analytic provenance. To unravel the experience of the world in terms of its aspects – and by means of the different discourses that seeing the world in the light of a particular

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aspect generates – is precisely the approach that, in his attempt to overcome metaphysics, Ludwig Wittgenstein developed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Connecting the concept of *aspect-seeing* to that of the *language game*, he described the conditions under which we articulate the world as a set of distinct yet interlocking semiotic fields (i.e., language games), that, each in its own right and with its own use of concepts, allows us to make sense of our experiences, from a particular perspective, that is, in light of the aspect of perception around which that particular language-game is based and which it hence highlights.

In this sense, the manner in which Filko has built his oeuvre over the years could equally be seen as an ongoing endeavor to unfold a set of language games, each of which presents an experiential zone, a semiotic field, or an artistic plateau, which articulates the totality of the world in the light of *one* of its aspects. In this perspective, the whole of Filko's oeuvre would then appear less like a single machine, and more like a topology of distinct yet interconnected zones spread out before us. To open up these two perspectives on the oeuvre is not meant to create the false alternative of an either/or choice. The point is to say that what makes Filko's approach



Stano Filko, *Modely vyhládkovej veže-architektúra (Models of the Lookout Tower Architecture)*, 1966–67. Environment.

rich and provocative is precisely the fact that he *marries* the force of engineering megamachines to a critical wisdom of unfolding worlds of experiential zones / semiotic fields / artistic plateaux. The horizon of the world articulated in its totality is thus always equally that of a system and that of an aspect: a big picture drawn via – and broken up into – a set of multicolored zones.

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2. A Rival to Ideology

Why would it be so crucial to highlight and reinvestigate the artistic tactic of claiming totality? Because in art history, as it is written today, the claim to totality is largely being framed as a megalomaniacal metaphysical delusion, that, in New York in the 1960s, was overcome by the turn toward a secularized aesthetics of bare facticity in Minimalism, Pop, and Conceptual art. An influential art historical school (of US provenance, represented by writers like Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, and Hal Foster) in fact treats the question of totality as *the* crucial watershed in postwar art: artists who still claim totality as their point of view, medium, and mode of address (Joseph Beuys being the showcase example) are portrayed as desperately holding on to the obsolete *old world* metaphysical notion of the artist as godlike creator. Conversely, those

artists who renounce the theater of metaphysics and instead choose to take an analytic approach to specific materials (Robert Morris et al.) are embraced as heralds of a progressive *new world* mindset: as down-to-earth pragmatists. By now it would seem obvious that positing this watershed scenario – of a break with old-world beliefs and the building of a new world on material labor and pragmatic wisdom – quite literally is to inscribe the foundational myth of the United States into art history, as its tipping point (as if the rise of one nation dreaming its dream – of a cut with the past and discovery of real truth in hard facts – had meant a leap forward for all, and set the standards for future progressive thought at large).

In this respect, an appreciative reading of Filko's practice can open a pathway to understanding that the legacy of the 1960s does not necessarily lie in the imposition of an exclusive either/or choice against/for metaphysics/pragmatism. Filko's work, on the contrary, challenges us to grasp how the *specific use of mundane materials and signs* coexists with *techniques of claiming totality* within one practice, and how that practice acquires its critical edge (and power to sustain itself in the face of political oppression) by consummating



Stano Filko, *Let na mesiac a späť, otvorená inštalácia (Flight to the Moon and Back, Open Installation)*, 1970.

the marriage of metaphysics and pragmatism.

A theorist who recognizes tactical claims to totality as an artistic point of view, medium, and mode of address is Boris Groys.² He situates this tactic within an overall scenario of ideological rivalry. In a totalitarian regime in general – and the construct of the Soviet Union masterminded by Stalin, in particular – the state ideologue will always be the first to lay claim to totality (as a point of view, medium, and mode of address) and justify his leadership with the assertion that he alone can articulate the state in its totality (i.e., what the state is, how it must be shaped, and how its people and needs must be addressed). To defend this exclusive right to articulate totality, the ideological state apparatus will seek to suppress all *rival claims* to that speaking position: hence the persecution and forceful indoctrination of artists and intellectuals. The tactic that dissident artists and intellectuals adopted to counter the power of the state apparatus, Groys argues, was to subsume the forces of subsumption by *mimicking* them. Putting on the mask of the supersupporter, the dissident would copy the voice of the state apparatus, and, with the official voice articulate totality, yet in such an *overly emphatic* manner that the painful difference between the ideals invoked and the social realities created by the regime would be rendered obvious. In one sense the mimicry therefore produces a *parody* of the voice of ideology. In another sense, however – and this is where the complexity of Groys's dialectical thought comes into its own – the overly emphatic enactment of the aspiration to totality also *recoups* the forces of idealist projection at the heart of the ideological operation and *frees them up*: in the form of an artistic speculation (which may sound like the state speaking but) which in fact is too exuberant, too radical, too libidinal – in all regards goes much too far – to still be contained by any orderly ideological program.

And indeed this thought opens up a possible port of entry to the work of Filko: the dialectics of subsuming the forces of subsumption, by means of parody and radicalization, can be seen at work in many of his pieces (particularly of the GREEN series articulating the world in light of its sociopolitical aspects). Take the installation *Modely vyhlídkovej veže-architektúra* (Models of the Lookout Tower Architecture, 1966–67), for instance: installed on the wall are three big black-and-white photographs with aerial views of the new modernist housing megastructures that had just been erected outside old Bratislava on the West side of the Danube. The photographs form a panorama, in front of which three sculptural metal objects are displayed standing

on four mirrored floor panels. The objects are welded together from different machine parts, including sprocket wheels, cranks, and what looks conspicuously like the gas tank of a motorbike. Presented as upright structures (and painted in monochrome colors: one blue, one orange red, one silver), they resemble models of a monumental tower building, such as a television tower, or of a spaceship ready to launch. In front of the photographs they seem like probable architectural additions to the new cityscape. On top of the mirror panels they appear to be hovering in infinite space. In mimicking the logic of the cityscape, Filko's machine model towers mock the way that the total power of state-controlled urban planning over the city turns architecture into an industrial machinery for housing production. At the same time, however, they also take this industrial logic further, far beyond itself, by suggesting that if we can build total machine cities like this, we should also be free to build rocket towers like that, and fly them to the moon!

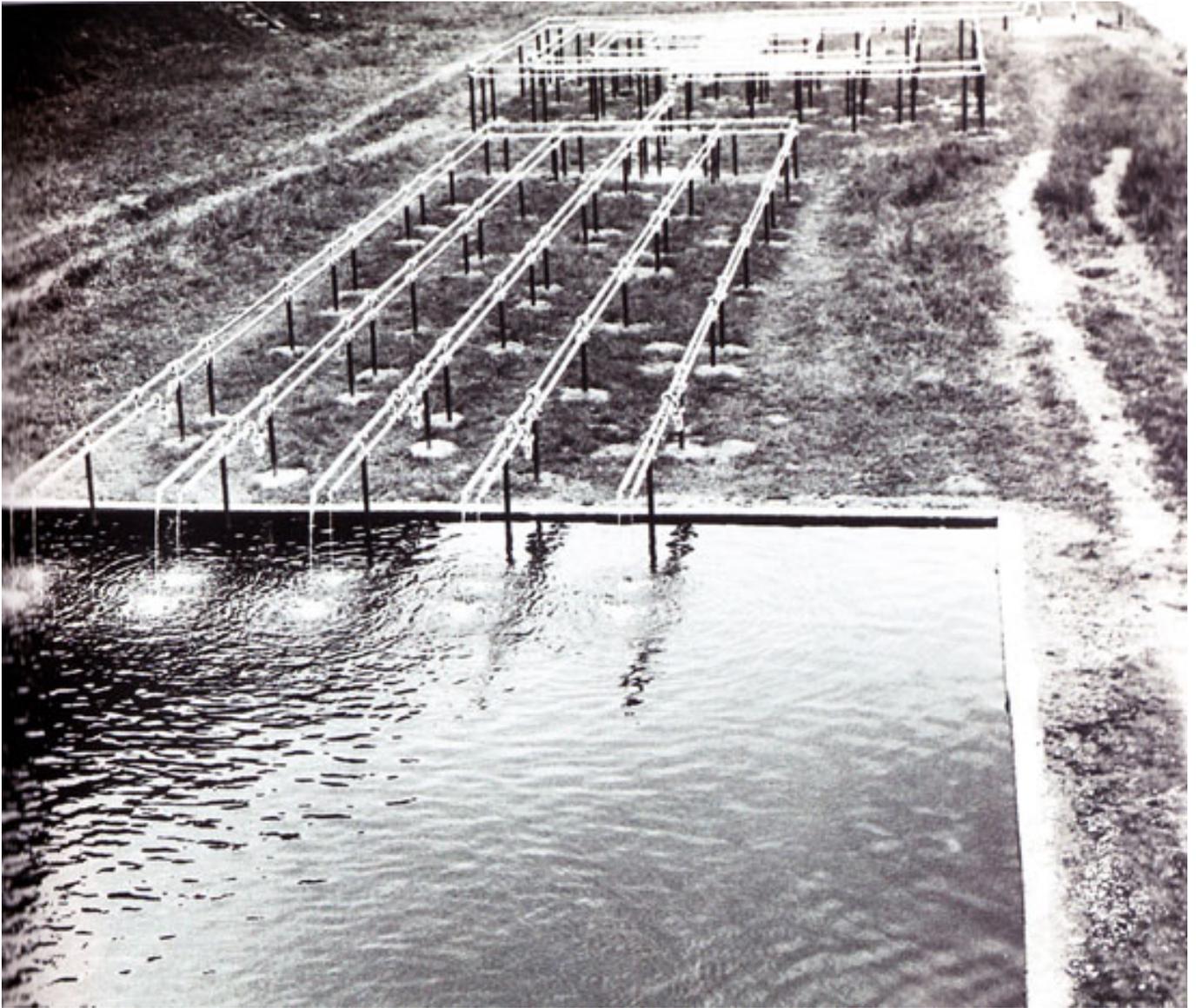
Comparable ambivalences characterize the environment *Prečerpávanie vody* (Shifting of Water, 1967). The piece is an elevated structure of water pipes that conduct water pumped from the Danube into a square pool adjacent to the river. The structure itself, however, is of near labyrinthine complexity: from the river the pipes wrap around each other in five consecutive loops, increasing in size before connecting to a phalanx of five parallel rows of double pipes ending over the pool. Again, the work can be read as a parody of absurdly overcomplicated technological systems that privilege the reflection on the totality of their own systematic workings before any apparent use-value. Yet, it is equally a beautiful example of an ecological system created by technical means, or, conversely, a cybernetic circuit, computing differentiation processes by means of water. With these two perspectives perpetually shifting, mockery and constructive speculation emerge as equally strong forces at work in the piece.

After 1968 the overall tone of Filko's work changes. The rivalry with the state apparatus has lost some, but not all, of its exuberance. Filko still invokes space travel as a radical possibility of the apparatus put to a different use. Consider, for instance, *Let na mesiac a späť, otvorená inštalácia* (Flight to the Moon and Back, Open Installation, 1970): A flat blue wooden box, with its lid ajar and the word *COSMOS* painted in black letters on its inside, is propped up against a wall next to three perforated sheets of metal suspended from the ceiling like solar panels on a spacelab. There is defiance in this gesture of leaving the door to the cosmos – that is, the exit to another world of freedom – ajar, after the

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Stano Filko, *Prečerpávanie vody (Shifting of Water)*, 1967. Environment.

state apparatus, aided by Soviet tanks, violently suppressed the attempts to realize a political alternative in this world two years before. This insistence on picturing a different totality still out there in the cosmos comes to be formulated in a growing body of works that Filko will subsume under the category “BLUE” in the overall system he develops for his work.

In parallel he begins to develop the works of the WHITE series: dedicated to meditations on absolute transcendence (or the transcendence of the absolute), these works also advance a technique of complete erasure. In Filko’s collaboration with Miloš Laky and Ján Zavorský, entitled *Biely priestor v bielom priestore* (White Space in a White Space, 1974), for instance, the piece is an installation composed of different elements, mostly white pieces of fabric laid out on the floor where sculpture might stand or installed on the wall where paintings might hang (an exhibition of designated absences). One key piece in the overall ensemble was a large-scale scroll which, instead of writing, has a layer of bright white fabric on its inside. Some documentation photos show it partially unrolled on the floor. In the context of the installation, however, it was fully spread out across adjacent gallery walls. Biblical in its connotations, the use of a scroll would seem to suggest that some form of holy scripture is being presented; and indeed this is what it may be, only that this scripture contains no gospel, but rather testifies to the truth of (its own) total erasure, invoking a state of complete whiteout. This could imply a state of bliss, yet equally one of painful annihilation.



Stano Filko, *Transcendation*, 1978–79.

Likewise ambivalent in principle, two later pieces from the WHITE series would seem to gravitate more toward the latter. *Transcendation* (1978–79) is a black-and-white photographic reproduction of a pietà

altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden, in which Filko erased the figure of Christ’s mortal body by fully covering it with white paint. An eponymously titled photograph from the same year shows visitors to a gallery critically studying the works on display. Here the head of the most prominent viewer is blotted out by a white rectangle (with a circular shape at its center). This method is also applied in a series of overpainted photographs commemorating Filko’s fortieth birthday (*Fylko 40 vyročie...*, 1977–78). In an apartment setting, different people are shown reclining on a sofa, having a drink, or preparing food in the kitchen, yet heads, entire bodies, or details in the apartment are obscured by white paint or cut out, leaving black holes. This could be seen to suggest that the individuals pictured were experiencing a moment of transcendence: their heads and bodies were taken to higher places in altered states. Yet, in another sense, it could also be understood as articulating a painful experience of erasure. If we understand the decade after the quelling of the Prague Spring to be marked by increased political repression, these works can be read as voicing this devastating experience: that of state power annulling the claim of the artist intellectual to represent what people feel and think. A set of two overpainted photos from the GREEN series – *untitled* (undated) – would seem to support this reading. Each shows a Soviet tank in the center of Prague, covered in pink paint: erasing the origin of erasure in an act of conceptual retaliation.

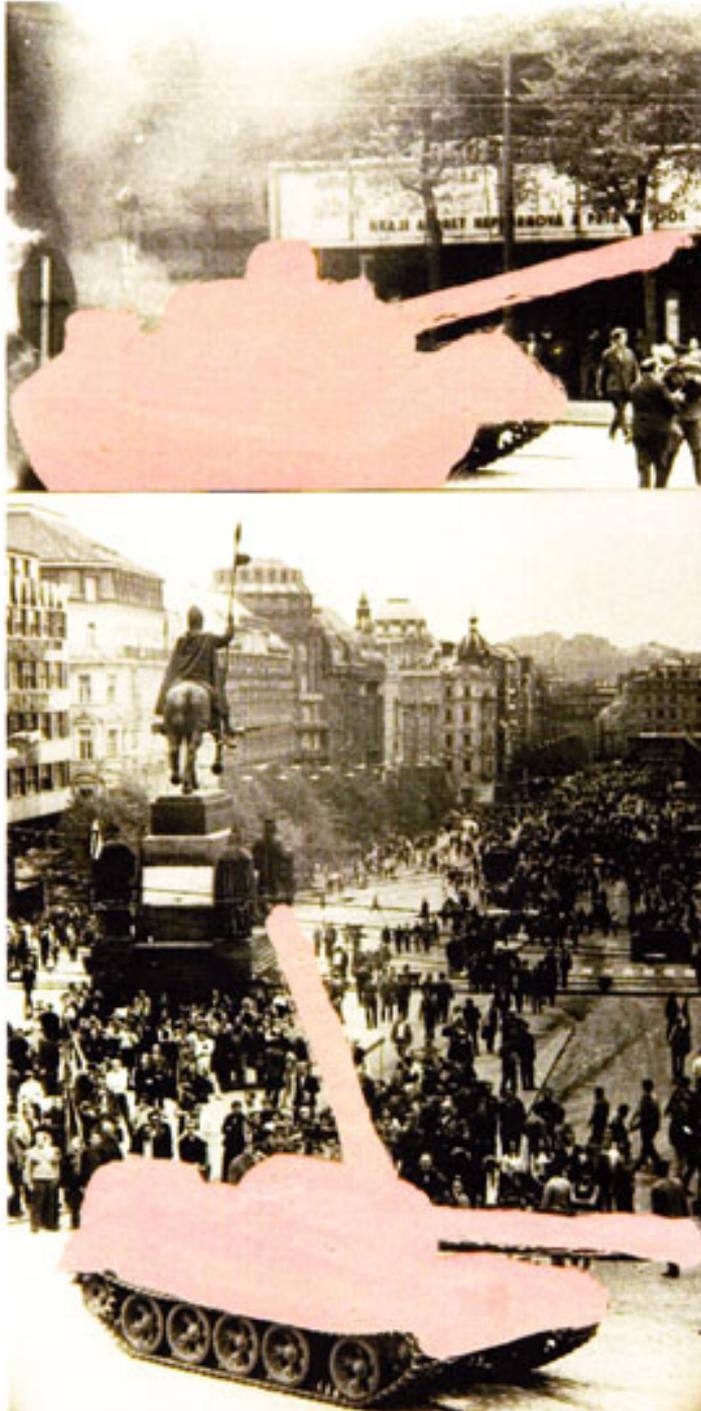
The crucial point, then, is that while meditating on the act of erasure, Filko’s works of this time clearly imply no admission of defeat. On the contrary, there is a pronounced boldness even to the act of appropriating a pietà, as well as personal and historical photographs, and obliterating the central figures. It is the artist who performs, and thereby authorizes, the act of annihilation! So, even and especially in the moment of erasure, Filko performatively reclaims the position of totality for his work: if it’s going to be a whiteout for artists, then the power to articulate that very whiteout is what confirms the survival of art. Dialectically speaking, the full embrace of the force of *negation* sublates the works into a *position* of transcendence: a stance of supreme (spiritual and political) defiance. And a position indeed the artists take; so much so that on the occasion of a further collaborative exhibition “Onthology Vertikál” (Onthology vertical) in 1974/75, Filko, Laky, and Zavorský characterize their use of white not at all in terms of *negativity*, but wholly positively as the proactive formulation of (a) pure *sensitivity*. In the catalogue to the exhibition they assert that “The ‘pure sensitivity’ in its absolute being is the



Stano Filko, *Environment Univerzál (Environment Universal)*, 1966-1967.

unique possibility to display our pure activity of 'pure sensitivity.'" So while, when read against the backdrop of the historical political conditions, a dialectical reading of Filko's practice would on the one hand seem absolutely warranted, the work, on the other hand, always also defiantly asserts the demand to be considered on its very own terms!

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Stano Filko, *Untitled*, undated photograph.

3. Out of the Red / Into the Black

To say that art has the power to engage the ideological forces of the state apparatus in

dialectical close combat is a way of insisting on the possibility of art eventually emerging as the winner. And as history shows, this happens. Yet, regardless of who prevails, the intimacy of the engagement always also means that the painful historical experience of being subjected (and subjecting oneself) to these forces of oppression is equally inscribed into the work. In this sense, situating art as ideology's dialectical rival emphasizes that, in the eyes of history, art does indeed have its own power and dignity. The problem, however, of reading work through the prism of historical dialectics *alone*, is that one thereby tends to, as it were, *chain* art to its nemesis: as if what art can be and do were solely determined by its relation to the powers that be – as if art wouldn't *also* generate its momentum by tapping other sources of empowerment! In Filko's own terms, it is as if one were to read his entire oeuvre through the GREEN prism – in light of life's sociopolitical aspects – and disregard the experiential horizon and language games opened up from within the RED, BLUE, WHITE, and BLACK zones.

In this respect, it should be noted that a pivotal work in the GREEN framework, *HAPPSOC 1*, already points beyond the field of the political: firstly, in that it (with a good dose of irony) lists items – e.g., washing machines, faucets, and tulips – so mundane that they, strictly speaking, slip through the grasp of ideology; and secondly, in that the artists consciously choose the days *between* two ideologically charged dates for their piece: it is the time between International Workers' Day on May 1 and May 8, the commemoration of the end of World War II, that the artists have selected for declaring the city an artwork – seven days that should be just what they are, with no superimposed symbolic meanings. So by turning this week into a total work of art, ironically, *HAPPSOC 1*, returns the city to itself.

Affirming the mundane from the point of view (and via the medium and mode of address) of totality articulated implies a crucial twist. It demonstrates that the embrace of the mundane does not necessarily have to go hand in hand with a renunciation of metaphysical claims to totality. Contrary to the canonical understanding of Pop as a strictly materialist affirmation of the material world, *HAPPSOC 1* foregrounds the residual metaphysical *universalism* that underpins Pop's declarations of love to the everyday, and thereby points to something fundamental: "A-B-C, 1-2-3, baby, you and me!" "She loves you, yeah yeah yeah!" "Ne me quitte pas!" All these lines give you great pop songs because, by virtue of being universal, they articulate a metaphysics of the everyday in the form of a basic speech act that effectively sums



Stano Filko, Projekt myslenia - mentality (Project of Thinking - Mentality), c. 2000.

up the totality of an entire language game in a nutshell. (Screenprinting cans of Campbell's Tomato Soup on big canvases arguably taps the same pop-metaphysics.) And it would seem that Filko masters precisely these mechanics when he celebrates life as it's lived in different shades of totality.

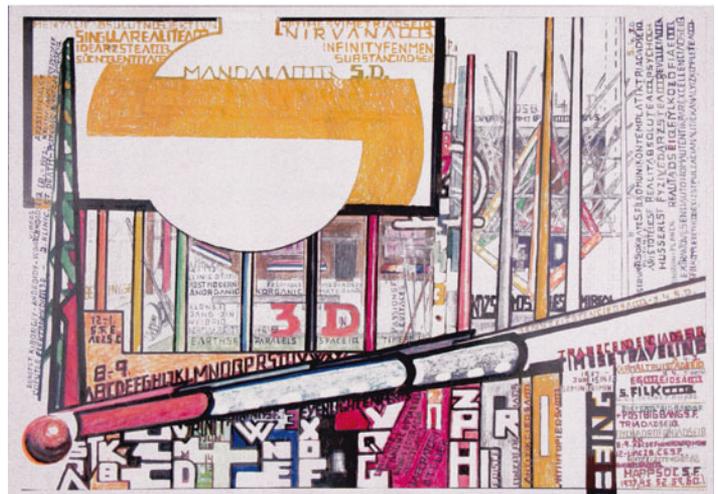
The environments of the RED series are another case in point. *Environment Univerzál / Environment Universal* (1966–67), for instance, manifests the fascination of the erotic encounter in a manner that is as direct in its material language as it is universal in its formulation. The environment is housed in a cubic structure (5 x 5 x 3 meters) built from green metal tubes. In the place of walls, semitransparent blinds produce an enclosure with an intimate atmosphere. On each blind the stylized silhouette of a woman dancing is printed. The floor consists of mirrored panels creating a visual echo – a virtual double – of the environment's interior and all that enter. In the space there are two illuminated globes and an all-black chessboard with red and yellow pieces on a stand. (Song lyrics to capture the atmosphere could range from "Let's spend the night together!" to the anthemic "She's got it!" from Shocking Blue's "Venus"). The environment is a world of seduction in a cube, concise in its form yet highly evocative in its use of materials and motifs. Admittedly, the assignment of the sexual mystique to the female figure here remains in line with a certain patriarchal tradition (which Surrealism's cult of the sphinx-like "Nadia"-type equally reinforced rather than dismantled). On the other hand, however, the monochrome chessboard adds a subtle conceptual twist: the erasure of the binary color code of the squares on the board would seem to suggest that, even if this were an age-old game, the rules and differences could still be reinvented.

In order to describe what the environment does, and how it does so, it is then not enough to say that it merely 'represented' its subject. In articulating a world from the perspective of desire, the work creates desire. The *Environment Univerzál* is a socioerotic space, an architectonic libido-generator (resonating with, if not predating, many of Verner Panton's interior designs). In this sense, the piece produces subjectivity: it subjects the visitors to an immersive experience that puts them in a particular mental and emotional state. From a sensualist point of view – that is, if we understand subjectivity as a state of sensing oneself sense oneself – this condition could be called a *state of subjectivity*, a state of *perceiving one's way of being in the world within a particular experiential horizon*: here, it is the horizon of the erotic. Yet, it is not only the visitors but, first of

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all, the environment itself, that is put in this state. In order to attune visitors to a particular condition of perception, the space is already tuned to this key. By articulating the world in particular light or key, Filko's works embody states of subjectivity, in and for themselves: each work is its own subject, a materialized state of perception.

In this sense one could say that, in each of his bodies of works, Filko focuses on creating the conditions for experiencing a different state of subjectivity: a mode of perceiving the world in light of one of its aspects, a mode of perception that is existentially connected to a particular manner of *being in and toward the world* (being in love, being in society, being open to the cosmos...) – in short, one possible mode of subjectivity. The body of Filko's work that in turn foregrounds this one fundamental aspect – the production of subjectivity – as such, in and for itself, is the BLACK/INDIGO series. In this series, diagrammatic drawings and language pieces prevail, and we touch on the semiotic operating system of Filko's practice. The joy and fascination of engaging with this body of works, however, comes from the dynamic, generative nature of this system. It seems to exist in a state of perpetual emergence. The writing doesn't stop. And it is *in* its writing that the system exists, not outside of it. The composition of the grammar of Filko's artistic articulations is in itself an artistic articulation.



Stano Filko, MANDLA000Q 5.D, drawing on paper, 2005.

A powerful example for this practice of writing the conditions of writing is a piece from 1959 called *BYŤ - SÚCNO - BYŤ - ČLOVĚK - BOL - JE - BUDE / BEING - EXISTENCE - BEING - MAN - WAS - IS - WILL BE*. On thirty typewritten pages, Filko listed key philosophical terms in three parallel columns, in three languages (English on the left, Slovak in the center, and German on the right), such as, for instance: "time - čas - Zeit /

space - priestor - Raum / energy - energia - Energie / spirit - duch - Geist ...” In some passages the text reads like a dictionary; in others it coalesces into something akin to a poem (left column only): “all / virtues / connecting / bridge / among / ... between / the physics / and / the metaphysics.” On one hand, Filko here seems to perform a metaphysical struggle of breaking the universe – and the history of thought – down into a list of its ingredients. On the other hand, however, a certain pragmatic aspect is equally perceptible, for, once you know the ingredients, the cooking can begin; so the thirty-page opus is as much a cosmological word-map as it is a medium for self-education and the preparation of a trilingual conceptual toolbox for future use.

This composition of semiotic fields – of language-worlds, if you will – in text pieces continues to be an integral part of Filko’s practice over the years. The BLACK body of work keeps growing. And the inscription of the self into these language-worlds becomes more pronounced. Crucially, however, Filko treats his own name (and existence) with the same methodological rigor as any other concept he organizes in the diagrammatic arrangements of words. As much as the world of language is built around its maker, the maker itself becomes a part and product of its making. *Projekt myslenia - mentality / Project of Thinking - Mentality* (c. 2000), for instance, is a text piece in which several clusters of words are arranged in and around a hexagon (inside of which, in turn, a circle is drawn). In each cluster, dates from Filko’s life appear together with arthistorical terms and metaphysical concepts, neologisms in part, taken from Filko’s growing vocabulary of cosmological mapping. Highlighted through uppercase and boldface text are the following declarations of self-multiplication: “STANO FILKO 1937–77, I. KLON = FYLKO 1978–87” and “2. KLON = PHYLKO 1988–1997, 3. KLON = PHYS 1998–2037.” What makes these lines so provocative is that, in their consequent irony, they are dead serious. When dedicated to reformulating horizons of experience – and hence conditions of subjecthood – a lifelong art practice can indeed, most factually, be understood as a material practice of cloning one’s self.

Going through the double helix of a dialectical motion, this overarching process of making the world of the self then sublates all biographical events into a conceptual totality: the fact that, due to dramatic accidents, Filko suffered two clinical deaths, in 1945 and 1952, for instance, is recorded in terms of the conceptual transformations that these events prompted in his process of thinking the world.

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Going through the reverse helix of the dialectics, however, means that all that becomes conceptual is equally rendered material. So the absorption of life into the thought process is offset by a radical moment of self-othering. When Filko spells out his life in the sequence FILKO, FYLKO, PHYLKO, and PHYS, he also writes *the self as other*: every single one of his clones is equally a material manifestation of an alterity, when the self, upon entering new horizons of experience, comes to physically perceive itself as a total other to itself.



Stano Filko, *Ego Diachron Synchron*, c. 1990-99.

Yet through – and going beyond – its own conceptual workings, the dialectical engine powering Filko’s art always also generates the conditions for an experience which is not necessarily only that of reading and understanding. It is a *state of meditation* as a state of subjectivity induced by the experience of words becoming a field, a force field in its own right. In recent years, Filko has further highlighted this dimension of his language pieces by organizing them through color fields in geometrical patterns, emphasizing that they are – and indeed always have been – *mandalas* of sorts: materialized and spatialized patterns of thought that invite the gaze to linger and become immersed in the cosmos of relations mapped out on the page. In the state of meditation, the

dialectical machine temporarily stops reeling, as time is concentrated in the moment and becoming turns into being. This is, then, one more powerful tension in Filko's BLACK series: the moment one experiences the force of thinking becoming itself transformed into the silent concentrated stillness of the *mandala* (from which again the conceptual pulse may emerge, as the heart of yet another conceptual clone starts beating).

By thus combining the restless motion of dialectics with a meditative immersion into particular states of being, Filko creates a powerful insight: he shows that it is actually possible to situate the conditions of artistic (personal, political, spiritual...) autonomy within the worlds of lived experience! Autonomy does not imply otherworldliness. On the contrary, in Filko's practice autonomy is found in the conscious artistic articulation of the conditions of perception: the *horizons of consciousness* and the *language-games* within which we operate – and which we can actually shape, if we put our minds to it. Shaping those horizons and games, from a historical and political point of view, can become an antagonistic practice, as the endeavor to determine your own way of enjoying the world places you in a confrontation with the powers that be (which built their own claim to hegemony on a monopolization of the social conditions of perception). And in Filko's practice this surely was the case.

The point, however, is that even and especially in this historical situation of antagonism, Filko's work never derives its power solely from that ideological struggle. There are always also other sources of energy: one is Filko's defiant insistence on building his work from his own *categorical imperatives* – his own ways of thinking totality and applying totality as a condition of experience and standard of action. Another source is his embrace of the *different aspects of being in the world* – GREEN, RED, BLUE, WHITE, and BLACK – that shatter the possibility of ideology claiming a unified, totalitarian point of view on the world, because totality is multiplied. In his formulation, there are now (at least) five totalities (or dimensions) to life, each of which opens up its own horizon of potential autonomy, in and through experience. The philosophical and art historical implications of Filko marrying these two approaches are indeed fundamental, for he shows that tactical claims to totality within an artistic practice are still viable, and that thinking in (metaphysical) terms of totalities and in (pragmatic, analytic, semiotic) terms of aspect-seeing in language games are not mutually exclusive forms of thought, but that they can be made to complement each other and sustain a free and

unruly form of art practice. Existentially, spiritually, politically, and libidinally, this means even more. Filko's art offers multiple keys to building a lifelong practice of resistance and emancipation: to claim the freedom of working according to the conditions of your own thought, action, and perception, yet to simultaneously stay attuned to the way in which these conditions multiply and become different horizons. To enter and inhabit these arenas is not a matter of making claims, but of an openness to experience.

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I here remain very much indebted to Patricia Grzonka's insightful and comprehensive introduction to Filko's work and color-coding system. See Patricia Grzonka, *Stano Filko* (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2005), 2–27.

2
See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

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