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Avant-Garde and Post-War Totalitarianism: Július Koller and Conceptual Art under Communism

This research will undertake a detailed study of Slovakian artist Július Koller (1939-2007). Over the past decade, Koller has emerged as the foremost conceptual artist of the East-Central European region. This research will present new findings about his work and draw conclusions about the fraught place of conceptual and avant-garde art in the former Soviet bloc. The focus of the proposed research will be on the important archival holdings of Koller's extensive research notes, on which scholarly work to date has been only very fragmentary. Koller's notes fill dozens of unprocessed archive boxes in the Slovak National Gallery, the major recipient of the artist's estate. This project is a unique opportunity to study this otherwise publically inaccessible material. It has great potential to foster important new insights into the forces and factors that shaped Koller's thinking as a conceptual artist living under communism. His notes, especially those from the 1970s and 1980s, commenting on societal, political and cultural matters, will serve as a lens on totalitarian reality, in which the political system operates directly on the everyday life of the individual citizen, and where 'private' becomes 'political'.

This research will examine the driving forces behind Koller's thinking and practice in the broader context, and will contribute to the scholarly reassessment of the Central and Eastern European avant-gardes that is being developed internationally. A new generation of scholars has been questioning and challenging the centralised tendencies of established scholarship dealing with the theory of avant-gardes that follows from the traditions of Western Marxist and post-Marxist writing on art, which has developed over the course of the 20th century mainly as a critical method to study the conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism. However, the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' and the gradual re-discovery of avant-garde under communism brought with it the question: what about art produced in the environment where socialism was not powerful only as the base for theoretical discourse, but its dominance was based on actualised political reality that affected

not only all public matters, but also had an immediate impact on everyday lives of individual citizens? After 1989, the approach usually taken was based on questioning what non-conformist art achieved *despite* communism, and to what extent it was able to keep up with the Western developments. More recently, the dialogue has been changing not only in art history but also in history and political sciences – Ronald Grigor Suny in ‘Red Flag Unfurled’ (2017) ponders the communist legacy and questions what positive lessons can be taken from Marxism and alternatives to capitalism. This research will contribute to this newly developing discourse, and by the example of Koller, assess what the non-conformist art of East-Central Europe achieved *because of* communism. Thus, it will seek some alternative paths to current overarching approaches to the theory of the avant-garde. Taking Július Koller as an appropriate case study, this research will ponder following questions:

- What was the significance of conceptual art practice and subversion under the normative conditions of state communism?
- How does Július Koller’s extensive practice of research note-making in relation to his identity as a non-conformist artist working under a totalitarian regime modify our understanding of the post-war avant-garde and conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under communism?
- What insights can be gained from a study of Koller that may inform new models for comparative study of the avant-gardes in different geo-political regions? To what extent may these inform a new modified theory of the post-war avant-garde as decentred and multilinear?