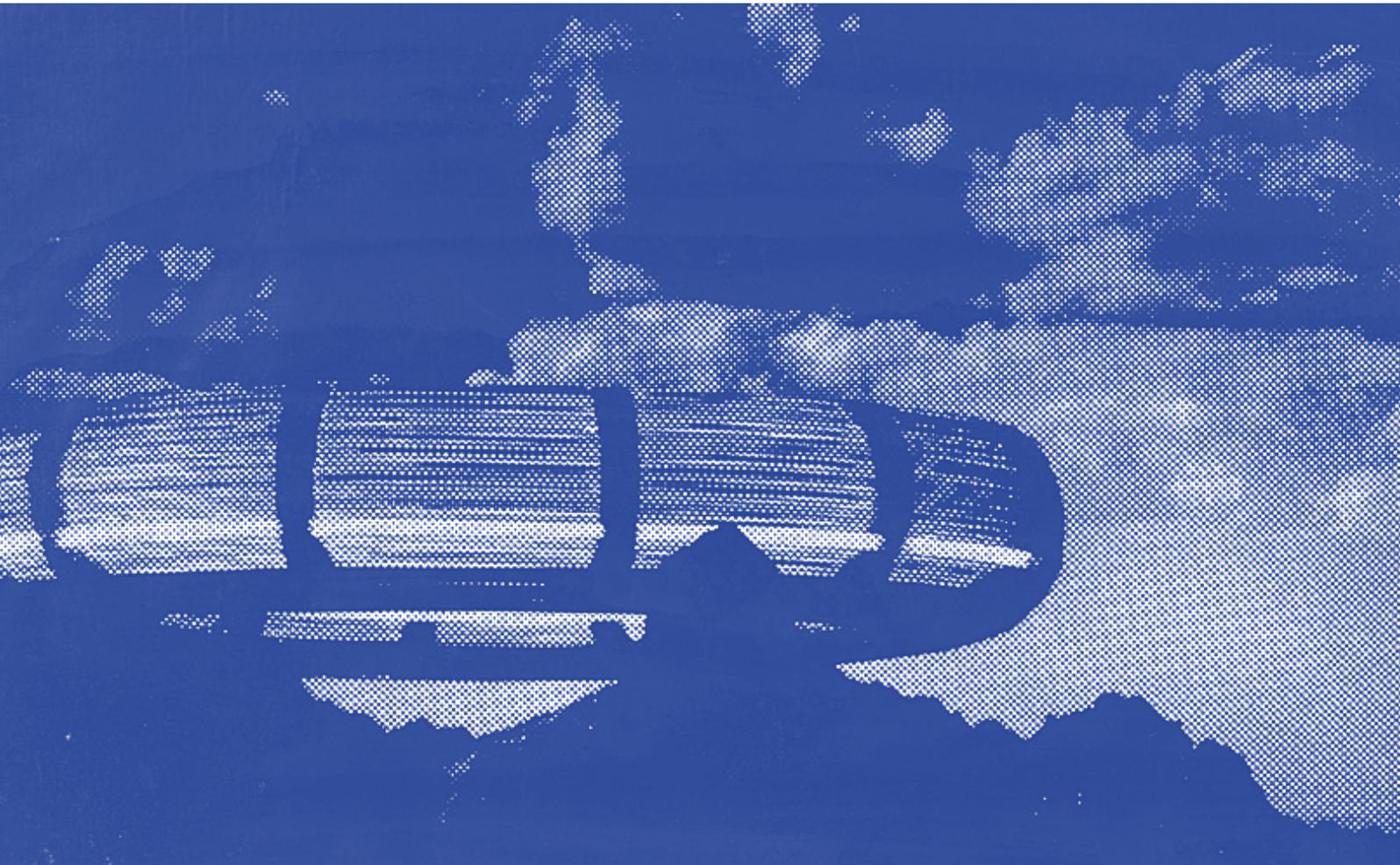# Utopia as Escapism, Escapism as Protest

AR2A011 2020/21 Q3

Utopia as Escapism, Escapism as Protest

Exploring the radical art and architecture of 1968 - 1989 Czechoslovakia, the case for VAL collective

Radical experimentation, formal plurality, and oscillation between architecture and visual arts permeated the 50s and 60s generation of architects and artists on both sides of the politically divided Europe. Central and Eastern European examples from this period are often undervalued, if addressed at all, both by Western European standards and even their local contexts.

VAL—Voies et Aspects du Lendemain—collective was formed in 1968 Czechoslovakia by the conceptual artist Alex Mlynárčik and the architects Viera Mecková and Ľudovít Kupkovič. VAL developed eight distinct utopias and megastructures in parallel to the global trends and Michel Ragon's techno-centric theory of prospective architecture. As the height of VAL's activity coincides with the peak of the normalisation period in the 70s Czechoslovakia, their utopian projects remain resistant to clear-cut interpretation then and now. Heliopolis, Akusticon, and the People's Assembly of Argillia are three distinct projects of VAL explored in reference to the themes of monumentality and architecture-sculpture, prospective architecture, and performance art influenced by Nouveau Réalisme.

Despite the unobstructed idealism that VAL emanates, it is argued that VAL's proposals go beyond an uncritical techno-positive utopia and can hardly be distilled from the irony and socio-cultural critique. And it is in the act of designing the libertarian utopias that VAL members found a form of individual escapism as means to express themselves creatively and to manageably live in a totalitarian regime—*utopia as escapism.* By subverting the expectations of what are the forms of expressing architectural dissent, escapism is understood as an act of resistance. Resistance to socio-cultural regression, economic depression, professional frustrations, and personal disillusionment with the failed Communist utopia—*escapism as protest.* The thesis questions our contemporary standing towards Central and Eastern European architects and artists whose work—as illustrated by VAL—entails complexities and contradictions of its socio-cultural and political context.

This thesis is my rather hesitant attempt to explore the complexities of Slovak architectural heritage. As someone who had studied most of my formative years abroad, I have always experienced a certain disconnect with the culture of my own country, and naturally, I felt unqualified to address the often paradoxical—or even controversial—socio-cultural context inherent to art and architecture.

Ironically, I had first considered the theme of utopia for my thesis in relation to Western European examples. However, in witnessing the polarising nature that art and architecture from the same period can have in Central and Eastern Europe, I recognised my own need to explore this theme critically, and in that, I came across VAL—a collective that is yet to receive the attention it deserves for its utopian and experimental projects.

Despite my initial hesitance, instead of studying their work in isolation as examples of prospective architecture, I explored the concept of escapism and dissidence in the act of designing. A theme that soon became very personal. In studying the portfolio of VAL and through short conversations with Alex Mlynárčik and Ľudovít Kupkovič I can now say with confidence that I understood the role of an architect a little better—the responsibilities and the limitations of this profession, and our means to push the boundaries and progress. Through studying the work of Katarzyna Cytlak, I feel more equipped to argue for the often controversial heritage of Slovakia which many would rather erase. Unfortunately, we cannot erase history and nor should we try.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Phoebus Panigyrakis. The members of VAL collective, Alex Mlynárčik, Ľudovít Kupkovič, and Viera Mecková, for providing me with an outstanding topic in its own right. Adam Gajdoš, Monika Kicová and Gabriela Smetanová, I very much appreciate your generous help and advice.

Special thanks go to my parents, my big sister, and my friends, both old and new, for your unlimited love and support.

Dominika Kopiarová

introduction to VAL

Radical experimentation and oscillation between architecture and visual arts permeated the 50s and 60s generation of architects and artists in Western Europe. While characterised by formal plurality, the projects often involved visionary dynamic, inflatable or temporal megastructures, and urban utopias beyond any limitation. Conceptualised by Archigram, Superstudio, Utopia, Metabolists, Constant, Haus-Rucker-Co, and numerous other architecture collectives and artists. At the core, formal, conceptual, and ideological innovation was stressed over what can be reductively referred to as functional or 'realistic' concerns of architecture. These architectural utopias took on a role of a counter-cultural image, often being openly critical of socio-political systems, consumerism, or contemporary practice; emphasising the role of art and architecture in the evolving society. Radical would be a term designated to the architecture defined by this ideologically charged content rather than referring to any formal unity.[1]

Parallel to the atmosphere of free experimentation in Western Europe, Central and Eastern European[2] formations exhibited an affinity for the counter practice of architecture too. The more radical examples, however, are attributed to artists rather than architects. VAL[3] was one of the rare formations in Central Europe which developed distinct experimental architecture projects in parallel to the global trends. The collective was formed in 1968 Czechoslovakia by the conceptual artist Alex Mlynárčik and two architects Viera Mecková[4] and Ľudovít Kupkovič, both of whom worked in the centrally managed state project institutes. During the normalisation period[5] and in private, the collective produced eight projects of megastructures, space cities, and inflatable monuments, which addressed the global themes of overpopulation, urbanisation, depleting energy resources, and ecology, but with regards to the specific sociocultural context of Czechoslovakia.

In line with Michel Ragon's ideas of prospective architecture, each monumental proposal was extensively documented, placed within real context and—according to the authors—its near-future feasibility was consulted with experts. Ragon associates the group with formations among the most influential in experimental architecture, such as Archigram or Metabolists, recognizing the innovative character of the Slovak group and placing the same level of importance to the architectural proposals on both sides of the Iron Curtain.[6] While the work of VAL collective has achieved some recognition, primarily in France owing to the personal interest of the critics Michel Ragon and Pierre Restany, in the histories of radical architecture, Central and Eastern European examples from this period are often undervalued, if addressed at all.

The formal parallels between Western European examples of experimental architecture and VAL's projects are indicative of the permeability of the Iron Curtain. However, considering VAL's utopias in isolation as purely prospective or uncritical is reductive. As Katarzyna Cytlak—whose words I cite extensively—notes, 'the complex nature of the sociocultural conditions adds a layer of meaning which conceptually differs or is even in opposition to its Western counterparts.'[7] VAL's utopias often constitute a universal perspective, yet it is the local climate in which these works were conceived that predetermine their significance.[8] VAL still presents a challenge to interpretation precisely because the height of their utopian activity coincides with the height of the period of normalisation.

[2] References to 'Western' in contrast to 'Central and Eastern European' are made throughout the text, referring to the 1948-1989 socio-political context. For the specificity of the themes and conditions explored, 'Western' is embodied by France, 'Central and Eastern European' by Czechoslovakia.

[5] Czechoslovak normalization refers to the period following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and lasts up to the 1987 commencement of liberalisation in the Soviet Union and its neighbouring nations. Normalisation was characterised by the forced restoration of the conditions from before the Prague Spring reform favouring the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

[1] Kicová, M., 2019. 'Architektúra skupiny VAL', Master's thesis, Masaryk University, Department of Philosophy, Brno, pp. 32-36.

[3] VAL, 'Voies et aspects du lendemain' translates to 'Ways and Aspects of Tomorrow'. The letters V, A, L also refer to the first letters of the members' names; Viera, Alex, Ľudovít.

[4] Viera Mecková belongs to the first generation of women to enter the architecture profession in Slovakia and the only woman - up to now - whose lifetime achievement was recognised by winning Emil Belluš Prize.

Moravčíková, H., 2015. 'Invisible Architects: The First Generation of Women in Slovak Architecture', Architektúra & Urbanizmus, 1/2, pp. 82-103.

[6] Ragon, M., 1978. Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes / prospective et futurologie. Tournai: Casterman, pp. 112, 114, 349.

[7] Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part II.', Jazdec, 8/26, pp. 10-13.

[8] Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in RIHA Journal, 0179, pp. 22-26.

The first chapter presents the external influences, personal experiences and the art of Alex Mlynárčik—the conceptual artist and the founding member of VAL—as means to establish the lenses to contemplate the multiplicity in interpretation of VAL's utopian projects. The themes of monumentality and architecture as sculpture, prospective architecture described by Michel Ragon,[9] and the performative art influenced by Nouveau Réalisme are explored. The next three chapters introduce a selection of three of VAL's projects conceived between 1968 and 1994. The 'conceptually and technologically most ambitious'[10] Heliopolis—an Olympic city most in line with Ragon's futuristic ideology, Akusticon—kinetic concert hall and an interactive instrument, and the People's Assembly of Argillia which epitomises the inherent escapist nature in the architecture of VAL. The latter two suggest the counter-intuitive typology of monuments in contrast to the prospective nature of a utopia and all of the above actively blur any formal division between conceptual art and architecture. The last chapter then reflects on VAL and the perception of radical art and architecture of Central and Eastern Europe.

The speculative approach to present the prospective utopias of VAL along with the complexities and the contradictions inherent to the socio-cultural context of a totalitarian regime illustrates the design process as a form of individual escapism of the architect. In escapism an implicit act of resistance is suggested—'utopia as escapism, escapism as protest.' In that the thesis poses questions to the reader rather than providing straightforward answers. The aim of this thesis is not limited to VAL but rather in a broader sense it argues for the greater appreciation of the paradoxical—and often controversial—nature of Central and Eastern European art and architecture produced behind[11] the Iron Curtain. And asks for subversion of our expectations of what are the forms of an architectural dissent and social critique that architects can utilise by the means of experimentation and pushing the boundaries of art and architecture.

[9]Michel Ragon describes prospective architecture as feasible in the near future; architecture which is informed by technological progress and the techno-positive anticipation of it.

[10]Chalupecký, J., 1990. *Na hranicích umění. Několik příběhů.* Prague: Prostor, pp. 106-122.

[11]'Behind' as in East of the Iron Curtain is used here with irony as it suggests the reductive division of the countries to those 'in front' and 'behind' the curtain. A language that sustains the often polarising narrative.

(right page) photo taken during the 1997 VAL exhibition in Gallery Klasik in Žilina, Slovakia [source: archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič]

1.0
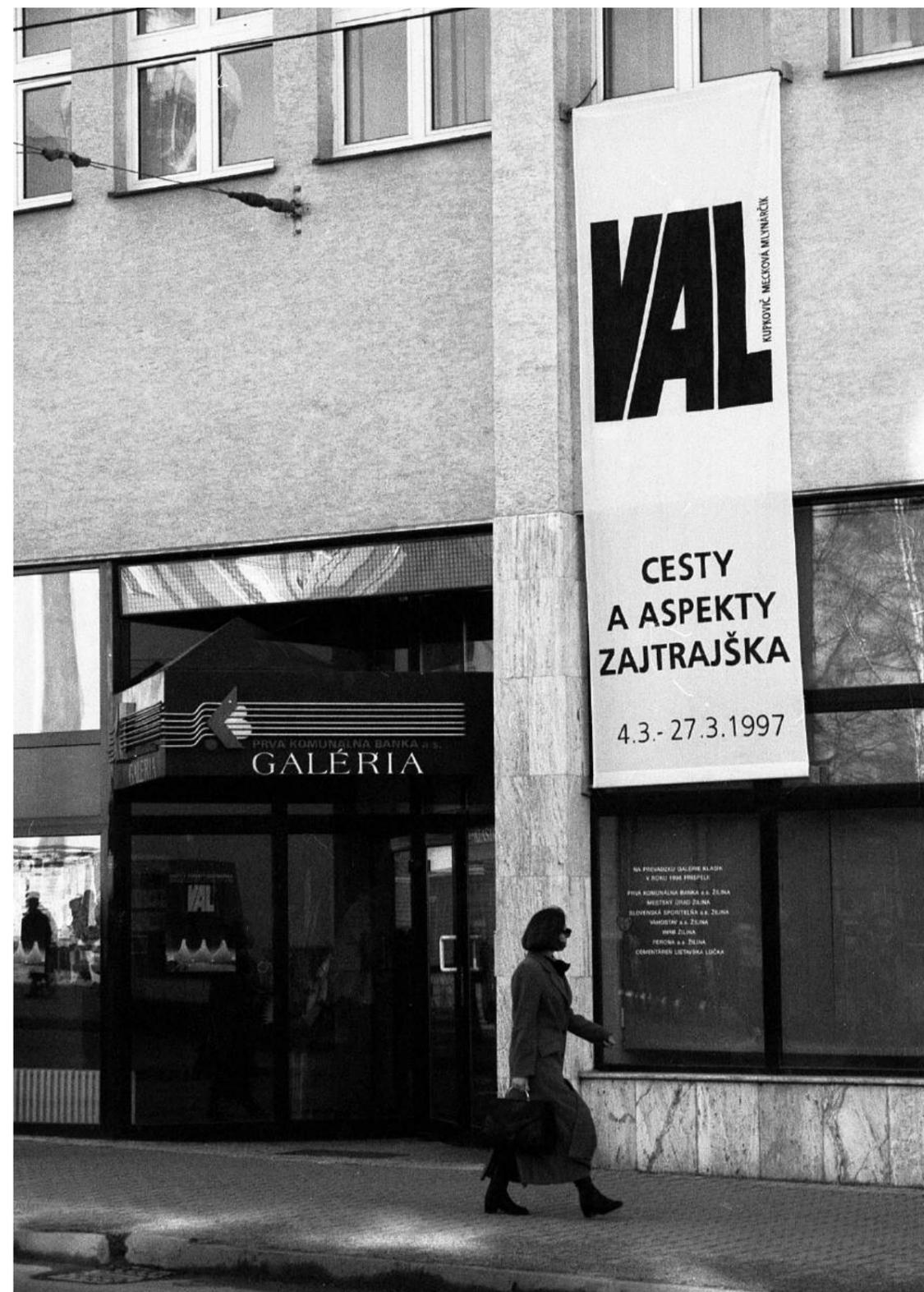
Alex Mlynárčik, the counter-architecture artist

The provocative title of 'the counter-architecture artist' stems from Michel Ragon's publication on prospective and futurist architecture. He argues that 'if the artists took on the role of architects and urban planners, it is only because the architects themselves renounced their duty as artists. It is the counter-architecture as an expression of lack, of frustration, of revolt against academism and modernism that lacks poetry and playfulness.'[1] Alex Mlynárčik's pneumatic monument, The Megaliths of XXI century, and some of VAL's projects are—according to Ragon—'exemplary architecture-sculptures'.[2] However, their revolt against academism or modernism is rather absent in comparison to Ragon's writing. Instead, the counter-architecture artist in the context of Czechoslovakia revolts against the limitations to express himself within his own discipline of conceptual and performative art, and turns to architecture as means to materialise an utopia.

Alex Mlynárčik's—the artist and the founding member of VAL—own individual conceptual work was an undeniable precedent for VAL's architectural conceptions. The action art,[3] the external influences, and the personal experiences and relationships establish lenses for understanding the context to VAL's interpretation. The themes of monumentality as a consequence of the design process, the prospective architecture as described by Michel Ragon and the conceptual art influenced by Pierre Restany's Nouveau Réalisme[4] serve to present the complex nature of VAL's projects which resist clearcut interpretation.

[1] Ragon, M., 1978. *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes / prospective et futurologie.* Tournai: Casterman, pp. 277.

[2] Ibid., pp. 298-300.

[3] Action art is used in reference to Alex Mlynárčik as a form of performance and conceptual art that engages its participants in staging the reality that is 'more interesting than fiction.' Read more in Milan Knížák's 1965 artwork *The Principles of Action Art According to Milan Knížák.*

[4] The 'nomadic' French art critic and cultural philosopher Pierre Restany engaged with the local art scenes at the peripheries across the globe, away from the known art capitals. Restany closely collaborated with Alex Mlynárčik during the normalisation, and after the 1989 Velvet Revolution was made an advisor to the Slovak Minister of Culture.

Wadstein MacLeod, K., 2021. 'Troubling Peripheries: Pierre Restany and Superlund', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History,* DOI:10.1080/00233609.2021.1884597.

1.1

architecture-sculpture and the monumental
[case: Monument to Jánošík (unbuilt, 1962), The Megaliths of XXI century (Châtillon,1968]

Sixteen-year-old Alex Mlynárčik was imprisoned in isolation for a year after being caught crossing the border to Austria in 1951. Ironically, only for his athletic achievements, he was allowed to study first at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava and later in Prague. Under the supervision of the artist, Vladimír Sychra, Mlynárčik designed The Monument to Juraj Jánošík (1962).[1]

The monument comprises five concrete pillars decorated in folk writings and mosaics, symbolising the five counties. The composition manipulates the light passing through at the different hours of the day as the interplay of light and shadow supposedly represents the movement and passing of life.[2] In this monument to a mythical legend of a highwayman,[3] the initial bridging between art and architecture or architecture-sculpture can be read. Michel Ragon described architecture-sculpture in opposition to sculptural architecture, as the former concerns 'the sculturers who disregard the function or architectural intent when designing the form, inspiring innovation in architects and engineers'.[4] This distinction refers to a translation of a plastic into architecture—the case of Akusticon.

Cytlak speculates the first architectural project of Mlynárčik to be The Megaliths of XXI century (1968), the pneumatic monument to French art critic R.J. Moulin for the contemporary art festival of *Châtillon des arts* in 1968. Seven inflated hoses (22 metre long, 1.3 metre-in-diameter) erected vertically in a circle. Mlynárčik drew his inspiration from Structures gonflables, an exposition by Utopie, to bridge architecture, technology, and society; and promote the *inflatable* in reference to fertility as a symbol of the future of humanity. Despite extensive effort, the megaliths proved impossible to lift once inflated and remained abandoned as a 'demonstration of man's failure'.[5] The event was later interpreted by the art critic Pierre Restany as a premonition of May 68, a period of civil unrest in France. Restany however noted it was the project's failure that generated the later significance of the artist's work.[6]

Mlynárčik's work in this sense formally aligned with the contemporary experimental architecture in France. However, he recalls the events of May 68 as a strange experience in contrast to what followed in August in Czechoslovakia the same year.[7][8] Therefore, his art must be read as influenced by the 'French' practice but conceptualised in—and for—the context of Czechoslovakia.

The two examples of architecture-sculptures can be viewed as precedents for the direction VAL later accepts. Not only concerning contemporary experimental practice, but in understanding of the paradoxical choice for the typology of monuments which permeates the artist's oeuvre. The symbolism in monuments to historical figures is a recurring theme in both Mlynárčik's sculptures and VAL's portfolio, whether taken sincerely—Akusticon, critically—Memorial to E.A. Cernan, or as an irony—Memorial to the king of Argillia.

More importantly, understanding the monumental tendencies in relation to the artist's own practice distances the interpretation of VAL as a visionary ideal of late modernism—even though reverberating modernism was characteristic of Czechoslovakia at the time. In the built projects of the architect Viera Mecková, almost 'mannerist tendencies towards modernist ideals' are visible in projects such as the design for the city hall in Žilina (1988) as Henrieta Moravčíková notes.[9]

[1] INDE. Directed by Juraj Nvota, Marian Urban, RTVS, FILMPARK production, UN film, 2018. dafilms.com, URL (https://dafilms.com/director/10515-juraj-nvota).

[2] Kicová, M., 2019. 'Architektúra skupiny VAL', Master's thesis, Masaryk University, Department of Philosophy, Brno, pp. 13-14.

[3] Highwayman stole from the rich travelers - and in the case of Jánošík - gave back to the poor.

[4] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 79-83.

[5] Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in *RIHA Journal,* 0179, pp. 14-16.

[6] Ibid., pp. 14-16.

[7] Soviet troops Invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968 as means to halt the reformist trends in Prague.

[8] INDE. Directed by Juraj Nvota, Marian Urban, RTVS, FILMPARK production, UN film, 2018. dafilms.com, URL (https://dafilms.com/director/10515-juraj-nvota).

[9] Moravčíková, H. in Ikony (Viera Mecková). Directed by Barbora Sliepková, ARTICHOKE, 2020. RTVS.sk, URL (https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/16250/243488).

(left page, top)
photo collage for The Monument to Juraj Jánošík (1962) by Alex Mlynárčik. (below) The artist in the atelier of Academy of Fine Arts in Prague [source: RTVS, FILMPARK production, UN film]

(right page, top)
photo collage for The Megaliths of XXI century (1968) by Alex Mlynárčik. [source: archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič]

(right page, below)
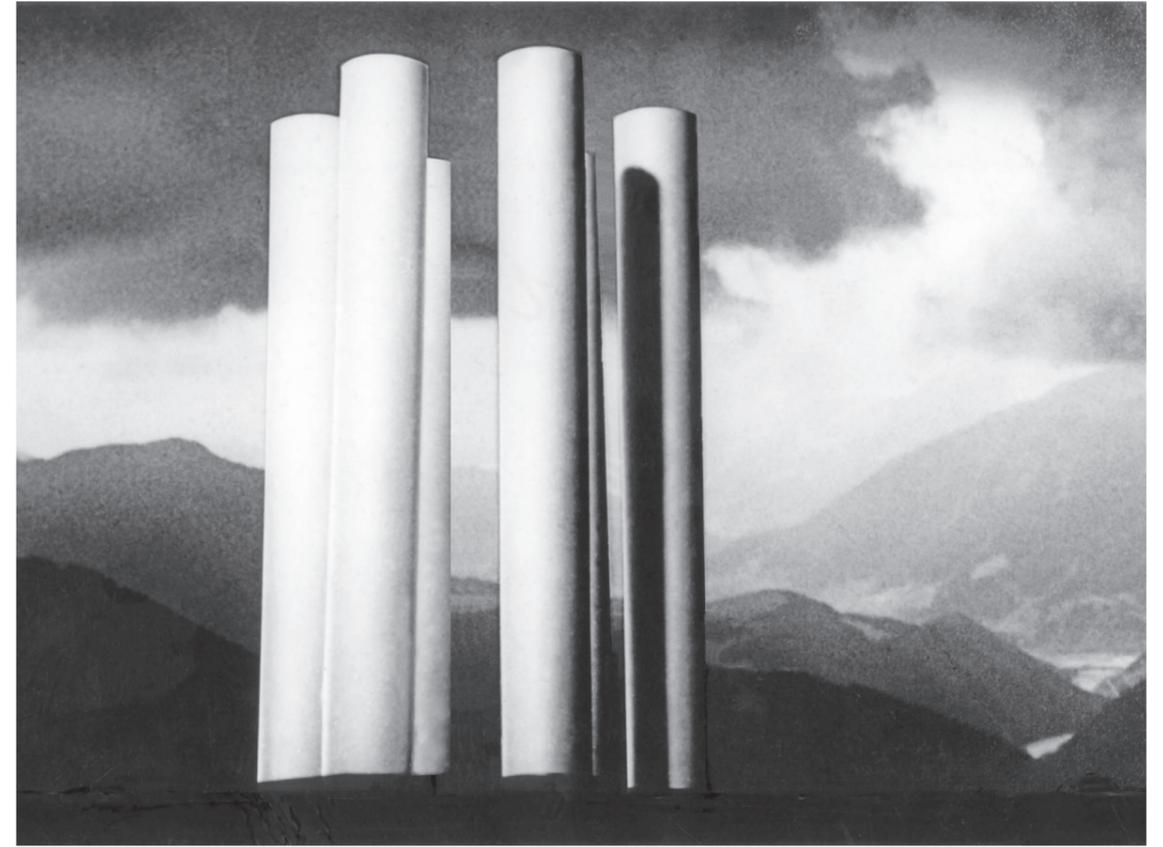Photo of the failed realisation of the installation in Châtillon [source: Cytlak, K., 2017. In 'L'architecture prospective en Tché-coslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon', *RIHA Journal,* 0179.]

1.2

Michel Ragon and the prospective
[case: Où Vivrons-Nous Demain? (1963), the GIAP manifesto (1965)]

The 50s and 60s were characterised by formal plurality, radical experimentation, and oscillation between architecture and visual arts. Dynamic megastructures and utopias beyond any structural limitation; but also happenings, temporary installations and new media confronted architecture and urbanism with revolutionary ideas on the future and often critical views on the present.

As a reaction to this movement, Michel Ragon denoted prospective architecture as distinct—or even in opposition—to these radical architectural experiments which 'consist of poetic and imprecise fantasies, without a tangible technical or scientific basis. Utopia is viewed as a negative modality of visionary architecture'.[1] In his publication *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?* (1963) and the *GIAP manifesto* [2] (1965), Ragon describes prospective architecture as feasible in the near future—architecture which is informed by technological progress and the techno-positive anticipation of it.

Ragon's terminology stemmed from the notion of *la prospective* by the philosopher Gaston Berger who developed the philosophy of rational anticipation of the development of the modern world based on Henri Bergson's phenomenological theory of the time. Bergson no longer considered the future as either an inscrutable mystery nor an inexorable destiny. Instead he argued the man's increased control over the environment would induce a modification of his understanding of time. Bergen advocated a conception of the future that presents openings for change, "to move from retrospection to prospection is not just to turn in a different direction; rather, it is to arm oneself for action."[3] A slogan that resonated in the 1965 *GIAP manifesto* signed by Yona Friedman, Paul Maymont and others, Ragon concluded with 'Against retrospective architecture. For prospective architecture,'[4] as means to stimulate innovation and technological progress provoked by architectural visions.

Ragon's ideology strongly resonated with VAL, declaring their own projects as prospective. The close relation between Alex Mlynárčik and the critic, whom he became acquainted with through Pierre Restany, certainly contributed to the mutual affection. The first publication of Heliopolis in *Chroniques de l'art vivant* came from Ragon and the critic later organised the first exhibition of VAL in 1977 Paris-based Galerie Lara Vincy with the subtitle "Exposition d'Architecture Prospective".[5] A year later, Ragon contributed to the relevance of VAL by including it in *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes / prospective et futurologie.* The critic listed Heliopolis in the chronology of the megastructure projects along those of Constant's New Babylon or Buckminster Fuller's Triton City, and included VAL among the research groups such as Situationists International, G.E.A.M. group and the Metabolists.[6] Ragon recognised the innovative character of VAL and placed the same level of importance on the architectural proposals produced on both sides of the Iron Curtain.[7]

Alex Mlynárčik portrayed Ragon's progressive theory as the primary impulz for VAL's activity.[8] The eight projects could illustrate the themes and the typologies of prospective architecture covered in *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?*, the Czech translation of Ragon's book. [9] [10] VAL's projects coincide with the chapters of the book, proposing megastructures, space colonies, kinetic, acoustic, pneumatic or underwater structures, architecture-sculptures and specific references to forms and construction methods. The eight projects

[10]It is relevant to acknowledge here that Ragon's publication was likely not the only source of inspiration. The same year, the urbanist Jiří Hrůza published *Města utopistů* (translation from Czech as 'The Cities of Utopists') which points to the experimental tendencies in architecture and urbanism.

[1]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in *RIHA Journal,* 0179.

[2]GIAP stands for Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective.

[3]Berger, G., 1964. 'The Prospective Attitude' in *Management International,* 4/3.

[4]GIAP, 1965. *Manifeste du Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective.* Paris.

[5]Poster for the exhibition 'Voies et Aspects de Lendemain', 1977. (see page 22)

[6]Ragon, M., 1978. *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes / prospective et futurologie.* Tournai: Casterman, pp. 112, 114, 349.

[7]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in *RIHA Journal,* 0179.

[8]Interview with Alex Mlynárčik, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 6 April 2021.

[9]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part II.', *Jazdec,* 8/26.

VOIES ET ASPECTS DE LENDEMAIN
EXPOSITION D' ARCHITECTURE PROSPECTIVE

VIERA MECKOVÁ
ALEX MLYNÁRČIK
ĽUDOVÍT KUPKOVIČ

PARIS 1977
GALERIE LARA VINCY - RUE DE SEINE
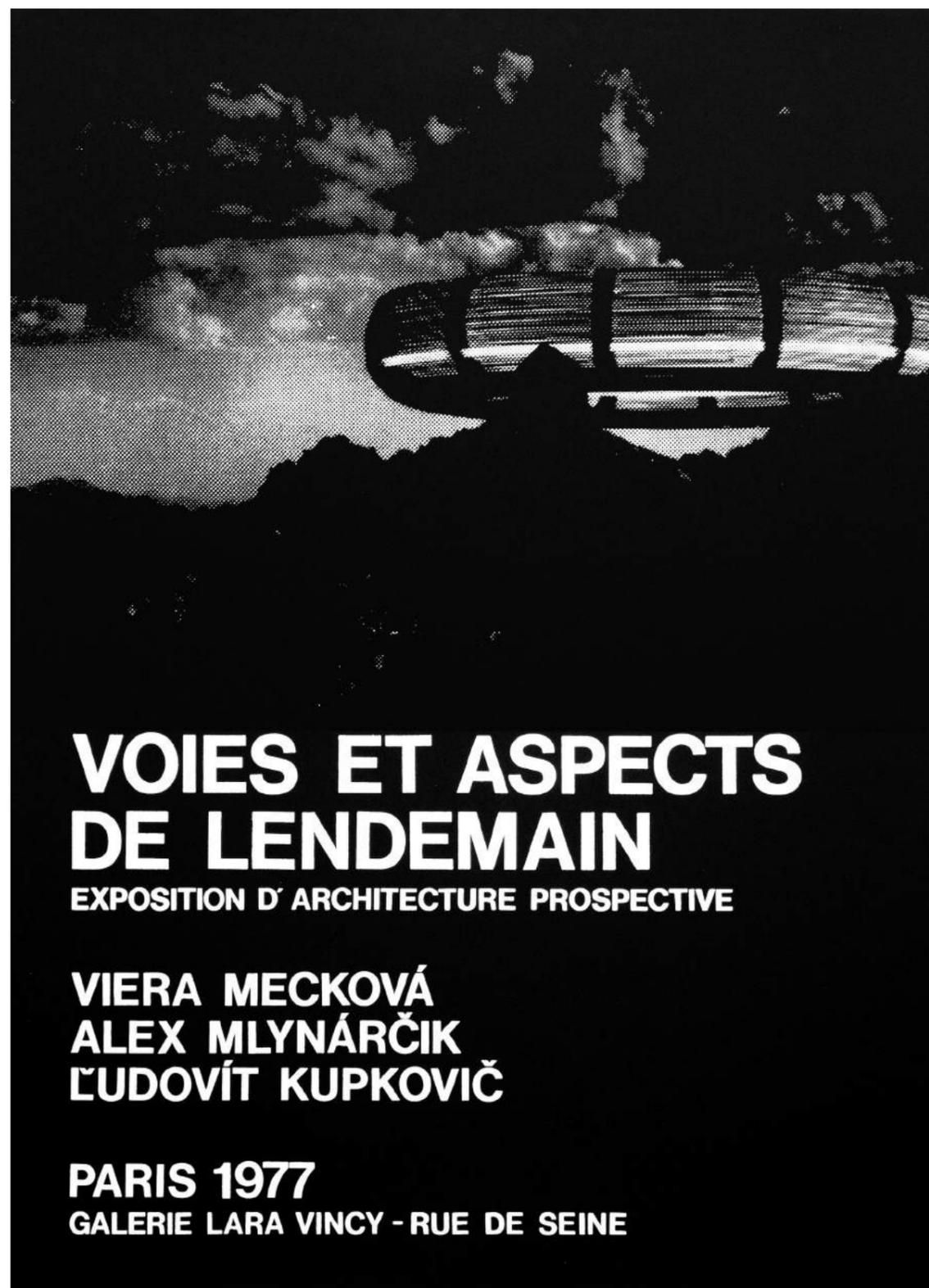
produced by the collective also addressed the critical themes of overpopulation, urbanisation, depleting energy resources, ecology and changing standards of living as outlined in the first chapters of *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?* and in the *GIAP manifesto* stating that 'Our cities, our territories are no longer adapted to these transformations. It becomes urgent to foresee and organise the future instead of submitting to it.'[11]

VAL's monumental proposals were placed within real context and documented as architectural projects in plans, sections and models. However, apart from the prospective ideology, the tendency to elaborate up to the standards of an architectural study can be read as the authors' need to express their creativity freed from the tangible limitations—and apart from the state managed institutions of which both the architects were a part of. Viera Mecková recalls the unfavourable professional conditions, absence of quality and quantity in terms of materials, options, project commissions, limitations of production and prefabrication, which all characterised the reality of architecture practice during the normalisation.[12]

The need for consulting the near-future technical feasibility with experts is stressed by Ragon and seconded by VAL. As stated in the manifesto, 'the GIAP aims to bring together all those: technicians, artists, sociologists and various specialists who are looking for new urban planning and architectural solutions.'[13] Ragon was convinced that 'proposing challenges compels specialists to give up on routine solutions and attempt to seek utopian solutions instead.'[14] The architect, Ľudovít Kupkovič, disclosed that he and the members of VAL 'have consulted the prospective proposals with collaborators and experts from the various fields of acoustics, astrophysics, astronomy, biology, theory and history of architecture, urbanism, infrastructure, ecology, electromechanics and more.'[15]

Unfortunately, despite the authors' recent affirmation, no verifiable documentation of such consultations was made public and potentially remains in the private archives, made inaccessible by COVID-19 restrictions (Spring 2021). In a recent documentary, an aerologist Ján Lukačko recalled conversations about the Heliopolis project with the architect Viera Mecková during their collaboration on the Aerological Observatory realisation (Gánovce, 1977). While the scientist held up a screen-print of Heliopolis on a translucent plastic against the window, he admitted that he had never seen the drawing or any technical documentation for the project.[16]

More relevant critique of prospective architecture comes from its lack of any social or political commentary as the designs do not present challenges to the status quo that goes beyond architectural or technological solutions. Ragon rather anticipates that technological advancement would naturally induce progressive changes in society.[17] Here the divergence between prospective architecture as defined by Ragon and VAL's own humanistic approach as a result of the sociocultural context in which the projects were conceptualised becomes clear. Despite the formal relations, VAL's projects are not pure prospective visions as they provide social critique and address issues of today by imagining a *better tomorrow*.

[11] GIAP, 1965. *Manifeste du Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective*. Paris.

[12] Ikony (Viera Mecková). Directed by Barbora Sliepková, ARTICHOKE, 2020. RTVS.sk, URL (https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/16250/243488).

[13] GIAP, 1965. *Manifeste du Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective*. Paris.

[14] Ragon, M., 1977. 'Heliopolis' in VAL (ed.) *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška*. The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.

[15] Interview with Ľudovít Kupkovič, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 5 April 2021.

[16] Ikony (Viera Mecková). Directed by Barbora Sliepková, ARTICHOKE, 2020. RTVS.sk, URL (https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/16250/243488).

[17] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra*. Prague: Mladá fronta.

(left page) Poster for the exhibition Voies et Aspects de Lendemain, 1977 [source: archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič]

1.3

action art and appropriation
[case: Happsoc I+II (Bratislava, 1965), Eva's Wedding (Žilina, 1972)]

If the parallels drawn between Alex Mlynárčik's architecture-sculptures and the monumentality readable in VAL's projects can be presented as salient, the conceptual art characteristic of the artist's oeuvre introduces new contextual layers to the interpretation of VAL.

In 1964, Alex Mlynárčik encountered Pierre Restany, a French art critic and cultural philosopher, in Galerie Lara Vincy in Paris.[1] The artists found an immediate affinity with Nouveau Réalisme, Restany's and Yves Klein's answer to the American Neo-Dada and Pop Art[2] as means to turn the artist's attention to the *ordinary life* and to seize art from gallery space and integrate it back into daily life. A task easier in the East than the West for an absence of commercial galleries and institutional support for the avant-garde practice. Klein advocated for the dematerialisation of the art itself in favour of gesture, a word, or *action*.[3]

The influence of Nouveau Réalisme is evident in Happsoc I+II, action art that Mlynárčik organised with Stano Filko and the theorist Zita Kostrová. The trio wrote a manifesto excising an event from the flow of everyday life and declaring it to be a work of art. Four hundred participants were invited to experience the city doubly, as a reality, and as a work of art to question their modes of seeing, experiencing, and perceiving reality. The authors state in the *"HAPPSOC"* manifesto, 'Happsoc is an action which provokes the perception of reality, taken out of the stereotype of its existence.'[4]

In Happsoc, the city of Bratislava and its society was declared an exhibition. The only physical documentation being the printed manifesto and two images of the official parades, "and they have a bureaucratic air that reflects the totalitarian aspirations of the work itself: it was impossible for the residents of Bratislava not to be part of Happsoc I, and presumably, any photograph taken between 2-9 May 1965 could conceivably form part of its documentation."[5] The event responded to two types of participation, the official parades and the artists' creation of invisible, involuntary, and imaginary participation. Chalupecký contemplates the interpretation falls on one's translation of 'happsoc' as either 'happy society' or 'happy socialism' which would imply a position of ironic distance towards these compulsory celebrations.[6]

According to Rusinová, Alex Mlynárčik contributed to the establishment of action art as one of the prevailing tendencies in Slovakia in the 60s. Happenings, art performances, and events became an established form for the upcoming generation of artists. In relation to Mlynárčik and associated artists, Rusinová alludes to the act of appropriation in conceptual art in reference to Marcel Duchamp and Dada. However, as opposed to the *readymades*, in the context of Czechoslovak conceptual art, she describes appropriation as material or ideological use of pre-existing objects or art pieces with the intention to complete or otherwise manipulate.[7] [8]

In VAL's architecture—just as can be argued for any 'original' design—architectural or artistic references occur throughout. However, in VAL's portfolio, there are instances where the designs are not merely used as references but are explicitly utilised and cited; to complete the Babylon tower in the design of E-TEMEN-AN-KI, or to manipulate Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's design for VAL's People's Assembly of Argillia. This direct source of inspiration does

[1] The artist recalls their encounter and evolving close friendship in the documentary INDE (2018).

[2] Pop art as an art movement emerged in the 50s UK and US. As opposed to the *elitist*, pop art challenged the traditions of fine arts by focusing on pop and mass culture imagery, advertising, comic books or ordinary mass produced objects; emphasizing the banal, the kitsch, often through irony.

[3] Chalupecký, J., 1990. *Na hranicích umění. Několik příběhů.* Prague: Prostor, pp 106-122.

[4] Filko, S., Kostrová, Z., Mlynárčik, A., (1965). *Manifest "HAPPSOC".* Bratislava.

[5] Bishop, C., 2012. *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London: Verso, pp. 141-147.

[6] Ibid., pp. 141-147.

[7] Rusinová, Z., 2001. *Umenie akcie 1965-1989.* Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, pp 189-191.

[8] Note that her description differs from *appropriation art* in relation to readymades that undergo little or no transformation. Inherent to *appropriation art* is that the new artwork becomes recontextualized while the original remains intact.

Eva's Wedding (Žilina, 1972)

[top] Photo documentation of Eva's Wedding, 1972, Alex Mlynárčik. [source: Boris Krsnak, independent-collectors.com]

[left] Photo documentation of Eva's Wedding, 1972, Alex Mlynárčik. [source: Miloš Vančo, art and concept gallery, artandconcept.eu]

Pierre Restany (in the bottom middle) was invited to act as the master of ceremonies in Eva's Wedding.

not deprive VAL projects of their originality if we consider using the term 'appropriation' in VAL's architecture in the very same way as it is used for Alex Mlynárčik's art. Havránek raises an interesting point in relation to how the intensity of interpretation has the potential to multiply the quality of the original. "Interpreter […] gives form to the original work. His approach depends on different phenomena: from the selection of an artwork to his understanding of it—all is up to his own creative potentiality. The form of the interpretation in the field of the visual art can be placed next to the interpretation of music or acting or can be compared with the realization of an architectural design."[9]

A case for appropriation in the artist's oeuvre is the performance of Eva's Wedding (Žilina, 1972). Based on the recreation of the Slovak artist L'udovít Fulla's painting Village Wedding (1946), Mlynárčik organised a real wedding ceremony as a readymade theatrical event. This example of Mlynárčik's participatory work alluded to vernacular festive tradition and art history, involving people unaware of their participation in this socially-engaged art. In addition to interpreting existing artwork, "The key element of these actions was the appropriation of reality: they were taking already existing situations or rituals and turning them into art. There were some participants that didn't know they were taking part in an art action. They thought it was a real wedding."[10]

The event was called 'an insult to Slovak culture' and Mlynárčik was dismissed from the Union of Soviet Artists.[11] Unable to exhibit his further work it reveals "the gap between Mlynárčik's optimistic rhetoric and the dominant conditions of normalisation: the celebratory tone of his permanent manifestations […] seem strikingly in disaccord with political reality".[12] Same year as Eva's Wedding took place, the congress of the Union of Soviet Artists passed a resolution endorsing Socialist Realism and a uniform cultural policy in which the binding criterion for art was Marxist-Leninist theory. Alternative art was forced into privacy and many artists found themselves excluded from the public realm. 'Nothing but Socialist Realism in the Socialist Czechoslovakia. Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne were forbidden even in the libraries. Architecture must have resembled the Socialist Architecture and become a kitsch of itself.'[13]

Alex Mlynárčik and associated Slovak artists present a challenge for Western European interpretation keen on finding "heroic gestures of dissident opposition to totalitarian regimes."[14] Unable to express social critique without censorship, his participatory art was the means to live manageably within the unfavourable conditions. That is not to suggest that their escapism was in fact uncritical, "events like Eva's Wedding are unquestionably compensatory: a utopian fantasy geared towards the co-creation of a more tolerable experience of the everyday, an escape through festivity and hommage".[15] Instead of destructive or absurdist expression, Mlynárčik gears his utopian altruism and extrovertness towards hope in the genesis of a new culture; creatively individual, free and playful. Naturally, after 1972, Mlynárčik's action art became illegal and the artist seeked for expression in a new form—architecture—as the founding member of VAL collective.

[9] Havránek, V., 2009. '[Let me…]' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). In english po polsku. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 71.

[10] Pospiszyl, T., 2009. 'Remarks and Comments: Discussion on The Zalesie Ball and Participation' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). In english po polsku. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 110. (transcribed discussion between Tomaš Pospiszyl, Claire Bishop and others)

[11] Prior to this, in 1966 Alex Mlynárčik was expelled as the teaching assistant from Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava for exhibiting 7 mirrors at the public toilets in the center of Bratislava 'for everyone to look at their own misery', (INDE, 2018) in relation to the art critics' congress AICA II. happening at the time.

[12] Bishop, C., 2012. Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London: Verso, pp. 141-147.

[13] Interview with Alex Mlynárčik, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 6 April 2021.

[14] Bishop, C., 2012. Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London: Verso, p. 148.

[15] Ibid., pp. 141-147.

2.0

Heliopolis, Olympic city
and the conception of VAL in 1968 Czechoslovakia

As an expected consequence of normalisation, performative art and other forms of alternative art practice were expelled to the margins of the city as means to avoid surveillance. The act of art production took place often illegally, either in private ateliers and bars,[1] or hidden in the openness of the natural landscapes and mountains. "The landscape stands as a symbolic escape from contemporary social reality organised by bureaucratic directives, and perhaps also as an assertion of Slovak national identity."[2] In this atmosphere, potentially also inspired by the forced rural relocation, Mlynárčik imagined Heliopolis, design for 1984 Olympic city,[3] and he invited the architects Viera Mecková and Ľudovít Kupkovič to collaborate on this first and 'conceptually and technologically most ambitious of VAL's projects'.[4]

The form of the Heliopolis city can be described as a bird nest that rests suspended in between the crests of the Tatra mountains—the highest in Slovakia. Michel Ragon described it as 'a flying saucer between sky and earth, sparkling with a thousand lights. Imagine it in winter, covered in snow, white as an ivory bracelet. Imagine it in summer, with its promenade and solarium terraces.'[5] Ragon suggested that in Heliopolis, VAL found the best organisational solution for a macrostructure.[6] Heliopolis was conceptualised as a recreational city to house 10,000 inhabitants + 50,000 tourists concentrated within the 200-metre-high, 1,2-kilometre-wide ring sitting at 2-kilometre-high summit. The sixty functionally homogeneous levels comprise three zones; dwelling, communal areas, and infrastructure and technical space.

The proposal was a reaction to the thread of overtourism to the natural landscape. The problem—global in scale—was described by Ragon[7] but in the local context of the Tatra mountains materialised during the extensive construction period in the anticipation of the FIS Nordic World Ski Championship in 1970 Czechoslovakia. An urban zoning study was therefore part of Heliopolis and can be read as a critical reaction to the poor urban planning response and neglected nature conservation. VAL suggested four functional zones of Tatras National Park, each utilised with different intensity from the air-conditioned Olympic zone for winter sports to a natural reservation of fauna and flora made inaccessible, "a natural counter-monument to man's destructive capacities."[8] Crowley saw in the utopian architecture built from the dystopian logic of environmentalism an act of provocation, "to question the limits of progress was to issue a challenge to official state doctrine, Communism."[9]

Outside of the Heliopolis macrostructure no development was to take place. The infrastructure master plan considered public transport as well as connection to the nearest airport and a pneumatic metro. Heliopolis was designed to meet the demand for winter recreation, while avoiding distorting the natural beauty of the region by dispersion. At the same time, it was the architects' intention for the rational form to stand in stark contrast to the surrounding mountain range.[10] However, the enclosed macrostructure could with its own architectural monumentality compete with the monumentality of the natural landscape.[11]

VAL saw Heliopolis not just as a futuristic utopia, 'but rather as the most tantalising synthesis between our physical and technical capacities on one hand, and the real needs of both men and nature on the other.'[12]

[1] "Artists had no place to exhibit, so they started to meet in the only section of the public sphere that was free for them. And that was bars."

Pospiszyl, T., 2009. 'Discussion on The Zalesie Ball and Participation' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). *In english po polsku.* Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 110.

[2] Bishop, C., 2012. *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London: Verso, pp. 141-147.

[3] Czechoslovakia was considered a candidate at the time but the 1984 Olympic games took place in Sarajevo instead.

[4] Chalupecký, J., 1990. *Na hranicích umění. Několik příběhů.* Prague: Prostor, pp. 106-122.

[5] Ragon, M., 1978. *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes / prospective et futurologie.* Tournai: Casterman, p. 349.

[6] Ragon, M., 1977. 'Heliopolis' in VAL (ed.) *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.* The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.
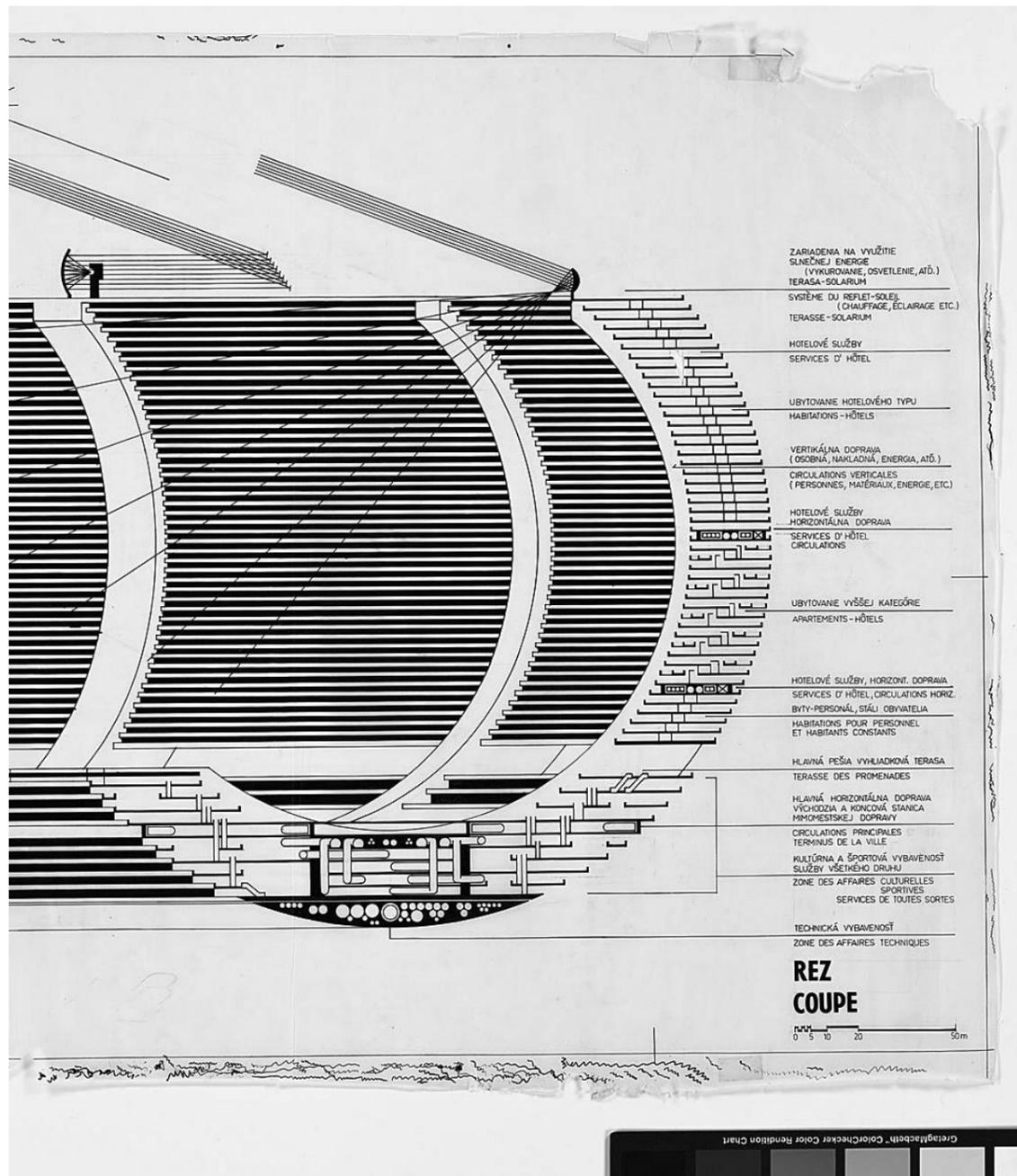
[7] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 146-147.

[8] Crowley, D., 2011. 'Cold War Landscapes. Looking Down on Spaceship Earth' in *Autoportret,* 2/34, p. 57.

[9] Ibid., p. 57.

[10] VAL, 1995. *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.*

[11] Chalupecký, J., 1990. *Na hranicích umění. Několik příběhů.* Prague: Prostor, pp. 106-122.

ZARIADENIA NA VYUŽITIE
SLNEČNEJ ENERGIE
(VYKUROVANIE, OSVETLENIE, ATĎ.)
TERASA-SOLARIUM

SYSTÈME DU REFLET-SOLEJ,
(CHAUFFAGE, ÉCLAIRAGE ETC.)
TERASSE-SOLARIUM

HOTELOVÉ SLUŽBY
SERVICES D' HÔTEL

UBYTOVANIE HOTELOVÉHO TYPU
HABITATIONS –HÔTELS

VERTIKÁLNA DOPRAVA
(OSOBNÁ, NÁKLADNÁ, ENERGIA, ATĎ.)
CIRCULATIONS VERTICALES
(PERSONNES, MATÉRIAUX, ENERGIE, ETC.)

HOTELOVÉ SLUŽBY
HORIZONTÁLNA DOPRAVA
'SERVICES D' HÔTEL
CIRCULATIONS

UBYTOVANIE VYŠŠEJ KATEGÓRIE
APARTEMENTS – HÔTELS

HOTELOVÉ SLUŽBY, HORIZONT. DOPRAVA
SERVICES D' HÔTEL, CIRCULATIONS HORIZ.
BYTY-PERSONÁL, STÁLI OBYVATELIA
HABITATIONS POUR PERSONNEL
ET HABITANTS CONSTANTS

HLAVNÁ PEŠIA VYHLIADKOVÁ TERASA
TERASSE DES PROMENADES

HLAVNÁ HORIZONTÁLNA DOPRAVA
VÝCHODZIA A KONCOVÁ STANICA
MIMOMESTSKEJ DOPRAVY
CIRCULATIONS PRINCIPALES
TERMINUS DE LA VILLE

KULTÚRNA A ŠPORTOVÁ VYBAVENOSŤ
SLUŽBY VŠETKÉHO DRUHU
ZONE DES AFFAIRES CULTURELLES
SPORTIVES
SERVICES DE TOUTES SORTES

TECHNICKÁ VYBAVENOSŤ
ZONE DES AFFAIRES TECHNIQUES

REZ
COUPE

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VAL, project documen-
tation for Heliopolis,
section. [source: Olo-
mouc Museum of Art]

In line with Ragon's prospective research, Heliopolis was a fully explored architectural study including the urban zoning proposal. According to the architects, the project was consulted with experts in infrastructure, energy and ecology. The macrostructure, however, not only presents an aggressive intervention to the natural landscape but is 'an absurd proposal by today's ecological standard.'[13] VAL proposed to air-condition the entire Olympic zone, the valleys externally and the various competitive runs and sports areas internally—according to Ragon's recommendations utilising solar energy. The architects' optimistic view on indoor micro-climates found its parallel in Ragon's *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?* descriptions of Buckminster-Fuller's Manhattan geodome and Yona Friedman's visions for the whole climatised cities.[14]

However, in opposition to Ragon's lack of social critique, Heliopolis can be read as an act of political resistance to authoritarian power in its design of communal and public space. Multiple levels of the ring comprise interior and exterior terraces and promenades, communal areas, shopping and services. Overall assigning 34,3 metre^2 communal area per resident.[15]

The attention to design for recreation and leisure is according to Cytlak indic-ative of VAL's desire 'to create egalitarian spaces; renouncing the hierarchy in the name of the new collectivism that is more playful than the reality the Czechoslovak citizens would experience on a daily basis.'[16] Cytlak refers to the formal parallels with the concept of *homo ludens* proposed by Constant in his design of New Babylon which too comprised micro climates fostering common activities. Unlike Constant and other Western contemporaries, VAL's attention to communal and public is not a critique of capitalism nor fasci-nation with consumerism, but a critique of the reality of normalisation. 'It is not material abundance that constitutes the background of VAL's projects, but rather the depression of economic life. [...] The themes of entertainment and commerce, which are of considerable importance in VAL's projects, are two aspects of urban life that are very neglected in an era when public space is only a space in which power exercises its control over the citizens.'[17] In Heliopolis, an act of silent resistance is detectable, and in that the utopia created by VAL serves as means to consider—at least theoretically—the possibility of sociopolitical change.

The first of VAL's projects, Heliopolis remains the 'poster child' for experimen-tal architecture in the normalisation period of Czechoslovakia. The macro-structure was included at the 2008 London exhibition Cold War Modern: Art & Design in a Divided World 1945-1975, the first to examine the contemporary design, architecture, and pop culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War era.

[12] VAL, 1995. *VAL Ces-ty a aspekty zajtrajška.*

[13] Moravčíková, H., Dulla, M., 2002. *Ar-chitektúra Slovenska v 20. Storočí.* Bratislava: Slovart, pp. 334-335.

[14] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žit zitra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 137-139.

[15] VAL, 1995. *VAL Ces-ty a aspekty zajtrajška.*

[16] Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture pro-spective en Tché-coslovaquie. Conver-gences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in *RIHA Journal,* 0179, pp. 22-26.

[17] Ibid., pp. 22-26.
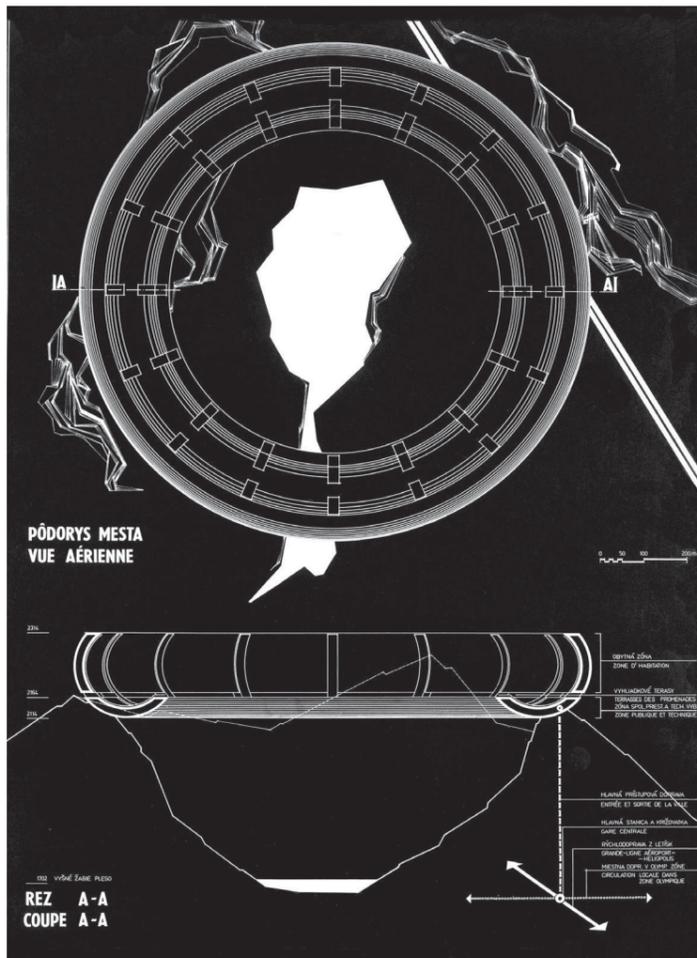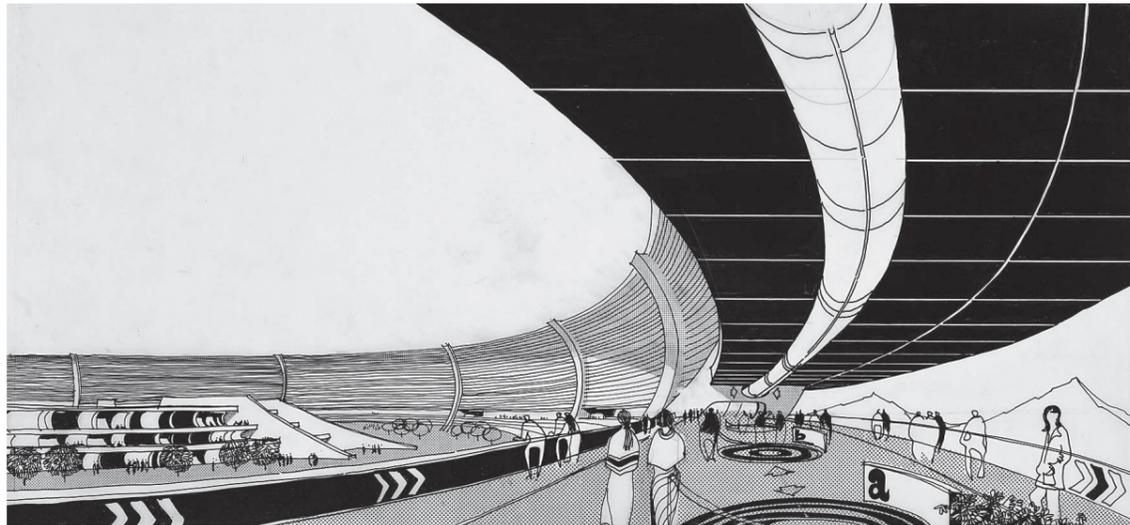
VAL, project documentation for Heliopolis, (left page, top) exterior promenade, (below) section and plan, (right page, top) photocollage [source: Olomouc Museum of Art]

(right page, bottom) Viera Mecková going through the urban zoning plan for Heliopolis in the documentary IKONY. [source: RTVS.sk]

3.0

Akusticon
homage to Miroslav Filip 1969 - 1971

Akusticon can be introduced doubly as a kinetic concert hall and an interactive musical instrument. Before the project was developed by VAL, it was first conceptualised in 1969 by Alex Mlynárčik as a 50-centimetre egg-shaped performative plastic,[1] fitted with percussion instruments—bells—inside of its hollow form. Each plastic was stamped with the title Miss Pogany Flirt, and multiple were intended for an exhibition at St. Mark's Square in Venice.[2] The eggs were to be scattered across the square so that the pedestrians actively participate in the creation of a promenade concert as they collide and the eggs oscillate and chime. Instead, the performance was realized in the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan 1969.

Akusticon is, in essence, a scaled-up version of Miss Pogany Flirt, further blurring the border between fine arts and architecture. The 18-metre-high, 13-metre-in-diameter ovoid form is held in equilibrium by balancing weight at its tip—Columbus egg. The architects imagined an electromagnetic anchor at its base, a circular platform surrounded by water so that from a distance, the volume appears to levitate—almost weightless.

In line with Ragon's prospective attitude, Akusticon is a case for collaboration with experts. Miroslav Filip was invited to cooperate with VAL in the field of acoustics and musical theory. Filip promoted the creative use of natural science in musicology and was himself an author of patented musical inventions. Akusticon can too be read as a musical instrument. Similar to Miss Pogany Flirt's percussion, Akusticon is conceptualised as a performative sculpture.

The audience initiates the sound performance by moving through the ascending and descending spirals and momentarily interrupt the mutually interactive light rays which pierce the interior space. The audience realises the concert; the pitch, tone, and sound continuity correspond to the light ray interplay. Simultaneously, one primary beam of light responds to the others in the main oscillation programmable by the conductor and translates into the vibration of the whole structure. Therefore, there is an act of intervention by the artist who has some influence on the overall performance.[3]

Akusticon is an exemplary architecture-sculpture. The literal form of the plastic was translated into the kinetic architecture of a performative space. The out-of-scale monumentality is not the intention but an inherent consequence of the design process—the monumentality that differs from the inhumane scalelessness proposed by Le Ricolais as a natural consequence of human progress as recalled by Michel Ragon in *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?*[4]

Pierre Restany presumably credited Tomáš Štrauss with the idea to translate the plastic to Akusticon.[6] However, a likely impulse for Akusticon as a whole originated in Michel Ragon *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?*'s chapter on the ovoid forms.[7] Ragon suggested the *egg* as the aerodynamic form for experimental architectural exploration due to its thin outer member's ability to withstand great structural tension. Ragon also alluded to Constantin Brâncuşi,[8] who 'through abstraction rediscovered the archetypal ovoid form in sculpture.'[9] Alex Mlynárčik cites Brâncuşi's Mademoiselle Pogany[10] (1913) as his inspiration for the installation of Miss Pogany Flirt—the precedent for Akusticon.

[1] A 'plastic' refers to an art form that engages physical manipulation of a plastic medium by means of molding, modeling, or carving, such as a sculpture or ceramics. The term in art preceded the use of 'plastics' for any synthetic material.

[2] Šmejkal, in his text *A Cosmic Egg* (1975), suggests that the scattered eggs were to invoke a grouping of pigeons at the principal public square in Venice.

[3] VAL, 1995. *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.* The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.

[4] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 37-39.

[5] Tomáš Štrauss was Slovak art critic and a key theoretician of the postwar neo-avant-gardes in Central and Eastern Europe.

[6] Šmejkal, F., 1975. 'A Cosmic Egg' in VAL (ed.) *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.* The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.

[7] Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 62-63.

[8] Constantin Brâncuşi was an influential French-Romanian sculptor, considered to be one of the founding figures of modernism. Through radically simplified figurative forms - in bronze, marble, stone, and wood - Brâncuşi reexamined representation and questioned realism, preferring that his sculptures evoke
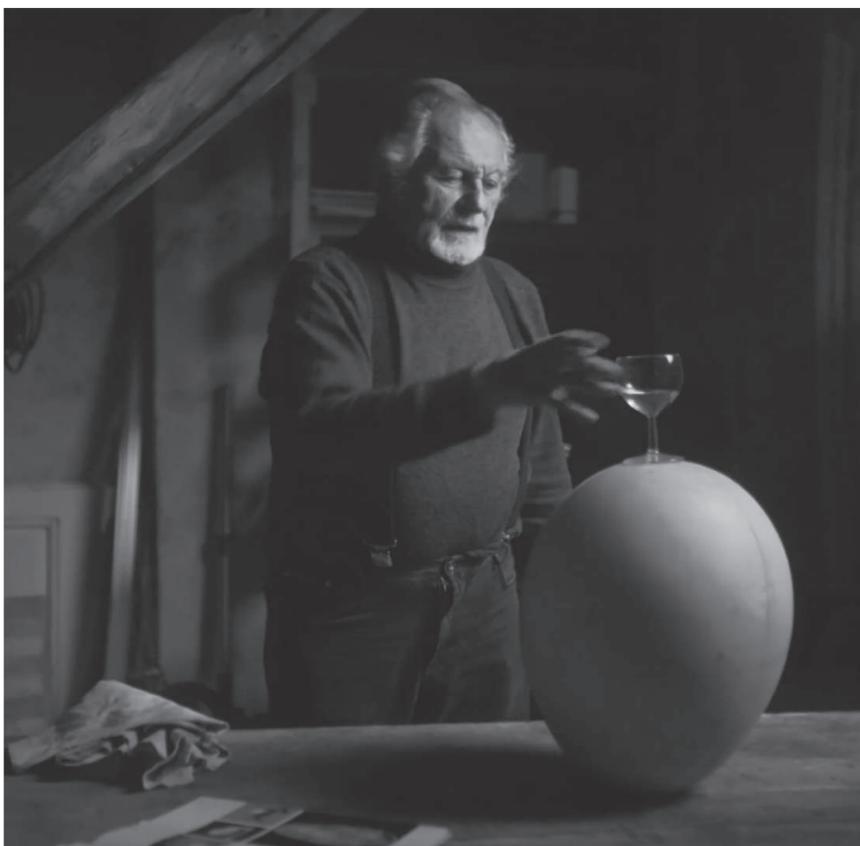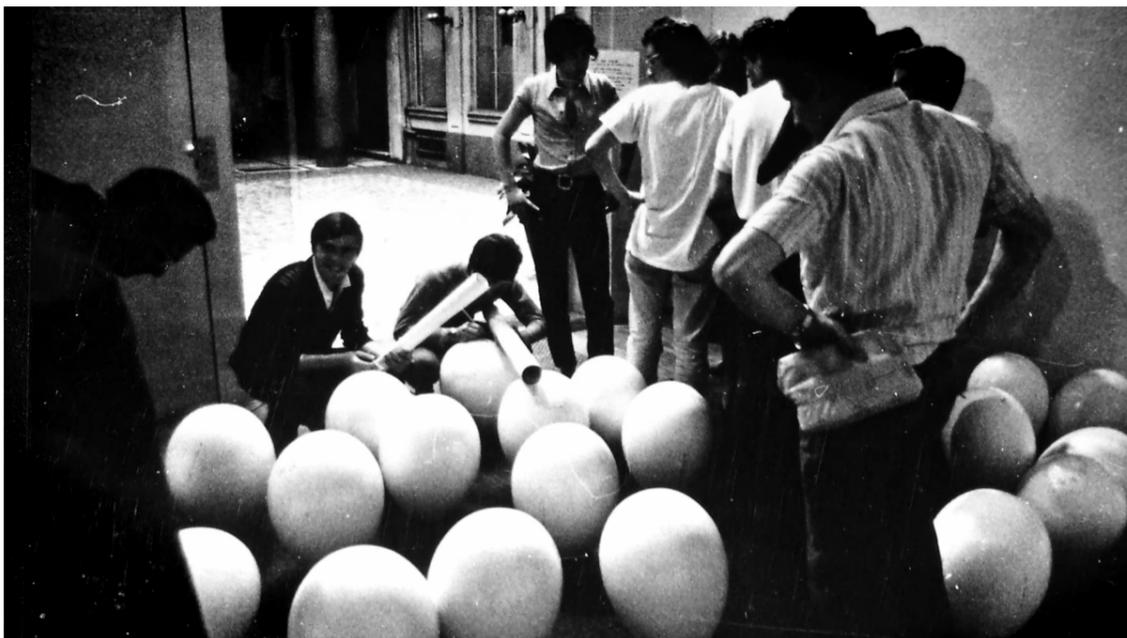
(top) Photo of the installation Miss Pogany Flirt, likely in the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan, 1969, in the documentary INDE. [source: RTVS, FILM-PARK production, UN film]

(bottom) Alex Mlynárčik balancing a glass of wine on top of the scaled model for Akusticon in the documentary IKONY. [source: RTVS.sk]

In the same chapter of *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?* an incentive for the musical typology appeared too. Ragon suggested that new forms of theatre and performance space seek their realisation in the form of ovoid or globe, naming Nicolas Schöffer and Jacques Polieri as pioneers.[11] Schöffer's perplexing Kinetic-Op sculptures embraced the—at the time—innovative research in cybernetics, interacting with humans and its environment. In his kinetic spaces, "word and tone, movement and space, light and color, form a theoretical citywide *gesamtkunstwerk* total-art continuum in real-time."[12] Jacques Polieri searched for an avant-garde redefinition of theater space in the mobility of all its elements and components to generate a dynamic experience during the performance.[13] Formal parallels can be drawn regarding Akusticon, in the spiral ramps and mobility of Polieri's Kinetic Theatre Space (c. 1960), and in the interactive experience of light and sound of Schöffer's cybernetic space.

The act of scaling and monumentalisation of an everyday object relates to the contemporary art tendencies in 70s Eastern Europe. The objects were either exaggerated in a sculpture or scaled up in a photo collage to achieve an apparent monumentality. The practice was typical of artists and architects alike. Exemplary was Tadeusz Kantor's Architektura niemożliwa (translates from Polish to 'Impossible architecture', c. 1970).[14] Alex Mlynárčik subsequently produced Skrutky I., II. (1976), photo collage duo formally in line with the documentation for Akusticon. If contemporaneously conceived in Western Europe, the piece could be interpreted as pop art about consumerism and hedonism, however, Cytlak considers the scaling-up of everyday objects in the context of Central and Eastern European economic depression as being closer to conceptual art. 'The material absence leads to a search for alternative expression. The artist turns to his surroundings, appropriating objects from everyday reality and exciting them into a piece of art.'[15]

The themes of Nouveau Réalisme explored by Alex Mlynárčik in Happsoc I+II or Eva's wedding action art follow the same line of exciting ordinary events and day-to-day experiences to an act of an artistic performance. A parallel can be drawn between Skrutky and Akusticon, which both allude to the same abstract notions—and potentially same criticism—but since performative art was made illegal, utopian architecture offered a medium more acceptable for the regime, in contrast to the festive performances which addressed masses and often involved public unaware of its participation.

rather than resemble the subject. He exploited ovoid and elliptical forms to evoke movement, repose, or spiritual reflection.

[9]Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 62-63. (translated from Czech by Dominika Kopiarová)

[10]The highly stylized and simplified form of Mlle Pogany is an unconventional portrait of an artist Margit Pogany that Brâncuşi initially carved out of marble from memory and later cast four versions of, including the version I in bronze (1913).

[11]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

[12]Nechvatal, J., 2018. 'The Visionary Modernist Experiments of Nicolas Schöffer', *Hyperallergic*, [online]. Available at: https://hyperallergic.com/440598/nicolas-schoffer-retrospective/ (10 March 2021)

[13]Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 151-153.

[14]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part I.,' *Jazdec*, 7/25, pp. 12-14.

[15]Kicová, M., 2019. 'Architektúra skupiny VAL', Master's thesis, Masaryk University, Department of Philosophy, Brno, pp. 46-47. (translated from Slovak by Dominika Kopiarová)
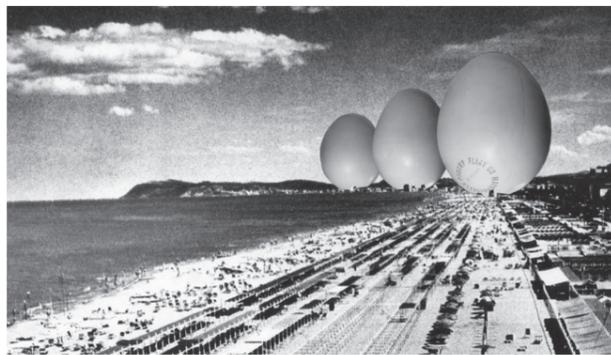
(left page, top) VAL,
project documentation
for Akusticon, photo
collage.
[source: The Museum
of Art in Žilina]

(left page, bottom) The
monumentalisation
of everyday objects in
art of Alex Mlynárčik,
Skrutky I. (1976), title
unknown (n.d.).
[source: private archive
of Alex Mlynárčik]

(right page) VAL,
project documentation
for Akusticon, sections
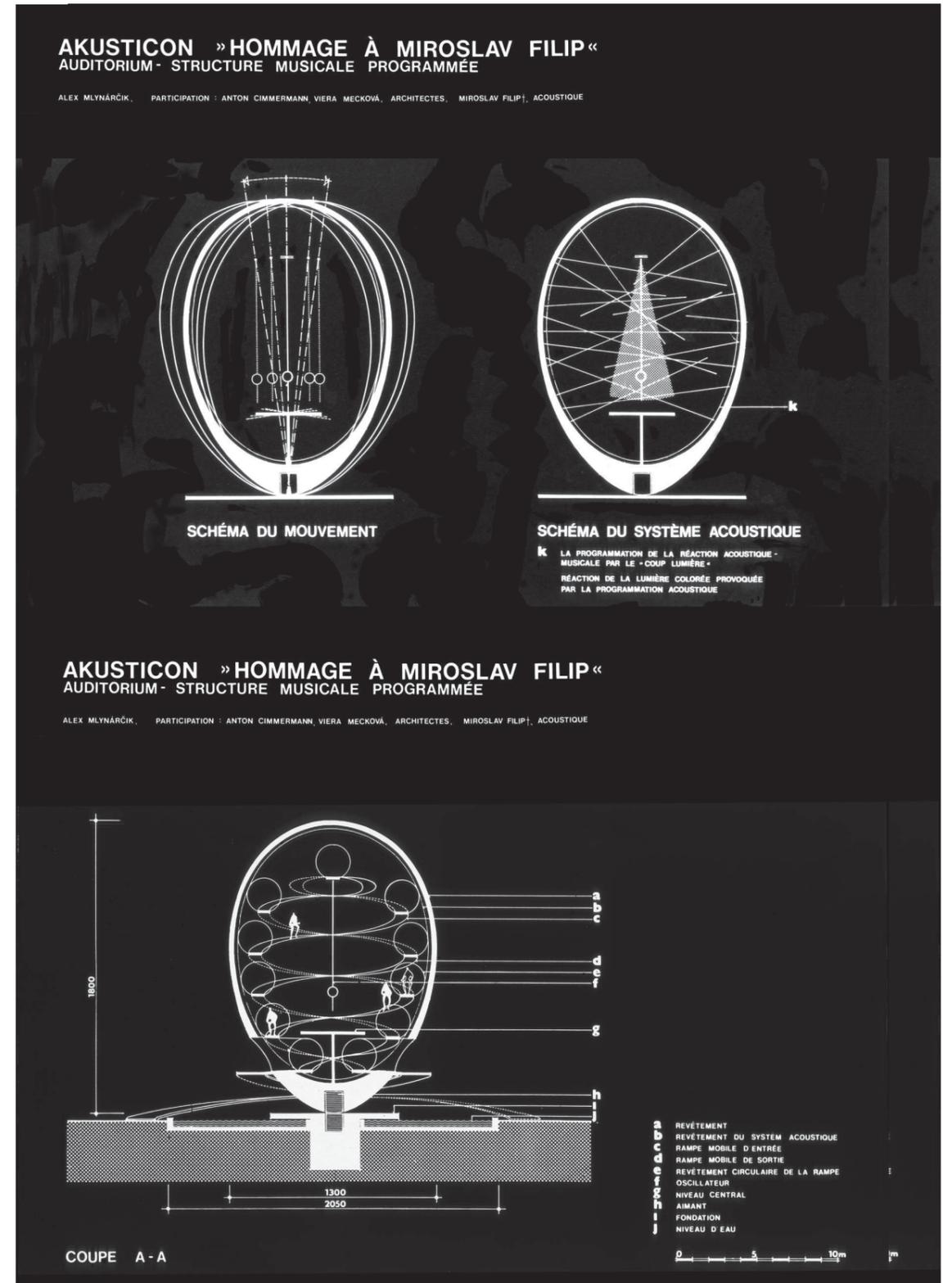[source: The Museum
of Art in Žilina]

AKUSTICON »HOMMAGE À MIROSLAV FILIP«
AUDITORIUM - STRUCTURE MUSICALE PROGRAMMÉE

ALEX MLYNÁRČIK, PARTICIPATION : ANTON CIMMERMANN, VIERA MECKOVÁ, ARCHITECTES, MIROSLAV FILIP†, ACOUSTIQUE

SCHÉMA DU MOUVEMENT

SCHÉMA DU SYSTÈME ACOUSTIQUE

k LA PROGRAMMATION DE LA RÉACTION ACOUSTIQUE -
MUSICALE PAR LE « COUP LUMIÈRE »
RÉACTION DE LA LUMIÈRE COLORÉE PROVOQUÉE
PAR LA PROGRAMMATION ACOUSTIQUE

AKUSTICON »HOMMAGE À MIROSLAV FILIP«
AUDITORIUM - STRUCTURE MUSICALE PROGRAMMÉE

ALEX MLYNÁRČIK, PARTICIPATION : ANTON CIMMERMANN, VIERA MECKOVÁ, ARCHITECTES, MIROSLAV FILIP†, ACOUSTIQUE

a REVÊTEMENT
b REVÊTEMENT DU SYSTÈM ACOUSTIQUE
c RAMPE MOBILE D'ENTRÉE
d RAMPE MOBILE DE SORTIE
e REVÊTEMENT CIRCULAIRE DE LA RAMPE
f OSCILLATEUR
g NIVEAU CENTRAL
h AIMANT
i FONDATION
j NIVEAU D'EAU

COUPE A - A

4.0

People's Assembly of Argillia
homage to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux 1980 - 1994

The conception of the imaginary land of Argillia and its manifestation in the design of People's Assembly epitomises the inherent escapist nature in the architecture of VAL. Simultaneously, any formal differentiation between architecture and conceptual art can be disregarded.

In 1972, Alex Mlynárčik first envisaged 'a country from elsewhere',[1] in—what can only be described as—an altruistic opposition to the everyday reality of the Communist regime. "Imagine. An artist inventing a new virtual kingdom of Argillia, writing its Constitution, deputing as its King an agricultural worker, inventing its history, a day of celebration, a flag, and actively trying to inhabit it […]."[2] Argillia renounced its borders as it virtually stretched across the globe. Currency, governance, and state symbols were established. Galerie Lara Vincy in Paris was designated the head of 'agence de presse'—here, Argillia was presented publicly at the same time as the 1977 *Biennale de Paris*[3] ensued. Alex Mlynárčik involved renowned artists and critics Ragon, Restany, Miloš Urbásek, Gianni Bertini, and others in the fictitious state system. Photo-montages were produced to illustrate the fake history, including 'official' meetings of Restany as President of the National Assembly with Brezhnev and Roosevelt. In a celebration of the ordinary person, the centre of the kingdom lied in a village in Northern Slovakia, in the courtyard of Ondrej Krištofík, a local Slovak farmer proclaimed the king.

'The land of clay' had no delineated border, but it was not abstract nor purely ideological, 'its essence made it more real than reality itself'[4] for those who were involved. In Argillia, an interpretation of Alex Mlynárčik's escapist attitude offers itself. One in which the artist "seems less interested in the formation of a counter-public sphere than in the creation of a sovereign domain of which he is the sole organiser."[5] Instead of involving the masses and exciting ordinary events—as in action art—Argillia stands in contrast to these themes of Nouveau Réalisme that oppose elitism of visual arts. As Ján Budaj points to in his 1981 interview with Alex Mlynárčik, Argillia no longer communicates with the official nor the unofficial spheres, only the initiated are familiar with the imaginary kingdom.[6] Instead of calling it *elitist,* in the context of the height of normalisation, the personal escapism is at the same time an attempt to disassociate from the political and a critique of the regime. "But even though I live here I do not have to accept the current situation […]. Since 1970, our world has been so greatly permeated with ideology that should you even decide to plant a flower somewhere it is perceived as a political gesture. […] Should the problem in my life revolve around ideology, or some incumbent politician, or some regime? I want to live in transcendence, someplace else, serving other values."[7]

In 1980, VAL was 'commissioned' by the Royal Council of Argillia to imagine the architecture of the new world parliament, People's Assembly of Argillia, as a palace of understanding and reconciliation in the natural landscape of the island Bora-Bora. The monumental design comprises two concentric, geometrically pure volumes; a sphere of 230-metre-diameter embedded in a sunken convex hemisphere with a square pedestal. Four promenades stretch from the sphere towards the four cardinal directions, providing a mass transit system and a connection to the airport North of the parliament. The sphere houses two parliamentary chambers and a multimedia information complex broadcasting the ongoing world-wide news and spurring deliberations among

[1] A writing on the state symbols of Argillia, "regnum ex alio loco" translates from Latin to 'a country from elsewhere'.

[2] Havránek, V., 2009. '[Let me…]' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). *In english po polsku.* Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 73.

[3] Paris Biennale was an annual prestigious art fair organised since 1956 by prominent art and antique dealers. After years of internal dispute, scandal, and pandemic-related setbacks, 2021 will feature a new format of the art festival.

[4] Chalupecký, J., 1990. *Na hranicích umění. Několik příběhů.* Prague: Prostor, pp 121-122. (translated from Czech by Dominika Kopiarová)

[5] Bishop, C., 2012. *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London: Verso, pp. 146-147.

[6] Budaj, J., 1981. '3DS' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). *In english po polsku.* Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 225. Conversation in an unrated pub, a transcribed 1981 interview between Ján Budaj and Alex Mlynárčik.

[7] Ibid., p. 225.

People's Assembly of Argillia
homage to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux 1980 - 1994

Leonid Brejnev à l'aéroport Vnoukov accueillant la délé-
gation d'Argillie qui est arrivée pour une visite officielle

**Photomontages
to illustrate the
fictitious history of
the imaginary land
of Argilia.**

**(top) The 'official' meet-
ing of Pierre Restany
as the President of the
National Assembly with
the Soviet politician
Leonid Brezhnev.
(bottom) "Marcel
Duchamp invited
Jindřich Chalupecký,
the dean of the Royal
Council of Argilia, to
a symposium at the
fifth planet of the Little
Prince." (1980)
[source: INDE, RTVS,
FILMPARK production]**

the delegates. The convex hemisphere is subterranean and combines living, communal spaces and services. The below-sea-level structure is in contact with submarine life through the transparent envelope.[8]

VAL's design for the People's Assembly of Argillia could be considered an 'appropriation' of the unbuilt Maison des gardes agricoles (c. 1765) by Claude Nicolas Ledoux. The geometrically pure aesthetics of the housing for the agricultural guards "takes the most ideal form: a perfect sphere, embedded in a sunken rectangle, and accessible through a series of stairs positioned on all four sides."[9] Inside the hollow sphere is a kitchen with a fireplace, and four dormitories. Ledoux's Architecture Parlante was designed for egalitarian society in the years preceding the French Revolution (1789). In that, 'VAL's reinterpretation of Ledoux's neoclassical design could reinforce the idea of understanding their actions as a socio-political protest.'[10]

VAL presents Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943), a story of a boy who visits other planets inhabited by flawed adults, as inspiration. Alex Mlynarčík explained, "Little Prince represents a prototype for perceiving life's truths which paves the way to comprehending Argillia. The Little Prince is above the superficial, he dwells in spiritual realms […] there always has been the world of deeper truth, deeper joy…"[11] VAL's choice to pay homage to Ledoux's design shaped like a planet, the Earth, which was in line with Architecture Parlante's buildings resembling the profession of the people who inhabit it, can be also read simply as a reference to the narrative of the novella.

The potential interpretation regarding the choice of Ledoux's design as a precedent for Argillia parliament—either as a suggestion of a socio-political protest or a reference to *The Little Prince*'s planetary theme—remains speculative. When asked, Ľudovít Kupkovič vaguely referred to a 'conceptual connection' as the source of inspiration for the appropriation of Maison des gardes agricoles.[12]

Despite the monumental scale of the design, little direct reference can be made to Michel Ragon's notion of prospective architecture. The chapters on subterranean and underwater urbanism in *Où Vivrons-Nous Demain?* refer to humanity's need to relocate as a result of war or extremely dense urbanisation.[13] The chapter on spherical forms illustrate the lightweight geodomes of Buckminster-Fuller which differ from the undefined construction principle in the design of Argillia assembly.[14] Across the portfolio, VAL progressively loosens the direct references to prospective attitude and rather actualises architecture of a game and escapism.

In Argillia, Alex Mlynarčík and VAL avoided direct confrontation with the political reality of normalisation by the means of designating new margins to their professional action; geared towards vague humanistic and indirectly critical actions rather than an outspoken, explicit opposition. Argillia is not a techno-positive utopia but rather a counter-cultural image to the everyday reality. VAL transcends the prospective architecture as described by Ragon and aspires to be radical in its escapism. Cytlak also suggests that the conceptualisation of Argillia as a global sovereign reflects the authors' desire to end the Iron Curtain isolation of Czechoslovakia during the period of normalisation.[15]

[8]VAL, 1995. *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.* The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.

[9]Patteeuw, V., 2018. 'Delirious Architects and Globes', *MacGuffin*, 6 (The Ball), pp. 153-160.

[10]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part II.', *Jazdec*, 8/26, pp. 10-13. (translated from Slovak by Dominika Kopiarová)

[11]Budaj, J., 1981. '3DS' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). *In english po polsku.* Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 225. Conversation in an unrated pub, a transcribed 1981 interview between Ján Budaj and Alex Mlynarčík.

[12]Interview with Ľudovít Kupkovič, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 5 April 2021.

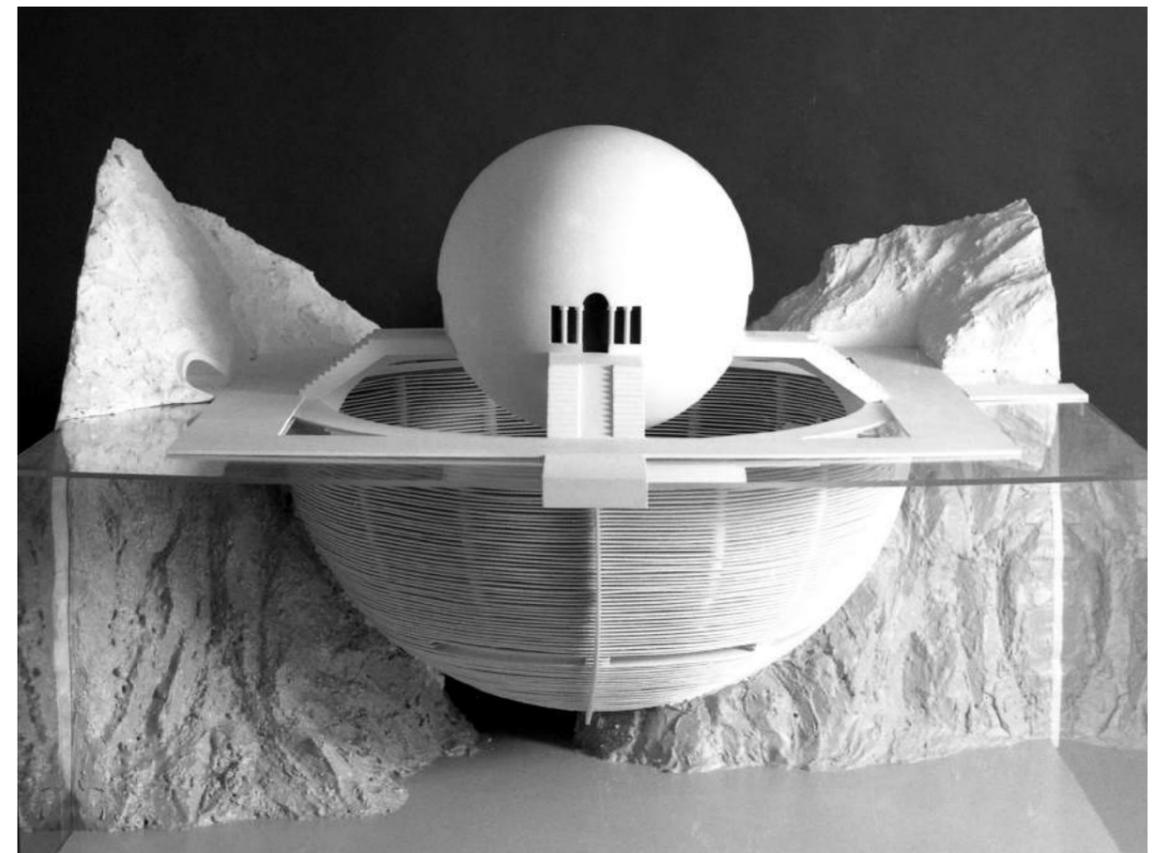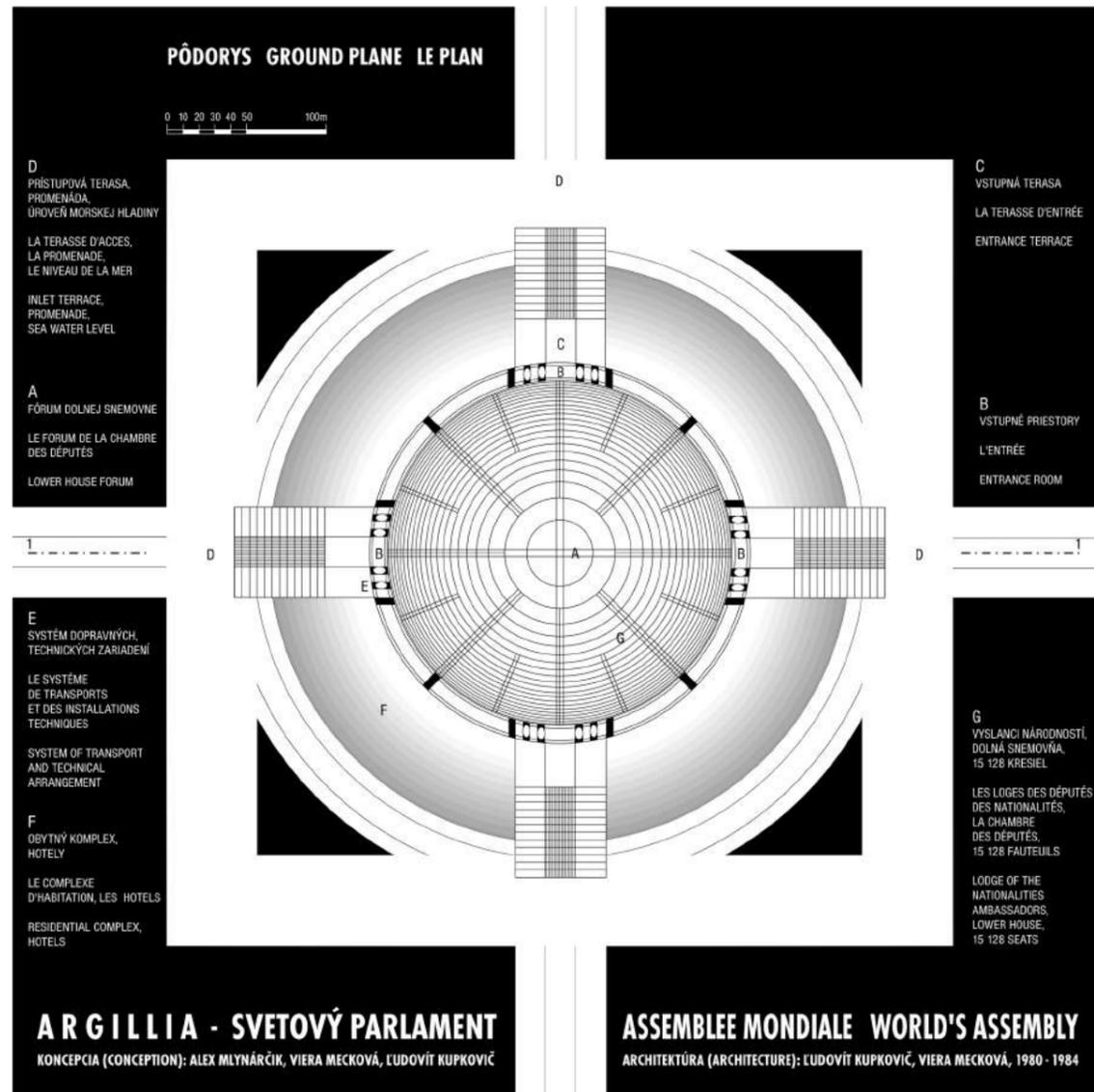[13]Ragon, M., 1967. *Kde budeme žít zítra.* Prague: Mladá fronta, pp. 117-124.

[14]Ibid., pp. 57-58.

[15]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part II.', *Jazdec*, 8/26, pp. 10-13.

PÔDORYS GROUND PLANE LE PLAN

0 10 20 30 40 50   100m

D
PRÍSTUPOVÁ TERASA,
PROMENÁDA,
ÚROVEŇ MORSKEJ HLADINY

LA TERASSE D'ACCES,
LA PROMENADE,
LE NIVEAU DE LA MER

INLET TERRACE,
PROMENADE,
SEA WATER LEVEL

A
FÓRUM DOLNEJ SNEMOVNE

LE FORUM DE LA CHAMBRE
DES DÉPUTÉS

LOWER HOUSE FORUM

E
SYSTÉM DOPRAVNÝCH,
TECHNICKÝCH ZARIADENÍ

LE SYSTÈME
DE TRANSPORTS
ET DES INSTALLATIONS
TECHNIQUES

SYSTEM OF TRANSPORT
AND TECHNICAL
ARRANGEMENT

F
OBYTNÝ KOMPLEX,
HOTELY

LE COMPLEXE
D'HABITATION, LES HOTELS

RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX,
HOTELS

C
VSTUPNÁ TERASA

LA TERASSE D'ENTRÉE

ENTRANCE TERRACE

B
VSTUPNÉ PRIESTORY

L'ENTRÉE

ENTRANCE ROOM

G
VYSLANCI NÁRODNOSTÍ,
DOLNÁ SNEMOVŇA,
15 128 KRESIEL

LES LOGES DES DÉPUTÉS
DES NATIONALITÉS,
LA CHAMBRE
DES DÉPUTÉS,
15 128 FAUTEUILS

LODGE OF THE
NATIONALITIES
AMBASSADORS,
LOWER HOUSE,
15 128 SEATS

ARGILLIA - SVETOVÝ PARLAMENT
KONCEPCIA (CONCEPTION): ALEX MLYNÁRČIK, VIERA MECKOVÁ, ĽUDOVÍT KUPKOVIČ

ASSEMBLEE MONDIALE WORLD'S ASSEMBLY
ARCHITEKTÚRA (ARCHITECTURE): ĽUDOVÍT KUPKOVIČ, VIERA MECKOVÁ, 1980 - 1984

VAL, project documentation for People's Assembly of Argillia, (left page) plan, (right page, top) photo collage, (bottom) physical model.
[source: VAL, 1995. VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška. The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint]

5.0

Architecture of Escapism
reflection on VAL and the role of radical architecture
in Central and Eastern Europe

As the height of VAL's activity coincides with the peak of the normalisation period in the 70s Czechoslovakia, their utopian projects remain resistant to clear-cut interpretation then and now. Superficially, they present a case for uncritical anticipation of progress and innovation, strictly in line with the prospective architecture described by Michel Ragon. However, in the understanding of the political pressure heightening since the 1968 Soviet Invasion—after which the Communist regime was gradually reestablished along the rigid standards of the past Stalinism—the projects can hardly be distilled from the irony and the subtle critique of the totalitarian regime.

Despite the unobstructed idealism that VAL emanates—in the act of designing the libertarian utopia—VAL found a form of individual escapism as means to express themselves creatively and to live manageably - 'utopia as escapism'. The motif of escape permeates both the artist's oeuvre and VAL's portfolio in the reference to being 'elsewhere—ailleurs—inde'.[1] As for the physical isolation of the Iron Curtain, a release in geographical mobility became soon unattainable. Therefore, other forms of psychological escape were performed, namely pushing the boundaries of art and architecture. The means by which artistic escapism was performed, however, progressed from the initially socially-engaged art that Alex Mlynárčik performed as an individual to VAL's architectural proposals produced in private and exhibited abroad.

In performance and action art, Alex Mlynárčik turned to optimistic and vernacular forms of participation and 'consensual'[2] collaboration as means to create a 'total expression of art as life'.[3] Eva's Wedding (1972) proves the performance to be equally festive and escapist.[4] Tomàš Pospiszyl, on the notion of escapism, reminds us that "the society of that time and the whole environment was far from normal. [...] One type of reaction is to go against this situation - have fun, even in the time that we are not supposed to meet and have fun. [...] The key element of these actions was the appropriation of reality: they were taking already existing situations or rituals and turning them into art."[5] As participatory actions outside the state control were considered an exclusivist, 'anti-social activity', action artists were excluded from the state galleries and expelled from the official artists' institutions. Alternative or avant-garde art was effectively banned outside the inner circles of the artistic community.[6]

VAL turned to libertarian utopia and individual escapism instead. In a recent conversation with Ľudovít Kupkovič, the architect recalled the 'complete absence of any creative activity'[7] as the primary concern for the regime was the prefabricated production of mass-housing and accompanying civic, healthcare, and educational facilities according to the predefined models. 'Naturally, the restless architects searched for liberation from the primitive production scheme. VAL offered an elusive and mystical escape, an island of free creative expression. We were both the client and the creator, our own visions and desires in anticipating the future.'[8] In that Ľudovít Kupkovič disputes the interpretations of VAL as ironic or dissident—'there was no politics nor critique in our collective, only fascination with the prospective utopia and the aspirations for the conceptions of tomorrow.'[9] The artist, Alex Mlynárčik, was less subtle in his answer. 'I found joy in being elsewhere, and I did not waste my time by searching for something positive in the regime nor its flawed ideology.'[10]

[1] Ailleurs and inde translates from French and Slovak to 'elsewhere'. Pierre Restany wrote Alex Mlynárčik's biography titled Ailleurs, 1994. Paris: Galerie Lara Vincy. The documentary on the life and work of the artist was too titled INDE, 2018.

[2] 'Consensual' in quotation marks as the participants were often unaware they were taking part in action art.

[3] Bishop, C., 2012. *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London: Verso, p. 148.

[4] Ibid., pp. 141-147.

[5] Pospiszyl, T., 2009. 'Discussion on The Zalesie Ball and Participation' in Bishop, C., Dziewańska, M. (ed.). *In english po polsku.* Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, p. 110. (transcribed talk)

[6] Strauss, T., 1984. 'Three Slovak Models for Contemporary Art Actions' in Matejka, L., et al. (ed.) *Cross Currents,* vol. 3, pp. 405-413, [online]. Available at: https://bit.ly/2OvAZ36. (2 March 2021)

[7] Interview with Ľudovít Kupkovič, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 5 April 2021.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Interview with Alex Mlynárčik, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 6 April 2021.

The concept of escapism could be viewed with a negative connotation as it perhaps suggests passivity or even one's inability to face reality. However - here to add a new layer of irony—a German Marxist social philosopher Ernst Bloch defends utopias and daydreams, as according to him, they carry an impetus for a radical social change. The understanding of reality becomes fundamental to Bloch's argument, who saw it as not only consisting of what is, but also of what is becoming or might become; in that, the world is essentially unfinished, and the future constitutes a realm of possibility. As utopia reaches towards that future—hopefully, one of more humane social order—and anticipates it, the mere act of daydreaming and escapism aids its realisation.[11]

A parallel can be drawn with Ragon's anticipation of the future embodied by VAL's designs. The techno-centrism of prospective architecture was not viewed as pure forecasting of the direction of technological progress but a catalyst for achieving that utopian future. In the GAIP manifesto, 'it becomes urgent to foresee and organise the future instead of enduring it.'[12] And in relation to Heliopolis, Ragon suggests that 'utopians present their problems to compel the specialists to give up on their routines and pursue utopian solutions instead;'[13] participating as active agents in the innovation of architecture and urban planning. As previously noted, Ragon puts forward a solely techno-centric utopia, one that disregards the need for parallel socio-cultural progress. VAL addresses the socio-political dimension of that utopia too, perhaps better understanding the inability of sole scientific progress and technological innovation to bring about social change—as it is the current social context that impedes the progress in itself.

Ernst Bloch described architecture as a critical vehicle of utopian thought that embodies dreams of a better life as it ventures beyond the present reality. Bloch, however, distinguished between concrete and abstract utopia, in which the former refers to the anticipatory notion, embodying will-full rather than wish-full thinking, and the latter is by nature immature and tends to get lost in fantasy or memory. "While abstract utopia may express desire, only concrete utopia carries hope."[14] Whether VAL's approach is evocative of abstract or concrete utopia can be questioned, dependent on the interpretation of Bloch's words in the context of Czechoslovak normalisation. Perhaps, in the inability to materialise the utopian notions of social order in an openly political act, their affinity for the prospective attitude in architecture - which requires concreteness in spatial and structural form—provided the escape to theorise the possibility of socio-political change.

Here, a distinction between concrete and abstract in relation to ideology assets itself, "utopias are oriented to the future, and are those ideas which transform reality in their image, whereas ideologies are oriented to the past and serve to legitimate the status quo."[15] The irony in employing utopia by Czechoslovak artists and architects as means to escape the reality of the failed utopian project of Communism should not go unnoticed. If anything, comprehending the paradox is inherent to accept the complexities and contradictions of art and architecture produced during the normalisation period in Czechoslovakia and—to a very limited extent—the cultural atmosphere in the countries of the Eastern bloc.

[11] Levitas, R., 1990. 'Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia' in *Utopian Studies,* Vol.1, No.2, pp. 13-26.

[12] GIAP, 1965. *Manifeste du Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective.* Paris.

[13] Ragon, M., 1977. 'Heliopolis' in VAL (ed.) *VAL Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška.* The Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue. Žilina: Expresprint.

[14] Levitas, R., 1990. 'Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia' in *Utopian Studies,* Vol.1, No.2, p. 15.

[15] Ibid., p.18.

Dana Vais, in her article *From Escapism to Activism: Two Forms of Architectural Dissent in Romania,* argues for the similarities - not divergences - between then escapism and contemporary activism; seeing escape itself as a form of action.[16] Vais addresses the 'paradoxes of dissidence' that suggest "the more sophisticated the means of opposing reality, the less able they are to change it" by subverting our expectation of what are forms of expressing architectural dissent. "Opposing the communist architectural-political system in open dissidence would have most probably been doomed to fail. [...] Outspoken opposition was replaced with a kind of indirect action, by cultivating alternative fields of escape inside architecture itself."[17]

Despite the authors' conflicting 'apolitical' statements, VAL's designs emanate unobstructed altruism in stark contrast to the everyday experience of the Czechoslovak social reality, which 'postulates their architecture as an act of resistance.'[18] But the resistance was not by definition readable in the product, but in the design process itself, which revealed the discontent with the status quo and became the means to escape the oppressive reality—'escapism as protest'. Cytlak equally stressed VAL's playful design process as belonging to the domain of a game—especially in the imaginary land of Argillia. The act of a game, as means to overcome the reality of socio-cultural regression, economic depression, professional frustrations, and personal disillusionment, could have an almost therapeutic effect.[19] Here, critique or protest might be a secondary motif for VAL, or even an unintended consequence when viewed in retrospect. Nonetheless, as Cytlak argued, 'the mere act of a play acquired the characteristics of resistance.'[20]

It could be argued that any act of a protest is only established on the basis of retrospective wishful thinking of contemporary architecture historians and theorists. The architects themselves seem to dispute any intentional engagement with politics too. However, the paradox rests on how we view actions today differs from the perceptions of the everyday reality of the past— whether tainted by political conflict or a totalitarian regime. An act of living manageably then, by today's standards, can be read as a resistance to the status quo. VAL was first exhibited in 1977 in Paris Galerie Lara Vincy. Michel Ragon curated the exhibition, and understandably, none of the members of VAL attended the opening. Ľudovít Kupkovič recalled it as 'successful and well-critically received, considering that VAL claimed the status of the only prospective collective from the Eastern Bloc at the time.'[21] He then hints at the prohibitive conditions in Czechoslovakia by adding that the exhibition was illegally smuggled to Paris as a part of the stage design decor for a puppet theatre performing in France. Only a few people in Czechoslovakia knew of the Paris exhibition.[22] Eighteen years later, in 1995, VAL was for the first time publicly displaying their work in the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava. Viera Mecková recalled that the discussion about the direction of architecture initiated by the exhibition could no longer achieve the same intensity as the creators would have expected prior.[23] Whether exhibiting in Paris can be understood as a political protest or simply the architects' individual need for expression might be secondary to the effect of the act itself.

[16]Vais, D., 2014. 'From Escapism to Activism: Two Forms of Architectural Dissent in Romania.' *Architecture and Culture,* 02/01, pp. 27-44.

[17]Ibid., pp. 27-44.

[18]Cytlak, K., 2017. 'L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon' in *RIHA Journal,* 0179.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Interview with Ľudovít Kupkovič, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 5 April 2021.

[22]Szalay, P., 2017. 'Architektonická skupina VAL-Voies et Aspectes du Lendemain', *MAG DA* [online]. Available at: https://bit.ly/31QseU8. (17 February 2021)

[23]Mecková, V., 2006. 'Na projektoch prospektívnej architektúry sme pracovali takmer 30 rokov!' in Kicová, M., 2019. 'Architektúra skupiny VAL', Master's thesis, Masaryk University, Department of Philosophy, Brno, p. 7.

(left page) The VAL members wearing masks at the 1999 VAL exhibition in Venice. [source: archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič]

Ironically, in contemporary discourse, VAL—and to an extent, other examples from Central and Eastern Europe—present a challenge on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The generation of artists and architects, whose legacy is inevitably tied to the normalisation period, confronts Western European critics who are keen on exposing direct actions of dissident opposition.[24] Unfortunately, if their art and architecture are only viewed as formally in line with the experimental trends simultaneously happening in France, England, or Italy, in later years, they are considered as ostensibly lacking the essentially critical nature. VAL's projects might be undervalued or dismissed as conventional experiments from the outsider's perspective, but it is precisely the normality in which they present themselves that counters this interpretation.[25] Central and Eastern European examples embody a complexity that stems from the socio-political context—subverting their meaning and obscuring their interpretation. Open critique or explicit opposition would not be tolerated. Therefore, the radical nature—according to Western European 'hopeful' standards—must be rediscovered in the vague humanist or prospective nature, and in their search for the new margins of artistic action and architecture practice.

At the same time, local contexts do not favour art and architecture produced during controversial eras either. Alternative or avant-garde art produced during Czechoslovak normalisation had the status of the 'underground' and—as mentioned before—was excluded from the official scene and therefore rarely reached a wider audience. Alex Mlynárčik recalls 'living and working under different names, often those belonging to friends and colleagues who remained in favour of the Communist party.'[26] The majority of architectural legacy from the period of normalisation was produced as part of the centrally-managed state institutes, and in retrospect, is viewed controversially as it carries the nostalgia of the regime. Even examples that managed to escape the oppressive mediocrity and exceeded in an architectural quality struggle for appreciation today.

At the time of its conception, VAL was a rare example of experimental architecture in Central Europe but practically unknown in Czechoslovakia outside the inner circles.[27] At the same time as proposing libertarian utopias, the architects of VAL, Viera Mecková and Ľudovít Kupkovič, both produced architecture under—and for—the regime. For instance, the City Hall in Žilina (1988) designed by Viera Mecková, remains a monumental symbol of the power of the ruling party.[28] Even Alex Mlynárčik shares the condescending view on Czechoslovak and more broadly 'Eastern' art. 'I do not wish to care nor discuss it! I warn you that [Central and Eastern European art and architecture] is exceptionally complex to underpin theoretically. To argue for such a thesis is suicidal.'[29] Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the controversion, in the recent years there is a sense of rediscovering as a part of a wider attempt to reevaluate the legacy of the normalisation period as means to preserve what is left of late modernist Slovak architecture. Visible in the popularity of the documentary series Ikony ('Icons')[30] on the 20th-century generation of Slovak architects and in the hopeful petitions to preserve the architecture of relevance such as Istropolis (Bratislava, 1956-81), the former House of the Trade Unions designed by Ferdinand Konček, Iľja Skoček, and Ľubomír Titl to host the congresses of the Communist Party.

[24]Bishop, C., 2012. *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London: Verso, p. 141-148.

[25]Cytlak names in her article the architects Elemér Zalotay, Jan Głuszak and Czech collective SIAL. And - those like VAL that diverged from the standards of architecture - 'Milan Knížák, Karel Malich, Václav Cigler, Hugo Demartini, Stanislav Kolíbal, Jozef Jankovič, Július Koller a Stano Filko in Czechoslovakia; Tadeusz Kantor, Edward Krasiński, Jerzy Rosołowicz, Włodzimierz Borowski, Jarosław Kozłowski, Zbigniew Gostomski in Poland; Sigma collective, Mihai Olos, or Paul Neagu In Romania…'

Cytlak, K., 2017. 'Zložitosť a protiklad v stredoeurópskej radikálnej architektúre. Experimenty v umení a architektúre 70. rokov, part I.,' *Jazdec,* 7/25, pp. 12-14.

[26]Interview with Alex Mlynárčik, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 6 April 2021.

[27]Kicová, M., 2019. 'Architektúra skupiny VAL,' Master's thesis, Masaryk University, Department of Philosophy, Brno, pp. 7-10.

[28]*Ikony* (Viera Mecková). Directed by Barbora Sliepková, ARTICHOKE, 2020. RTVS.sk, URL (https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/16250/243488).

[29]Interview with Alex Mlynárčik, conducted by Dominika Kopiarová (author), 6 April 2021.

[30]*Ikony* (Viera Mecková). Directed by Barbora Sliepková, ARTICHOKE, 2020.

Despite the unobstructed positivism that VAL emanates, I argued that VAL's proposals go beyond an uncritical techno-positive utopia and can hardly be distilled from the irony and the critique of everyday reality. And it is in the act of designing the libertarian utopias that VAL members found a form of individual escapism as means to express themselves creatively and to manageably live in a totalitarian regime—*utopia as escapism.* By subverting the expectations of what are the forms of expressing architectural dissent, however, escapism can be understood as an act of resistance—resistance to socio-cultural regression, economic depression, professional frustrations, and personal disillusionment with the failed Communist utopia—*escapism as protest.*

In a broader sense, my thesis hopes not only to question our contemporary standing towards the Central and Eastern European architects and artists. But, as was argued for VAL, the art and architecture on the East side of the Iron Curtain still have the potential to subvert what is considered radical architecture and what are the forms of dissidence and social activism that architects and artists could draw from even today. Is there still a place for an escapist utopia as a counter-image or could we—the architects—search for innovative architectural and socio-cultural antidotes?

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[1] 13 journal articles, 8 books, 2 gallery archives, 1 private archive, 2 manifestos, 2 theses, 2 documentaries, 1 catalogue, 2 zoom calls, 10+ phone calls, 2 interviews, and many more dead ends.

[2] Katarzyna Cytlak is a Polish art historian who explores the relationship of radical/experimental architecture on both sides of the Iron Curtain with regards to the historical, socio-political and cultural context. Her important work is cited extensively in this thesis.

[3] Signed by Yona Friedman, Walter Jonas, Paul Maymont, Georges Patrix, Michel Ragon, Ionel Schein, and Nicolas Schöffer in Paris, May 1965 with a slogan: "Against retrospective architecture. For prospective architecture."

[4] Monika Kicová is a Slovak art and architecture historian who was very helpful in my initial search for a direction in this thesis.

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