

Overview of past and present discourse on VAL

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ABSTRACT:

The paper is an introduction to my thesis entitled "Author's Conceptions in the European Architecture of the 20th Century". Specifically, the objective of my study is monographic research into VAL, a Slovak artistic-architectural group, which was active from the 1970s to the 1990s. The group consists of the artist Alex Mlynárčik, and architects Viera Mecková and Ľudovít Kupkovič, who gradually began to develop their visions together. During the years 1968 (1970) – 1994 they produced eight projects illustrating possibilities for our environment of tomorrow.

The 1960s were accompanied by a discussion critically thematizing the main ideas of modernism. Visionary, utopian or dystopian trends, which presented various scenarios for the near future, were an integral part of this discussion. Their subject was the relationship between man and the environment, man and the society, architecture and landscape, or man and the cosmos. These visionaries have generated a whole series of architectural concepts, which even today are an inspiration for thinking about architecture and the environment. VAL was a valuable part of this global movement, and thus an important phenomenon from the point of view of local architectural discourse.

This paper deals with the current state of research on the topic. It is a summary of formative moments and theories for the group's work, a summary of the critical reflection and public presentations of their work throughout their active period up to the present day.

KEYWORDS:

prospective architecture, conceptual art, utopia, visionary architecture, modernism, late modernism

INTRODUCTION

The VAL group is quite ambivalent when looking at individual projects, its theoretical and practical background, and its position in the local and global context. The basic ambivalence concerns the classification of the group's work. Architect Antonín Stuchl commented on VAL in the introduction of the catalogue accompanying their first solo exhibition in Slovakia [1] that *"although a certain affinity can be felt with the French New Realism and thus between Mlynárčik and Restany, later also with Ragon, their work does not seek the favour of any particular group, it is not subject to any role models, nor does it bring about any revolution against academicism. It is just their own work, combining technology and poetry with the values of the whole big world"*. [2] On the one hand, the group's work extends in many directions, works in many contexts, interprets numerous historical and modern artworks, personalities and responds to many socio-cultural issues. On the other hand, it wants to be a distinctive and free artistic play.

In addition to the aforementioned Pierre Restany, a French art critic, personal friend and biographer [3] of Alex Mlynárčik, VAL is related to the concept of *prospective architecture* [4] formulated by French critic and art and architecture theorist Michel Ragon in the 1960s. In the following text, I pursue many other views of experts from the local and international scene, who further developed or questioned the affiliation of VAL to *prospective architecture*. From the point of view of local art history, VAL's activities are attributable to the unofficial scene (Zuzana Bartošová), neoconstructivism (Viera Kuracinová Janečková), conceptual dematerialized art (Aurel Hrabušický) and others. From the point of view of the history of architecture, VAL is placed in the context of late modernity (Matúš Dulla, Henrieta Moravčíková). Their work is described as prospective, futuristic, visionary, utopian, radical, experimental, alternative, as another variant—*elsewhere*.

REFLECTIONS FROM ABROAD

The first public presentations of VAL's work did not come from the local environment, but from the French one, stemming from Alex Mlynárčik's personal relation with Restany and Ragon. The very first mention was made by Michel Ragon in an article [5] for the periodical *Chroniques de l'art vivant* in the early 1970s, in which the project called *Heliopolis* was published. The first solo exhibition [6] of VAL's work to date was also organized by Ragon in Paris in 1977. The first four existing projects—*Heliopolis*, *Akusticon*, *Istroport*, *Pocta nádeji a odvahe* (Homage to Hope and Courage) were presented at this exhibition. The texts of the accompanying catalogue were written by Michel Ragon, and Slovak architects Alexander Valentovič and Antonín Stuchl. These texts state a clear connection with the research of *prospective architecture* looking for answers to the problems of the industrialized world, emphasizing the technical feasibility of projects, as well as its ideological relevance: "*Heliopolis is a project that can be talked about, that can be expertly discussed in technical and philosophical terms, because such a futuristic project has its real technological background based on the results of the technical revolution of the 20th century*". [7] At the same time, they draw attention to the role of these projects to provoke an increase in the quality of average architectural and urban production: "*It is the search for the application of the latest knowledge of science to every form of human activity, especially where traditions and conventions have set the barrier for more significant progress. Breaking down these dams with a bold imagination is a matter of poetic thinking, which leads technology not only to a new arrangement of spaces, but also to new social perspectives*". [8]

This affiliation of VAL with prospective architecture was formalized a year later by Ragon in the third volume of his three-part history of modern architecture and urbanism *Histoire Mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme moderne* subtitled *Prospective et futurology* [9] which contains a reproduction of *Heliopolis* listed among megastructures. VAL is briefly described and classified as an important research group, such as L'internationale Situationniste, Japanese metabolists, Archigram or G.I.A.P. In addition to Alexander Valentovič and Antonín Stuchl, before the change of the social order in 1989, the work of VAL was reflected by several Czech and Slovak art theorists and critics, such as Tomáš Štraus, Jindřich Chaloupecký, and František Šmejkal. However, this reflection took place mostly in a private circle, in form of samizdat or personal correspondence.

LOCAL SHIFT

The shift, especially in the perception in the architectural environment, occurred after this turning point in social order. In 1992, an issue of the journal *Projekt* entirely devoted to futurological architecture was published. Alexander Valentovič lists VAL as an important local phenomenon in the foreword of this issue: "*And what about our Slovak architects? Where to classify them, as dreamers or futurists? Are they still active at all? For more than forty years, there was no suitable ground for such idealistic thoughts, but they still are, create and did create even in times of normalization, and perhaps that was the reason. Let us go back to the seventies and introduce a creative group, VAL, unknown to many contemporaries. (Certainly not the only one.)*". [10]

Under this issue, designs of *Scarabea*, *Akusticon*, *Heliopolis* and *Pocta nádeji a odvahe* (Homage to Hope and Courage) were published under the title *VAL 1967 až 1989* (VAL from 1967 to 1989). [11] Later, in 1995, Vlado Záborský's interview with Viera Mecková [12] was published, as well as designs of two other projects—*E-temen-an-ki* and *Národné zhromaždenie Argillia* (People's Assembly of Argillia).

Within the field of architecture, a mention of VAL appeared in the publication *Architektúra Slovenska v 20. storočí* (Architecture of Slovakia in the 20th century) [13] by Matúš Dulla and Henrieta Moravčíková, in the chapter entitled *Úniky z normalizácie* (Escapes from Normalization). According to the authors, the ideal of modernity persists in the work of VAL, which belongs to conceptual art rather than to practical architecture. They consider the group's work to be a clash of "*a modern beautiful, strong vision with inhumanly freezing abstract monumentality*". [13, p. 232] At the end, they note that the members of VAL (its architects) do not even come close to "*the conceptual level of these visions with their built architecture, and subsequently authors ask themselves whether this can be a sign of a deeply divided era*". [13, p. 232]

In 2008, in an article entitled *Posledné utópie?* (The Last Utopias?) [14] Henrieta Moravčíková considers VAL a unique case of "*experimentation and creation of utopian concepts*" within Slovak architecture. She also considers them to be "*a characteristic product of late modernism*" (referring to monumentalism, use of the latest, but also to a critical reflection and an irony of the concept of modernism) and argues that their visions served as "*a kind of polemical counterpart to the visions of the autocratic regime*". [14, p. 50]

In connection with the late modern architecture, Henrieta Moravčíková mentions VAL in the essay *Monumentálnosť v slovenskej architektúre šesťdesiatych a sedemdesiatych rokov 20. storočia: totalitné, národné, veľké a abstraktné* (Monumentality in Slovak architecture of the 1960s and 1970s: The Totalitarian, the National, the Large and the Abstract). [15] In her essay, she follows the examples in the history of Slovak architecture of the 20th century, which led to monumental manifestations (in both versions of monumentality: size and ability to memorialize) to offer us arguments that monumentality, characteristic of architecture of the 1970s "*was not just a product of political requirement, but a result of internal architectural impulses*". [15, p. 97] The work of VAL, which originated in private without any state commissions, thus serves as an illustration of her statement.

PERSISTENCE OF IMAGERIES

Over the last decades, VAL has appeared in several other articles in the field of architecture [16] as well as in several art or cultural periodicals. [17] But one of the exceptional public mentions of VAL from before 1989 is the study of František Šmejkal *Kosmické vejce* (The Cosmic Egg) [18] published in 1975 in the periodical *Umění/Art*. Šmejkal linked the archetype of cosmic egg with *Akusticon*, "an ultra-modern idea", persisting historical and mythological precedents. Šmejkal claims that archetypal images and their frequent occurrence in "contemporary" art anchor "*modern differentiated consciousness in tradition*". They awaken

in us “*the lost consciousness of the unity of man with the cosmos*”. [18, p. 254]

Slovak art historian Tomáš Štraus reflects on the work of VAL in the essay *Konceptuálne umenie ako analýza média a model skutočnosti, Poznámky k vývoju umenia 1970-1975* (Conceptual Art as an Analysis of the Media and the Model of Reality, Notes on the Development of Art 1970-1975) [19] of 1978, where he classifies it as an “architectural variant” of conceptual art. In this chapter, Štraus emphasizes the importance of artistic imagination, and the relationship between art and architecture. He describes several personalities (architects and artists) in history who have taken refuge in “the realm of fantasy and drawing” in order to be able to express themselves freely, to think about important topics. And it is the deficit of thinking that he blames contemporary architectural practice for: “...*the history of architecture, from which architecture as thinking and project fall out, is an incomplete history of architecture*”. [19, p. 74]

In his essay, Štraus primarily criticizes the recklessness of that period’s construction, the devastation of the historical centre of Bratislava, architects and architecture, which “*wrongly identified with the construction practice...*”. [19, p. 82] He criticizes the construction of that time for its excessive technical and material focus at the expense of the ideological and cultural one. In contrast to the contemporary technocratic building, he sets utopia, stressing that (intellectual) art substitutes architects: “*Do we need more arguments for the real practical reach of art, or if we want: “utopian” designs? In the opposite order: do we need even more arguments for the real impracticability of the current chaotic, shape-wise, technologically and ecologically obsolete construction? Construction that threatens to create an uninhabitable environment for our grandchildren.*” [19, p. 79] In this context, he highlights “self-proclaimed guests” [19, p. 77] - artists who enter this unfortunate situation, such as Alex Mlynárčik with VAL. He briefly describes *Heliopolis*, *Akusticon* and *Istroport*. The publication also includes personal correspondence with Alex Mlynárčik, where they discuss, among other things, *Argillia*.

One of the newer art historical reflections of VAL’s work is *Zuzana Bartošová’s* publication *Neoficiálna slovenská výtvarná scéna sedemdesiatych a osemdesiatych rokov 20. storočia* (Despite Totality: The Unofficial Slovak Art Scene of the 1970s and the 1980s) [20] in which she defines and examines the Slovak unofficial art scene, its gradual formation and transformation of art since the normalization period. In the subchapter *Sny a utópie—VAL a surrealisti* (Dreams and Utopias—VAL and the Surrealists), she writes about these two groups, which deviated slightly from the centre of the unofficial current, but are connected by overlaps beyond art, secrecy, and crossing boundaries of the real allowing their ultimate freedom.

As early as the 1970s when the first texts were written, there was a clear discussion of VAL’s role of provoking, namely, to provoke “average” or “chaotic” period’s construction to a better performance. Their projects were claimed to be a direct response to contemporary problems of architecture and urbanism, and last but not least, to lead to “new social perspectives”. These ambitions existed even though they could not be made public. Paradoxically, after 1989, VAL’s genre specificity and uniqueness

was recognized as an “experiment” in the context of our architecture, but their affiliation with late-modern architecture was emphasized. It was this affiliation of VAL to late modernity, manifested in monumentality, that served as an argument to free this mode of expression from its direct connection with the political regime and its demands. What many texts meet is precisely the emphasis placed on freedom of creation, which makes their projects a good material for reflection on questions such as the (a)political nature of architecture.

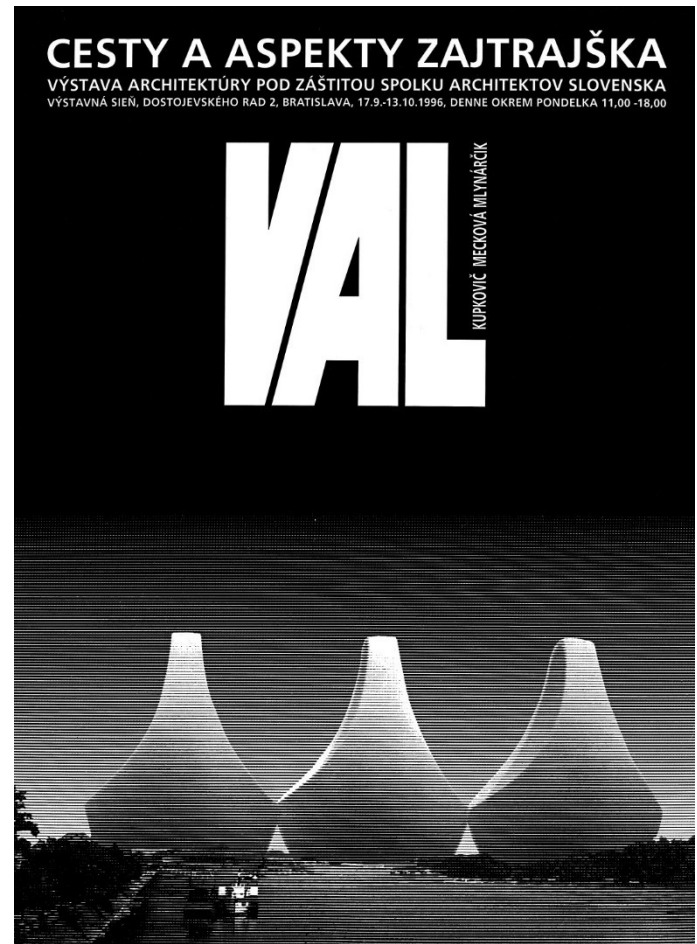


Figure 1: Poster for the exhibition “VAL—Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška”, 1996, Umelecká beseda, Bratislava, Slovakia.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupko

EXHIBITIONS

It was not until 1996 that VAL had their first solo exhibition in Slovakia [1], which took place in Umelecká beseda in Bratislava. All eight projects were presented. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue [21] compiled by the members of VAL themselves. In addition to the presentation of individual projects (represented by text, floor plans, sections, perspectives, diagrams, photo collages, reference pictures), the catalogue contains several new texts (Antonín Stuchl, Alexander Valentovič, Štefan Šlachta), excerpts from older texts (Michel Ragon, František Šmejkal, Antonín Stuchl, Jindřich Chaloupecký, Tomáš Štraus, Pierre Restany), and short biographies of VAL members with a list of their other works outside the group’s activities. A year later, the exhibition moved to Žilina, to a gallery named Klasik. In 1999, the complete work of VAL was presented in Venice. In addition to three solo exhibitions, VAL has appeared in various group exhibitions, both local and international. [22]

The Prague exhibition *Akce slovo pohyb prostor* (Action Word Movement Space) [23] curated by Vít Havránek deals with “another”—the experimental art of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. According to Havránek, the 1960s were a period of a lively theoretical discourse in Czechoslovakia, which was suspended by the following two decades of normalization. The exhibition thus follows up on the “interrupted reflection” at the end of the 1990s.



Figure 2: In front of Umelecká beseda at the exhibition “VAL—Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška”, 1996, Umelecká beseda, Bratislava, Slovakia. On the stairs from the left: Ľudovít Kupkovič, Alex Mlynárčik. Bottom right: Viera Mecková.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič



Figure 3: From the exhibition “VAL—Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška”, 1996, Umelecká beseda, Bratislava, Slovakia.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič



Figure 4: From the exhibition “VAL—Cesty a aspekty zajtrajška”, 1996, Umelecká beseda, Bratislava, Slovakia.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič

In the chapter *Kde budeme žiť zíttra?* (Where will we live tomorrow?), taken from the title of Michel Ragon’s publication [24] Ludmila Hájková and Rostislav Švácha present an overview of visionary expressions in Czechoslovakia during the 20th century. These culminate in the 1960s when “the release of ideological surveillance of architecture” succeeded in reviving the ideas of the avant-garde. According to the authors, translation of Ragon’s text, publication of *Města utopistů* (The Utopian City) [25] by Jiří Hruža or contact with the Austrian environment (Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler) also contributed to this. Hájková and Švácha claim that “in addition to reflections on a better organization of the society, one of the dominant themes of architectural thinking in the 1960s was the belief in technology as a tool for humanizing the world”. [26, p. 116]

The authors name the phenomenon of *non-architect’s architecture*, which also occurred in Czech—otherwise characteristically functionalist—architecture. It was the personalities outside architecture who, in their visionary positions, managed to detach themselves from the function, structure and objectivity of architecture. [27] The only representative of the Slovak (foreign) scene, among Czech artists, is Alex Mlynárčik.

On the basis of stages classified by Knížák leading to the architecture of *common spaces* [28] i.e. on the way to non-objective architecture, they liken *Heliopolis* to the second stage responding to the call to free the Earth surface. The authors of the text consider the projects of German expressionists (*Alpine Architektur*, Bruno Taut) to be the precedent for *Heliopolis*. In addition, they also included *Akusticon* here. They express the view that “behind the ideas of places in height lies a kind of purist or minimalist desire to clean up the landscape, which will then be able to become itself”. [26, p. 138]

The curator of exhibition *Neokonštruktivizmus v slovenskom výtvarnom umení* (Neo-constructivism in Slovak Fine Art) [29] Viera Kuracinová Janečková, listed VAL among 19 authors representing *constructive tendencies* in Slovak fine art from the 1960s to the end of the 20th century. She explains that in the Slovak context, constructivism in the 1920s was only present minimally, and she uses *neo-constructivism* mainly based on the

belief that in the 1960s, Slovak art developed in a world context. *Neo-constructivism* is thus represented in the works which were referred to by terms such as *new sensitivity*, *concretism*, *constructive tendencies*, and is understood as “a term for objective, non-mimetic, rationally structured geometric creation”. [29]

VAL is classified on the basis of belonging to *prospective architecture*, and thus represents “a futurological form of neo-constructivism”. What these works are supposed to have in common with classical constructivism is their inclination towards the scientific, the philosophical, and the technical utopia of the connection between art, architecture, and science. [29, p. 5] The last two projects of VAL were exhibited, *E-temen-an-ki* and *Národné zhromaždenie Argillia* (People’s Assembly of Argillia), both from the 1980s. Kuracinová Janečková claims that the architecture of VAL can be understood as “the heritage of Monument to the Third International by Vladimír Tatlin”. However, unlike the constructivists of the 1920s, the work of VAL is an intellectual escape elsewhere. The curator of the exhibition describes *neo-constructivist tendencies* in Slovak fine art as the art of “purity and order”. In addition to the inclination to rationality, science, and technology, she also characterizes *neo-constructivism* by the renunciation of the narrative and subjectivity of works. In this context, the degree of narrative may be what makes the projects of VAL stand out.

In 2000, the Slovak National Gallery prepared an exhibition and a publication on 20th century art as a part of the cycle *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia* (The History of Slovak Fine Arts) [30] The publication seeks to cover all genres from painting, sculpture, graphics, photography through multimedia to architecture and applied arts. In his text *Umenie akcie* (The Art of Action) [31] Radislav Matuščík considers one of the most significant contributions in the systematic conceptualization of the production of the 1970s, forming in the environment of the unofficial scene of Mlynárčik’s *Argillia*—the idea of “mental space with “correct” rules of the game, which were in a sharp contrast with the atmosphere of the upcoming normalization”. [31, p. 174] As a specific example of conceptual art, he refers to “utopian architectural projects and fictional monument memorials” [31, p. 175] where he also includes the projects of VAL together with designs by Jozef Jankovič or Juraj Meliš.

As part of the publication, Matúš Dulla deals with the period from the 1950s to the 1970s in architecture. [32] The end of the fifties for Slovak architecture means a gradual return of international post-war modernity, when “innovation, artistic pioneering, the building of an artistic ideal and a great gesture were integral signs of contemporary efforts”. [32, p. 225] At the same time, he claims that the independent work of architects in the observed period was rather a marginal phenomenon in Slovakia, because all production was concentrated in the project institutes. And because the work of VAL was private, and immune to the state ideology, they could freely express “a pure modern gesture”, “they were embodying the great spirit of modernity with its ideal enthusiasm and expansion”. [32, p. 227]

Another exhibition organized by the Slovak National Gallery was *Slovenské vizuálne umenie 1970-1985* (Slovak Visual Art 1970-1985) [33] where the projects of VAL did not appear on display,

but Aurel Hrabušický included them in his text *Umenie fantastického odhmotnenia* (The Art of Fantastic Dematerialization) [34] in the accompanying publication. In the introduction, Hrabušický distinguishes between “pure” or “radical” conceptual art as defined by Kosuth, which is rather self-referential, self-questioning, and conceptual art, which he considers more dematerialized or imaginative. “Instead of an analytical (synthetic) proposition” [34] Hrabušický offers a concise summary of art emerging in the Eastern bloc, where *the art of ideas* is the result of material scarcity, exhibiting constraints, content censorship. Somehow, the authors were forced to conceptualize the work. Due to the syncretism characteristic of our local art and the general ambiguity of conceptualism, Hrabušický introduces the concept of *dematerialized art*.

While the term conceptual art was not used in local environment at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s, the term *projektart* or *prospektart* was widespread and Hrabušický also uses this term to describe the work of VAL, specific in that “it was dematerialized art, but unlike previous types, it should not remain on paper”. [34] He identifies *Heliopolis* and *Akusticon* as key projects, which were preceded by Mlynárčik’s projects in the form of photo collages. “In any case, Mlynárčik’s photomontage designs of prospective architecture precisely by applying neo-dadaist and neo-surreal principles in dematerialized fiction represent a connecting bridge between the art of the 1960s and the 1970s and suggest other possibilities of uncommon use of this type of visibility.” [34]

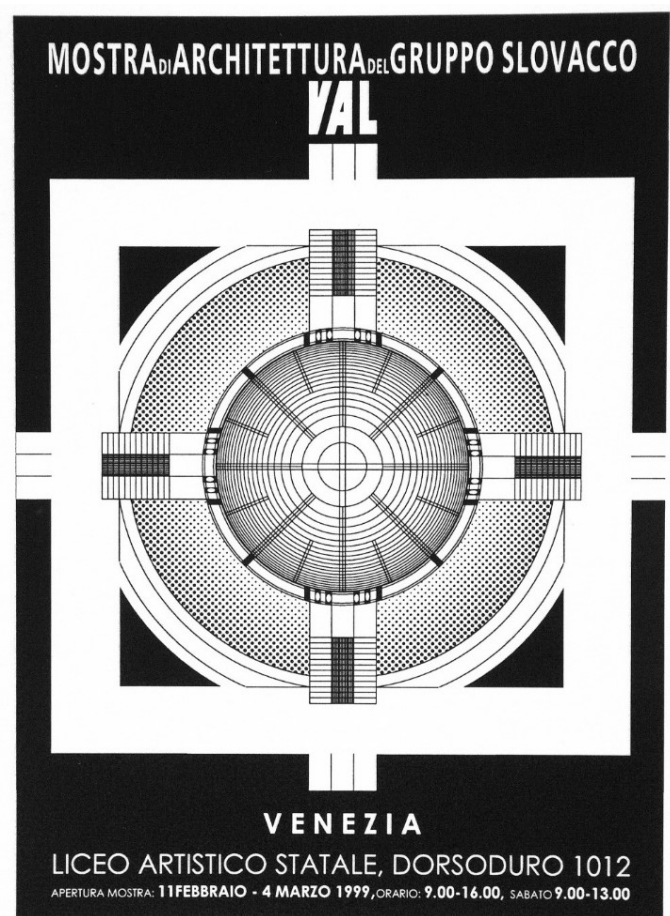


Figure 5: Poster for the exhibition “VAL”, 1995, Venice, Italy.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič

The exhibition *Slovenský obraz (antiobraz)* (Slovak Painting (Anti-painting)) [35] maps the Slovak fine art of the 20 century and presents it to Czech and international audience. The exhibition follows the former group exhibitions presenting Slovak fine art in the Czech Republic. The curator, Katarína Bajcurová, emphasizes that the development of Slovak art was subject to a different logic, it was always the result of various intersections, returns, jumps, shifts in the meaning of current art and thinking, which led to the creation of a “different” variant, where individual initiatives were often combined in contradictory ways—“barbarically”.

VAL's project is included in the thematic area of *Iné svety* (Other Realms). [36] In this section, the curators present works by which their authors detach themselves from the motionless world of totalitarianism, works that represent the capacity of their authors to “be elsewhere”. Mlynárčik is described as an author who has already been “elsewhere” programmatically (locally and also through the medium he used). *Akusticon* was exhibited, introducing Alex Mlynárčik as an animator (coordinator) of projects in which the general public enters and animates them.



Figure 6: From the exhibition “VAL”, 1995, Venice, Italy.
From the left: Viera Mecková, Alex Mlynárčik, Ľudovít Kupkovič.
Source: Archive of Ľudovít Kupkovič

Most Slovak (and Czech) group exhibitions classify VAL as a manifestation of conceptual art, or neo-avant-garde. The same thing is a manifestation of monumentalism in architecture on one hand, and dematerialized art on the other hand, while it is non-objective architecture from the point of view of conceptual art. The work of VAL is scientific, philosophical, and poetic. It is an intellectual escape *elsewhere*, where it sets its own rules of the game; it is a syncretic variant of post-war modernity. VAL represents this unique relationship between architecture and art, multiplied in our local context by a totalitarian regime, where one medium could express itself more freely in the language of the other, on the basis of mutual escapes.

A significant event was the presence of VAL at the British exhibition *Cold War Modern*, which opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and later travelled to the Italian city of Rovereto and Vilnius in Lithuania. The curators of the exhibition and the editors of the corresponding catalogue [37] David Crowley

and Jane Pavitt, based its content on the presentation of architecture and design as the central aspects of the Cold War and their various forms in relation to the competition between the East and the West from the end of World War II to the 1970s.

The authors refer to the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s as “the end of utopia”, thus referring to a situation in which the utopianism of the former modernist megastructures was discredited by their execution. At that time, countercultural groups emerging in the West, and in part in the East, were criticizing the Cold War and disrupting the former synchrony of design and politics. According to the authors, one of the manifestations of these last utopias, the new megastructuralism, secretly expresses the state of humanity surrounded by borderline situations, such as overpopulation, threat of nuclear war, pollution caused by industrialization, and responds to them in a radical way—by dwellings below sea level, in space etc.

The creation of “*catalytic images that could stimulate reactions*” [37, p. 259] is represented in the catalogue by groups such as Superstudio or VAL, which appears here in the context of different approaches to the landscape. Crowley highlighted *Heliopolis* as “*a mechanism to protect the natural environment from its greatest threat, a man*”. [37, p. 259] He pointed out that in the project there is a zoning of the territory of the Tatras, and two out of the six zones are inaccessible to humans, thus creating a natural counter-monument to the destructive power of man. *Heliopolis* has become “*a gesture of unattainable perfection*”. [37, p. 260] Crowley sees this project as an example of a utopia built on the dystopian logic of environmentalism, a relationship characteristic of the modified background of the post-war utopia of modernism.

LATEST REFLECTIONS

Polish art historian Katarzyna Cytlak dealt with VAL as part of her dissertation [38] which she defended in 2012 at the Sorbonne in Paris. An abbreviated version of her dissertation is available in the form of an article entitled *L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon* [39] in which Cytlak deals with the reach of Michel Ragon's theory of *prospective architecture* in the Eastern European context on the example of VAL. In her work, Cytlak briefly presents the difference between the *prospective* (or futuristic) and *utopian* principle, as defined by Ragon. Throughout her paper, she adheres to the dichotomy of these two principles and provides further definitions of the term utopia. She examines the similarities and differences of VAL's work with prospective architecture, and in parallel, writes about what brings them closer to groups such as Utopia or L'internationale Situationniste. She emphasizes the importance of the local (Eastern European) context for understanding the work of VAL.

Cytlak states that although VAL focuses on all the issues [40] mentioned by Ragon, all formal variants [41] of *prospective architecture* appear in their projects and they also used the new architectural forms [42] it does not deprive VAL of its originality, as they were “*one of the few formations in Central Europe, which has elaborated specific projects of experimental architecture in*

relation to the global trends of the time". [39] On the other hand, Cytlak finds in VAL's approach "a certain political and social interest usually associated with the concept of utopia, which the French critic rejected". [39] She presents Alex Mlynárčik's first architectural project *Les megaliths du XXle siècle* (Megaliths of the 21st century), which was inspired by an exhibition organized by the group Utopie. Cytlak claims that VAL's projects contain ideas of a better society—more egalitarian and in a better relationship with nature, thus approaching radical French architecture.

According to Cytlak, VAL combines several mutually contradictory trends in world architecture and clearly does not belong to any of them. She also emphasizes that their projects do not form a homogeneous whole, but rather a transition between modernism and postmodernism. With this statement, she also insinuates the fact that in the Slovak architectural interpretation, their work is uniformly classified as late modernity and postmodern elements in the newer projects are neglected. At the end, she expresses the need and usefulness of differentiating the work of VAL, and the need to place it in the context of contemporary discourse on architecture and spatial planning.

Cytlak focuses on the difference between experimental architecture in the West and the East in the article entitled *Complexity and Contradiction in Central European Radical Architecture* [43] which along the *Cold War Modern* exhibition, adds to research of permeability of the Iron Curtain in the field of art. In the article, Cytlak focuses on the complex relationship of Eastern European art to the global one and the specificity of the Eastern European approach.

Visionary projects appeared in the East as well as in the West in the mid-1960s. Although they were formally and conceptually similar, according to Cytlak, in most cases their meanings were different, or even opposite. The difference stems from different historical, socio-political and cultural conditions. What they had in common was setting themselves against the conventions of the past, their formal heterogeneity, permanent oscillation between art and architecture.

Projects coming from east of the Iron Curtain were either explicitly or implicitly set against official state architecture—socialist realism. They took the form of a protest against the architecture serving state propaganda or reacted to the general trend of massive industrialization and standardization. As for VAL, Cytlak considers their work to be indirectly critical of the local socio-political situation, because of its sharp contrast to the reality of the time, especially with regard to the design of the infrastructure for leisure or consumption, or their reference to the work of personalities such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. [43]

Cytlak claims that Eastern European projects overturned the strategies of the communist regime, but at the same time, they distanced themselves from the concept of utopia, expressing not only criticism, but also resistance to the utopian ideals of the socialist state. By creating counter-utopian discourse, they offered alternative visions of reality, while drawing attention to the problems of the socialist state. [43]

From the local point of view, several master's theses were elaborated on VAL. [1] With her work, Monika Kicová wanted to reconsider the current way of looking at the work of VAL as "a modernist, optimistic fantasy of the future". Her work attempts to cover the breadth of contexts in which the work of VAL is placed, and to formulate some other ways of its interpretation. She uses the method of constant oscillation between real and project architecture, and examines the possibility of their overlapping.

Kicová formally analyses architecture of the projects (deliberately avoiding the evaluation of feasibility (impracticability) of projects), outlines the conditions of individual project formation, puts them in the social context and the context of architectural production and urban planning of that time. She also confronts the work of VAL with similar international and local architects and artists. Kicová is looking for external starting points, kinship with various architectural and artistic tendencies in the West, both from the present and the past.

In conclusion, Kicová states that the work of VAL can be viewed in different ways: as a modernist vision from the course of prospective architecture, as a work critical to the contemporary architecture and the socialist system, or as a work of art synthesizing architecture, sculpture, painting, and drawing. She builds on Cytlak's dissertation in stating that the work of VAL cannot be seen as a unified whole, but as projects that are different from each other.

CONCLUSION

To date, the most attention to VAL, to the importance of their work and their relationship with an international production seems to have been devoted by Katarzyna Cytlak. Monika Kicová's master's thesis is in many ways related to Cytlak and complements it with the context of the local architectural scene. Much more attention was paid to VAL from the point of view of art history, where it has steadily established itself as a manifestation of conceptual art. In part, this attention can be attributed to the person of Alex Mlynárčik—one of the most important Slovak action (conceptual) artists; another reason being the uniqueness of this group on the local and international scene.

In the summary, there is a complex tangle of meanings and expectations related to VAL which to some extent contradict each other. The reason could be that their work is viewed mainly as a single whole, mostly represented by several selected projects. However, VAL has produced eight projects over a period of almost thirty years. The time spent on individual projects was of varying lengths, from one year to fourteen. In addition, there is a significant disproportion between the time when the projects were created and when they were publicly presented (at least in Slovakia). As Cytlak has already indicated, it might be useful to differentiate the work of VAL, to pay attention to separate projects and compare them with each other afterwards.

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