


Unearthing The Music is a project that addresses the issue of freedom of expression – particularly in music – in the countries under the so-called ‘iron curtain’ between 1957 and 1989 (following the developments after ‘de-stalinization’ and the hungarian and polish revolts of 1956).

In these countries jazz, electronics, punk or avant-garde music the and of this unspread, signification in the larger history of european vanguard music, its influences in present-day creative scenes relatively unknown.



By gathering music, videos, articles, testimonies, opinions and investigative studies on an online resource center, as well as promoting awareness and discussion over this issue, the project has tried to show to what extent and how it was possible, over the diverse regime grips on the arts in the different countries of the 'eastern bloc', to live in a creative mindset, to develop self expression through innovative music-making, and to contribute to such an european identity staple as is its creative, aventurous and genre-bending music.

This volume gathers texts from contributors which are and were involved, in different capacities – as musicians, as journalists or as researchers – in some of these music scenes, and it's a companion piece to the online database available on the project's website.

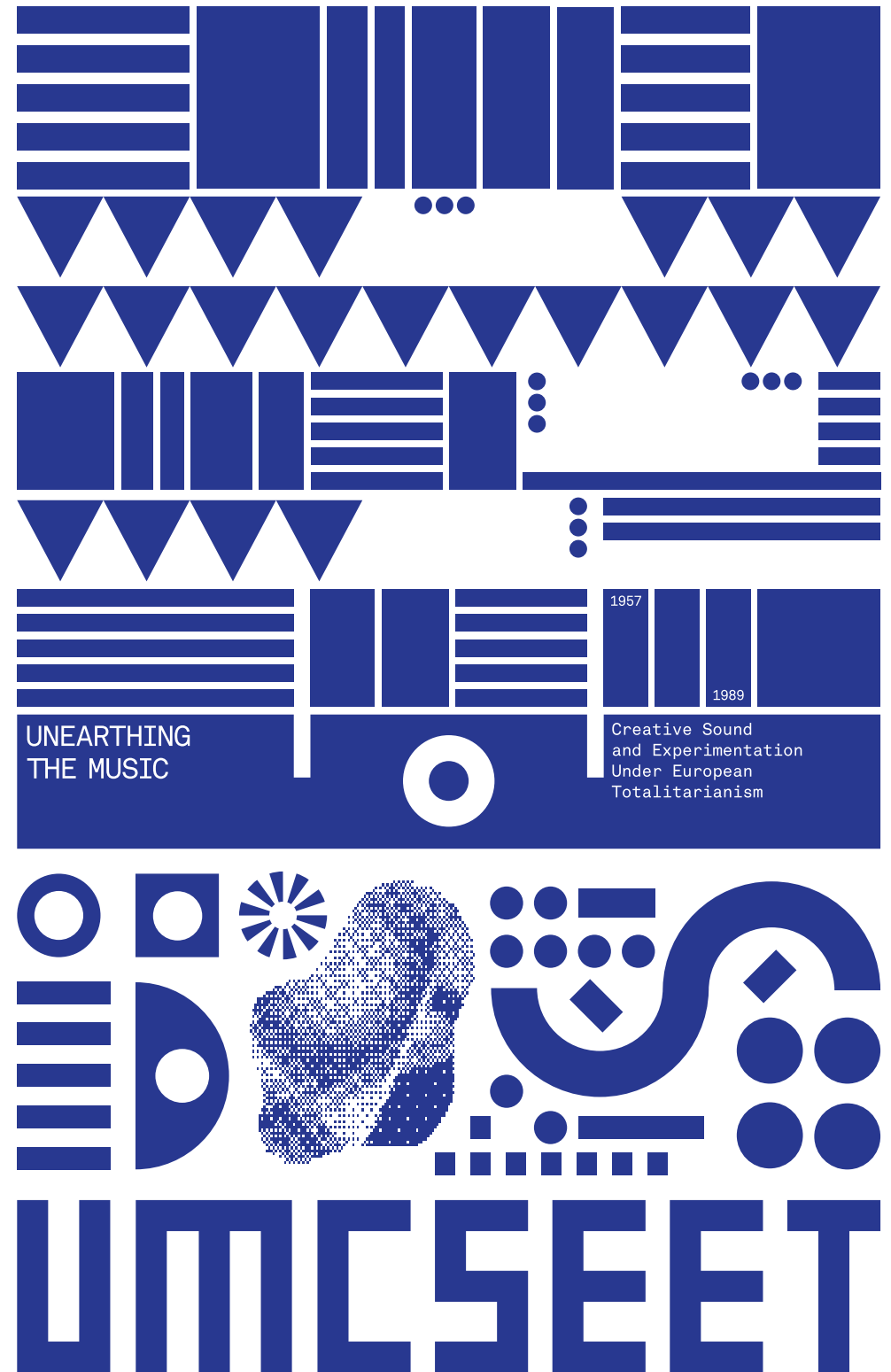
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UMCSEET /// UNEARTHING THE MUSIC

Creative Sound and Experimentation under European Totalitarianism

/// 1957-1989



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UNEARTHING THE MUSIC

Creative Sound  
and Experimentation  
under European  
Totalitarianism  
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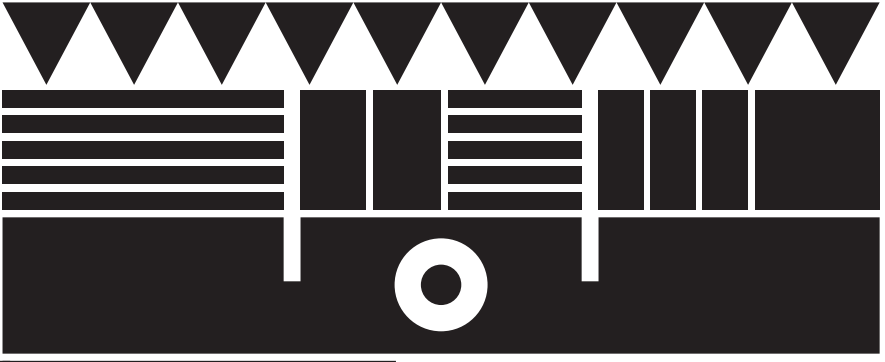
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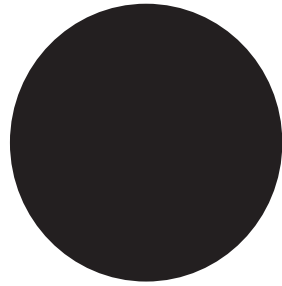
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“Did



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## Foreword by Rui Pedro Dâmaso\*

### Did somebody say "Totalitarianism"\*

Nietzsche famously (*well, not that famously...*) intuited the mechanisms of simplification and falsification that are operative at all our levels of dealing with reality – from the simplification and *metaphorization* through our senses in response to an *excess* of stimuli (visual, tactile, auditive, etc), to the flattening normalisation processes effected by language and reason through words and concepts which are not really much more than *metaphors of metaphors*.

Words and concepts are common denominators and not – as we'd wish and believe to – precise representations of something that's there to be objectively apprehended. We do live *through* and *with* words though, and even if we realize their subjectivity and relativity it is only just that we should pay the closest attention to them and try to use them knowingly – as we can reasonably acknowledge that the world at large does not adhere to Nietzsche's insight - we *do* relate words to facts and to expressions of reality. To truths. It's how we're made.

*So words do matter.*

In the book from which I borrowed this text's title, its author Slavoj Žižek argues that not only the word "totalitarianism" is too simplistic a model to describe the realities of the former 'eastern bloc', but as well *that the moment one accepts the notion of 'totalitarianism' one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon*. He's not the only one. Throughout the course of this year-long investigative project, me and my colleagues were more than once confronted over the use of this word by prospective contributors who either insisted in pointing out their disagreement over it, or simply couldn't look past the baggage it carries and plainly refused to collaborate – deeming this word as a *cold-war construct*, a *western* word complicit with a *eastern-European victim-posturing for the western gaze*. I personally don't take issue with these views, and I can agree with them to a large extent. I certainly respect them fully.

I admit "European totalitarianism" to be an unfortunate and over-simplified umbrella expression that has been used and appropriated with not very noble purposes so far. I also admit to be, as Žižek says, "firmly rooted in the liberal-democratic horizon", as must

\* ~~~~~  
Unearthing the Music's project manager / OUT.RA – Associação Cultural

of us are, even if involuntarily. That a lot of the eastern europeans we also contacted and worked with did not react in the same manner to this word probably shows that they *too* are already and understandably “trapped” under this liberal-democratic horizon – which just goes to show its ever-growing dominance and its success in breaching (though arguably not in the healthiest way) this historical east-west divide in Europe or, well, maybe they just didn't take issue with it or didn't bother to enlighten *yet another confused westerner*).

In western Europe there's always been a simultaneously complex and simplistic view of its eastern counterpart's *otherness*, especially following the developments after WW II. As a teenager and early adult at the end of the 1990's I only accessed ideas and concepts such as the Eastern Bloc, the Warsaw Pact or the Iron Curtain retrospectively – and only through personal interest could I learn a bit more beyond this sort of *fetichisation* that seemed and still seems ever-present when regarding the former socialist regimes of central and eastern Europe (through the most dangerous of all forms of vulgarization: that of turning everything into a *kitsch quest* – something that's more and more a result of our growing intellectual and social cynicism).

This is clearly observable in music as well – though the internet became instrumental in allowing access to true gems of fantastic and expressive sonic manifestations, it also helped this kitsch quest tremendously – who of us hasn't laughed at these mind-boggling soviet attempts at disco or pop music that keep popping up on our friends' timelines regularly, for instance (though a lot could be said about how these attempted appropriations of eminently capitalist musics by these so-called socialist regimes should be a good indicator of social complexities going far beyond our flattening ideas about everyday life there)? Even the more avant-garde leaning musical circles sometimes reveal this fetishistic look at what was on the other side of the wall – we just have to think of the great (or not-so-great) charade surrounding the “Kosmischer Läufer ” compilation to start with, or how any potentially great musical discovery from the east has an increased, emotionally-curious investment automatically added to it.

Even if our personal interests reside only in music and we embark on a journey through more or less experimental sounds made in the east, we should not only quite soon realize how serious and important these artistic pursuits were in much broader social terms, but also how there must have been very diverse scenes from country to country - even though all of those should be ran like this socialist totalitarian *monolith* we grew up thinking about (we can think of the incredibly strong free-jazz scene in Poland, for instance, or the more underground rock and punk rock movements in Hungary and

Czechoslovakia, or even the absence of a significant output coming from countries such as Romania or Bulgaria as strong indicators of very different regime grips on artists and overall social conditions).

So, didn't I / we, after all, just succumb to this flattening simplification Nietzsche talks about? Doesn't a word such as totalitarianism just overlook the many nuances and differences between these countries amongst themselves and the – some people might argue - considerable achievements therein obtained? Doesn't the dominant political and social discourse often place eastern European socialism in the same box as Nazism, for instance, placing concentration camps and gulags as two faces of the same devastating dystopian madness, or comparing a delusional wish for dominance and annihilation with a much more naive quest for the bettering of Man (though fundamentally flawed in its practice and setting)?

We're trapped in words; and we're trapped in a social system and way of life that has given us these words that we often do not investigate or call into question. This was true in these former socialist regimes and it's true – maybe even more as we do have an illusion of freedom and choice – in our dominant liberal democracies.

Would “non-democratic” be a fairer expression? Would any word or simple tag-line better convey this referent and still be suitable to the constraints of simplification that a project title is bound to? I think this over-simplification was probably, and admittedly, an ill-considered *by-product* sprung out of sheer enthusiasm for what this project is really about – and that is to delve into the more forward-leaning music of those times and places in Europe and come out of it with new insights and new knowledge, to the point of being able to ultimately question the very foundations and preconceptions at the heart of it. And doing it based on what after all is more resistant to simplification and normalisation: the personal experiences of those directly involved.

This small book tackles experimental music-making in the socialist regimes of eastern Europe from the perspective of musicians, journalists and thinkers that have been close to its happenings in several ways, and it should not only help to overcome the divide and preconceptions, but as well to pose relevant and contemporary questions: how different after all (barring the obvious case *for immediate* physical and psychological consequences back there /then - but aren't there *long-term* physical, financial and psychological consequences in liberal democracies as well?) is to commit to making non-commercial music or art in our present day democracies from what it was in these regimes (something that Chris Cutler's text addresses, for instance)? Aren't people who choose to do so, in a way, always *outsiders* (which can be clear reading Laszlo





Hortobágyi's interview), rejecting the steady lane for success and measurable social / economic achievement?

We can see how this *commitment* beared different consequences according to the specificities of each country (such as is the particular case of Czechoslovakia, in Martin Machovec's interview, or how journalist Chris Bohn's *western gaze* perceived the social climate surrounding music as he hopped from Poland to Hungary to Prague in the early 1980's), while Alexei Borisov's text offers an intimate account of creative survival strategies in the former USSR. Daniel Muzyczuk's text, in turn, delves deeply into punk, performance, counterculture and the social and political confusion and mishaps following the fall of the regimes.

Žižek says that when someone in a liberal democracy designates something as totalitarianism, nothing useful is being said about it (which Nietzsche would not only agree with but extend to when someone says anything about anything under the assumption of it being *a true correspondence with an objective reality*), except as an indication of *what gives the liberal democrat the heebie-jeebies*; we may have fallen for that mistake or controversy in the project's title, but not in its aims. Hopefully, this will be a point of entry for all interested not only in knowing more about real personal and artistic demands and pursuits under harsh conditions, but as well in destroying unfounded preconceptions and empty generalisation.

*I and OUT.RA would like to express our gratitude to the project's core-team members Alexander Pehlemman, Lucia Udvardyova, Daniel Muzyczuk and Alexei Borisov, to our designer José Mendes and all of those who throughout twelve months have in any way helped and contributed (in no particular order):*

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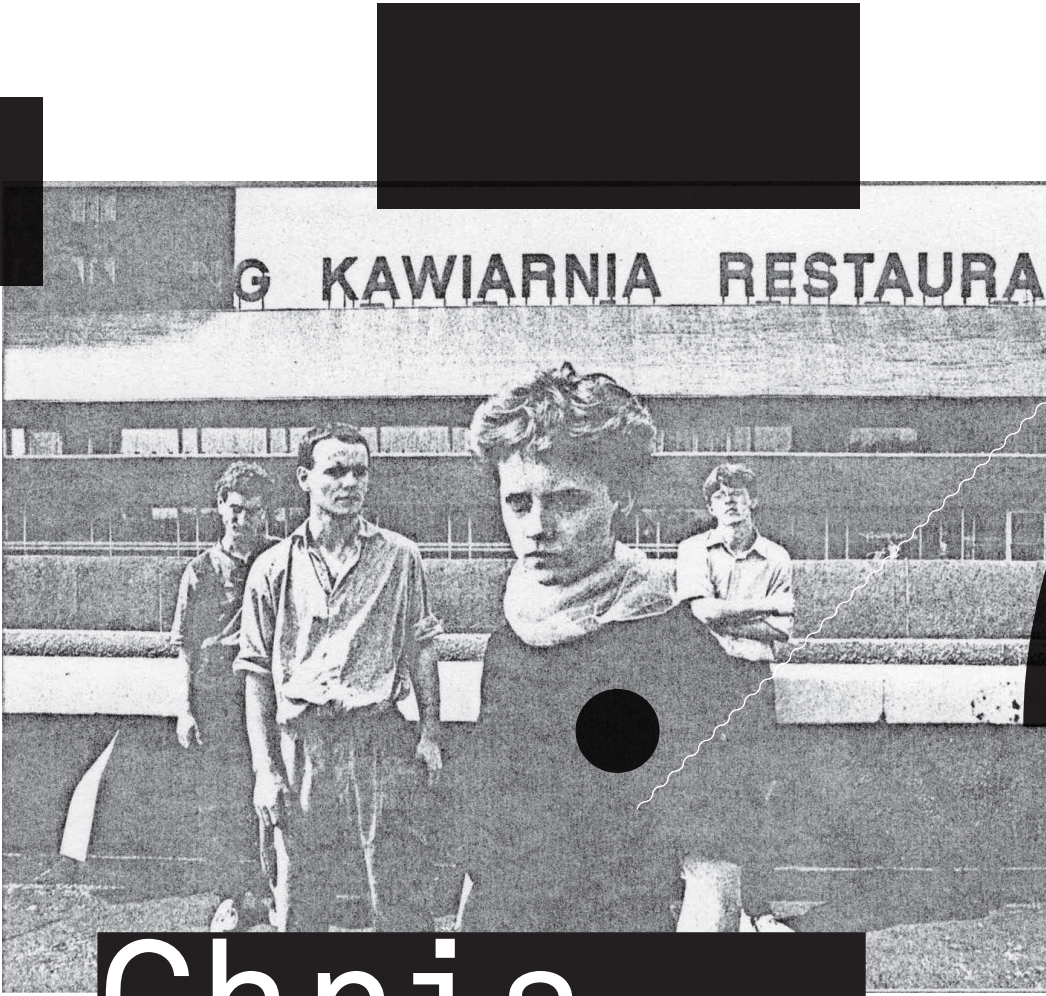
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*Ivan Acher*  
*Alexej Guha*  
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*Zuzana Husárová*  
*Peter Vronsky*  
*Anna Ceeh*  
*Levente Toth*  
*Izabel Caligiore (Lullabies for Insomniacs)*  
*Svetlana Maras*  
*Pavla Jonssonova*  
*Vlad Kurakin*  
*Zoya Petrova*  
*Robert Stieler (Major Label)*  
*Miloš Hroch*

*(Unearthing the Music's database is available online at [www.umcseet.eu](http://www.umcseet.eu), and it will remain open to all interested contributors long after the end of this first research phase).*

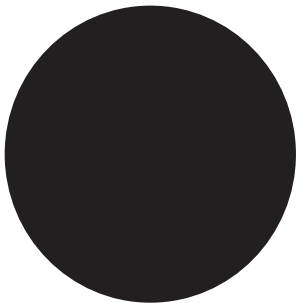




Kontrola W (Poland, 1983) - photo Jeff Veitch



# Chris Bohn





No

This text is  
a revised version  
of the afterword  
originally written  
for Alexander  
Pehlemann's  
Go Ost! book.

“ Right Turn:

Eastern  
Europe  
Revisited ”

*Chris Bohn is Editor-in-Chief of The Wire magazine. He has been associated with the magazine first as a freelance contributor and later as a staff member, since the mid-1980s. Before then he worked for the UK music weeklies New Musical Express (for which he travelled to Eastern Europe in the early 1980's to report on local music scenes) and Melody Maker. He has also contributed to The Guardian, City Limits, Time Out Film Guide and Berlin's Tip, among other periodicals. In 1993 he wrote the documentary Laibach: A Film From Slovenia.*



## No right turn: Eastern Europe revisited

I was so much dumber then, I'm marginally less naive than that now... Berlin might well have been the Hauptstadt der Deutsche Demokratische Republik from 1949 until the clock finally ran down on the disintegrating communist utopian dream with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. But in the bleak winter of almost a decade before, the show windows its Eastern sector projected to Western visitors quickly disappeared into the blackness of a November night back in November 1980, as the overground S-bahn train pulled away from the brightly lit yet bleak border crossing zone around Friedrichstrasse Station in the direction of Ostbahnhof, the transport hub connecting the Volksrepublik to its Warsaw Pakt neighbours. I was riding the overnight train to Prague. IPC, the publishing corporation which back then owned the UK rock music weekly *New Musical Express* (NME), had fretted about not being able to arrange any travel insurance for this particular assignment: to head east and investigate underground music in Prague, Budapest and Warsaw. Except Warsaw quickly fell off the agenda: 'occupation: journalist' cited in my passport had blocked repeated visa applications to enter Poland, which was then experiencing escalating street protests in support of Solidarnosc. There were no such problems obtaining permission to enter Czechoslovakia or Hungary. But in terms of forward planning for either of these sorties in Eastern Europe, all I had to go on was a list of addresses given to me en route through West Berlin by Moritz Reichelt of Düsseldorf's Der Plan at a fantastic German post-punk/Neue Deutsche Welle night that also featured Mania D (with future Malaria! members Gudrun Gut and Bettina Köster, and Liaisons Dangereuses member Beate Bartel), SYPH, Die Fehlfarben and Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft, whose 1980 debut single "Kebabträume" satirised West Berlin middle class fears of foreign guest workers and Communists combined breaching bourgeois security through a gate in the barbed wire.

Der Plan had compiled the list while putting together *Fix Planet!*, an anthology of underground music from around the world. At the festival Der Plan introduced me to a Czech contact Pavel Turnovsky, a friend of The Plastic People Of The Universe, who just happened to be at the NDW festival while on holiday in West Berlin. Without Pavel's help I'm sure I'd have failed to find anyone remotely connected to the underground during the whole week I spent in Prague...

*Flashback I: In 1978 I had spent ten days in East Berlin staying with cousins of my Silesian born mother (who'd moved to the UK in the late 1940s). The closest I got to experiencing any Eastern European music during that first extended holiday the other side of the so-called Iron Curtain was discovering Ernst Busch's fabulous History Of The 20th Century in ballad form series of singles published by the DDR record company Amiga.*



*I'd also returned with a handful of DDR rock records by the likes of Stern-Combo Meissen and Puhdys, who were as dully competent as their West German equivalent and had fans both sides of the ideological divide. Solo Sunny (1980), the last film completed by the great East German director Konrad Wolf, was about a young female rock singer, whose artistic ambitions were frustrated and ultimately stifled by the system's insistence on ranking and filing artistic activity like it was something from a factory production line. Viewed some 35 years later after it was released by US company First Run Features as part of their revelatory DEFA Collection of DDR films, many of which had been little seen at home or abroad on their original release, Solo Sunny retroactively filled a few gaping holes in my knowledge I'd acquired of creative life in East Europe during my East Berlin holiday.*

Ten days of comfortably numb holiday entertainment in 1978 East Berlin turned out to be poor preparation for a week in numbingly comfortable looking Prague in 1980. That latter illusion was immediately shattered by the testimonies of the underground musicians Pavel introduced me to. Indeed without his introductions I'm sure I'd have left Prague mumbling tourist platitudes about Kafka, the castle and the alchemy lane leading away from it, happily stuffed full of potato dumplings and pancakes. That the only decent group with a public licence to play during my visit was the appositely named Classic Rock And Roll Band said plenty; that they were on the verge of losing it for being too rock and roll lewd said even more. Hearing about the tribulations of The Plastic People Of The Universe from founding member Josef Janicek, how some of his fellow members had been imprisoned and so on, was deeply disturbing. That the tremendous group Extempore, led by Mikolas Chadima, swallowed their fear of nosy do-right neighbours reporting them to the police for disturbing the peace to perform Chadima's song cycle *15 Dreams Of The City Inhabitant* in their apartment for an audience of one was a real privilege I only came to fully appreciate 30 years later on belatedly hearing a double CD issue of the same piece, alongside a six CD set of the later Mikolas Chadima Band's 1980s performances. Indeed, aside from that Extempore apartment performance and the illicit Western releases of two Plastic People Of The Universe albums, it was nigh impossible to actually hear much of the music of most of the Prague musicians and groups I eventually wrote about in the *NME* cover story – the first of a two-part East European special – that appeared in early 1981. It hadn't yet become de rigueur to play 'spot the punk' in Eastern Europe as a way of registering public dissent in a communist climate, but given The Sex Pistols' year zero moment in Western rock had only occurred three/four years previously, it was of course uncommonly exciting that Energie G, whom I was told was one of Prague's three existing punk groups, also performed a private basement concert for my pleasure. My contacts were more excited about another punk group called Zikkurat, whom I only finally got to hear three decades later when I visited Eastern European underground chronicler Alexander Pehlemann in a punk-ridden zone





of Leipzig in October 2013. Their retrospectively released CD has been a revelation for the way the group's 20-25 minute slashes of rhythm and noise openly defied punk's quickly stultifying two chord, three minute song dogma. The other group everyone spoke about with a degree of awe in that winter of 1980 were called Kilhets, who by all accounts were as much Beuys style actionist performance artists with dada cells sunk deep in their DNA as they were post-Cage type provocateurs chancing their arm with lengthy silences between punked up collisions of Zappa-like passages and Velvet Underground-like thrashes. Chadima was a Kilhets member who'd stayed on in Prague. And I got to meet their melancholic, homesick founder Petr Krečan who had gone into exile in Munich on my long train ride home to London. When I finally got to hear a handful of their deeply underground performances as featured in a box set released in the mid-2000s, their music stands as the most stunning of the posthumous underground releases to have surfaced a few decades after the end of the communist regime that conspired to silence the group's insolent silences, so to speak.

Compared to the heavily suffocating atmosphere hanging over underground Prague, the Budapest scene I visited a week later felt like a playground paradise. But even in its more open climate people would occasionally raise their hands to hide their mouths from prying lipreading informants' eyes when speaking to a foreigner in public places. And the prevailing mood among the city's musicians and artists were as likely to plummet as spiral high. The congenial film maker Gabor Body, whose cult hit *Psyche* featuring West German actor Udo Kier (fresh from his starring roles in Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* films) introduced me to Attila Grandpierre, leader of Vágtázó Halottkémek, a few nights after the singer had tried to kill himself. With his wrists wrapped in bandages, Attila calmly and kindly answered my innocent questions about the meaning and motivations of the bizarre folk rock the group he had founded in 1975 blindly thrashed out in his absence the night he was recovering in hospital. Then he politely requested if he could he ask me a question: what were Blue Cheer doing now (that is, in winter 1980)? Sadly I did not have an answer.

Back in 1980, the other key Budapest underground group the cognoscenti kept talking about were Spions, whose Laibach-like overidentification with the totalitarian organism – be it stalinist or hitlerite – resulted in one of their founders, Gregor Davidow, going into exile in Paris rather than risk the wrath of the state's displeasure in such Spions songs as the one about 'Anna' Frank dancing with her killers. I never got to hear these early Spion songs, even when I met Gregor in Paris on the final leg of my return trip to the UK. I'd have been disappointed if I had. Never mind Spions' overidentification with the totalitarian organism. More problematic was Gregor's overidentification with Joel Grey, the MC from *Cabaret*, 1970s Hollywood's invocation of Christopher Isherwood's stories

of Weimar Berlin, and his far too unhealthy love of Malcolm McLaren's strategies. But other Hungarian underground music I encountered has aged much better. In particular and above all the voice of Jenő Menyhárt of URH. I still recall his one-song performance of the great Hungarian underground hit "Bon Bon Si Bon Bon" – any number of versions of which can now be found on YouTube! – at a Budapest party. Seated, legs crossed, on a low wooden stool, supported by the a cappella mouthings of two members of a group called Balaton, his voice barked itself into a terse rant along the lines of "Too many police, too few whores" and back to "Too many whores, too few policemen". In an attempt to recapture that moment I went looking for Menyhárt on record. Eventually I found *Annak Is Kell*, a 2013 set by his later group Európa Kíado. (Their 1980s albums *Popzene*, *Love '82* and *Jó Lesz... '84* are highly recommended – imagine Roxy Music's first album being ravaged by a 1977 punk riot and coming out alive by ducking through a hole into a future of their own devising.) Back in the here and now his voice is as every bit as emotionally captivating as it was back in 1980. And I'm totally won over by "Ennek A Szobának", the album's stingingly sung Hungarian translated cover version of Bob Dylan's "Shelter From The Storm". I ran the Hungarian title through google translate just to confirm what I was hearing. It came out "As In A Room", which felt exactly right: 35 years later East and West might be almost the same but in the final count they're still just that little bit far apart.



*Flashback II: In 1978 the big punky reggae hit was Tapper Zukie's "MPLA". People heard it as being about the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola even if in truth it had little to nothing to say about the people's struggle for independence from Portuguese colonialism. Meanwhile the smash hit films of 1978–80 were America's soulsearching post-Vietnam defeat movies The Deerhunter and Apocalypse Now, both of them were heavy on the damage done by said defeat to the US psyche, even as they expressed little to no regret about the people the US failed to bomb into the oblivion of surrender. A few years later, during the Falklands War with Argentina, UK forces sunk the Argentine ship General Belgrano, killing more than 300 men. Travelling underground in Eastern Europe was always an ambivalent experience; encounters with musicians and artists in Prague and Budapest, earlier in Ljubljana in non-aligned Yugoslavia, and later in Poznan, Warsaw, Krakow, East Berlin and again, frequently, to meet Laibach in Ljubljana, was never less than exciting, exhilarating, immensely moving and every so often unnerving, and once or twice heart in mouth frightening, even. But these trips were never undertaken with the feeling that the West was somehow better. Morally superior? Certainly not. The Soviet bloc, China and Cuba backed all the right sides in people's liberation struggles around the world, even if their outcomes were often as not inglorious.*

*Utopia by definition must forever remain a dream away from reality. Utopia, it appears, is only attainable by wielding a heavy stick, destroying it in the very moment of its creation.*



Chris Cutler is an English percussionist, composer, lyricist and music theorist.

Best known for his work with English avant-rock group Henry Cow, Cutler was also a member and drummer of other bands, including Art Bears, News from Babel, Pere Ubu and (briefly) Gong/Mothergong. He has collaborated with many musicians and groups, including Fred Frith, Lindsay Cooper, Zeena Parkins, Peter Blegvad, Telectu and The Residents, and has appeared on over 100 recordings.

Cutler co-created and runs the British independent record label Recommended Records / ReR, whose sub-label Points East Records released several essential records by central and eastern european avant-garde musicians between the late 1980's and the early 1990's. He has given a number of public lectures on music, published numerous articles and papers, and written a book on the political theory of contemporary music, and was one of the founders of the Rock In Opposition movement.

This note is a revised version of the text originally written for the programme for BIG EAR festival, in Hungary, in 2000

Christoph Anders (Cassibien) in Rostock, 1985 Photo by Chris Cutler



# Chris Cutler

“

Looking

”

back



## Introduction

I'm grateful for this opportunity to reprint the following note about my experiences in some of the East bloc countries in the '70s and '80s. Back then I spent a fair amount of time in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, GDR and the Soviet Union, performing or visiting friends. I also set up a label to release music from these countries, in 1987 – because this music was excluded from the global conversation, in spite of the fact that it had plenty to say. The label was called Points East. And it lasted as long as East bloc itself lasted.

I should make it clear that my personal perspective diverges somewhat from that of this project; in particular, I think the tagline that lumps these very different countries under the single heading “totalitarian” is essentially unhelpful and fails to convey the nuance and complexity of the realities on the ground. Sure, there were things that were worse in the East than they were here, but there were also things (typically ignored in our simplistic assessments - like crèches, price and rent controls, public safety and the provision of services - that were better. Triumphantist Western parodies of the East simply show how blind we were to the prejudices and deficiencies of our own social conditions. And I note how quickly we adopted some of the worst aspects of Eastern society as soon as the East block itself collapsed - and how reluctant we remain to introduce any of the best.

I would also have to say that, amongst the people with whom I mixed, at least, intellectual life operated on a higher level there than here and that cultural communications amongst artists and the intelligentsia were both more respected and more seriously received than in the west.

## **Looking back**

(Originally written for the programme of the BIG EAR festival, Budapest 2000)

As I recall, there were many conversations, a lot of them centred around the word free - but I noticed that although, or because, we could do what we liked, no one much cared. How free we were was only a way of looking; another was that to be ignored might be as draining and as effectively neutralising as being proscribed. The relative luxury we experienced of being at no physical risk seemed to come at the cost of a kind of immateriality while, in those places where stepping outside the boundaries of what was officially acceptable brought serious existential consequences – the kind of consequences that could affect your entire life, even your physical liberty – refusal to conform appeared to carry considerably more weight. In fact, the evident bother misfits gave the apparatus was one of the things that made what they did matter so much, in one of those rare instances of the power that police and politicians occasionally - and usually inadvertently - lend their critics. Artists knew that there were at least two minorities (themselves and state ideologues) who would take them very seriously indeed, and this in spite of the fact that they might only be able to play two concerts in a year, both unofficial and both to a tiny, invited, private audience. Such restricted opportunity might seem from the outside to indicate a terrible defeat, but the immense resonance those two concerts could have - the extent to which they could really matter - tells another story altogether. There were certainly musicians from the anything-goes free world who would have given their eye-teeth to be taken that seriously. On the other hand, how many would have been prepared to pay the price? That's the strength of difficulty. To be brutal, such high costs act as a filter, a powerful environmental mechanism, that eliminates all but the most serious, the most driven - or the most perverse Bartleby-esque of artists: the ones who are unable not to do what they have to do.

In order to agree to pay a price, there has to be some compensating satisfaction. Money is easy to understand, or fame. But what kind of satisfaction is there that can compensate someone for being harassed, censured, ostracised and even imprisoned? For most sensible get-along sort of people, the answer is none. It's the same for those who have fame, cash, comfort or career in mind - in fact for all who are unable to understand that it might be unthinkable not to put your nose out of joint for music or art. Or for solidarity

In a way one could argue that the East-West art fracture didn't just run along the line of freedom and proscription (as Westerners tended to see it), but equally, and maybe more essentially, along the line of need and cost. This is the line from which the unwilling step back the minute the price goes up too far. I think this constitutes



an evolutionary mechanism. It seems universal and it's only the nature of the obstacles confronted that vary according to circumstance. Fifteen years ago, we could divide around which of these fractures exercised us most. Today the first has gone. All overt opposition has evaporated and along with it the clarity and focus it engendered. Now we all have to deal with indifference and market forces. Nothing is proscribed any longer, just ignored.<sup>1</sup>

The East-West border was porous - but in one direction only; it was more like osmosis than diffusion, with information flowing essentially West to East and not the other.

On my first visit to Prague, I remember being amazed at how informed about Western culture an interested circle there was, and not only about what was popular and overground, but what was unpopular and underground too. On the other hand, I knew almost nothing of what was going on in any of their half dozen countries. In the free world, where information was apparently lying around freely just waiting for someone to pick it up, it was usually left pretty much undisturbed while, in Prague, information was valued to the extent that anything of interest was immediately copied and circulated. Eastern cultures had a far more social and far less commodified approach to knowledge, an approach born not merely out of scarcity but from a real sense of community. This was always rather a hard fact for Westerners to grasp, since community was a category we had more or less succeeded in eradicating - or at least rendering incomprehensible (which is why we fantasised about it so remorselessly). Quite as much as the obvious and insidious differences in working conditions, it was this social grounding, this sense of responsibility, that divided the experience of Eastern and Western artists.

The community I encountered in Prague was not - like our small networks of friends at home - a loose gathering of musicians and artists. It also took in mathematicians, dissidents, physicists, architects, Christians, philosophers, drunks and presidents-in-waiting: a collection of people bound by their desire to be in and of a wider world denied them; people who refused to have their lives defined by idiots. While they worked in full knowledge of the world outside, no comparable flow returned to the West, whose vision was, paradoxically, made narrower and smaller by an official belief in the theoretical availability of everything on demand (rather like smokers who will never quit because they know they can quit any time they want). It is a sad fact that knowledge of the possibility of infinite access makes actual access less urgent and obscures the fact

1 So it was in 2000 when this was written, but nothing stays the same. Consider the trials of Pussy Riot, for instance, and read what they say about why they do what they do.



that the marginal is always and inevitably inaccessible without work. What is really accessible - however much it is dressed up as choice - is only the obvious. It appears different from diktat because the mechanisms of its delivery (advertising, media, money) are more subtle, and therefore less visible than official exclusion or propaganda. Ours is a better system of control and censure, since it is built on smoke and mirrors rather than sticks and bars. It makes our future sausages so secure they can be left to run the abattoir themselves.

Important things were happening in the East, but we ignored them. Mostly out of arrogance. We just knew we didn't need to know. Like colonialists declining to learn the local language while dismissing the multilingual natives as ignorant savages - just so in the eighties it was denigrated Easterners who acted out of knowledge while incurious Westerners remained ignorant of the wider picture. OK this is an oversimplification, but behind it lies an important and unfinished story - as archival CDs like 'New Czech Music of the 60s' demonstrate.<sup>2</sup>

What the few - the outsiders - shared, both in East and West (not that they saw that way) was their marginalisation, their symmetrical rejection each of their own systems and, at a deeper level, of the tyranny in general of all procrustean structures. Both typically also displayed an exaggerated sympathy for the regime the other rejected. I recall on that first visit to Prague having a long discussion with Vaclav Havel in which he told me how terrible socialism was, and how wonderful Ronald Reagan and the market economy were - while I was busy explaining to him how terrible Western politics and market economies were and how I thought, for all its faults, socialism had to be the better way. My general observation now is that (Havel aside) friends who were oppositional in the old regime find themselves oppositional in the new.<sup>3</sup> And that, I think, is one of the things we all had - and still have - in common.



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2                      And since, many other collections and documentations from other East Bloc countries of the 'lost' work of this era.

3                      2018. This hasn't changed.

Notchnoi Prospekt (1985), photo by Oleg Kornev



# Alexei Borisov

Electronic

Russian

Music

People

and

Instruments

Alexei Borisov has been a pivotal figure in the Russian new-music since the early 1980's, when he began playing guitar in Center, one of the pioneering new-wave groups in the USSR. After moving on to form Prospekt (and later, with his then-partner Iván Sokolovostky, he became a widely influential musician in the political transition years, only to resur face in the late 1990's as noise / electro-acoustic composer and performer and one of modern Russia's most accomplished experimentalists.

In this new text, Borisov comprehensively recalls his upbringing in Moscow, heavily informed by the visits in the early 1970's to the computation centre at the Moscow University, where his father worked. He talks about a rich and developing electronic music scene in the 1980's, while giving us an insight into the transition into 1990's following the end of the USSR.





## Russian electronic music: People and Instruments

At the beginning of the 70's I moved to the Cheryomushkinsky district of Moscow. My parents were given a separate apartment (before that we lived in a communal apartment near Mir ["Peace"]) Avenue) in a so-called "house of improved conditions" or just DAS (House of post-graduate and intern students on Shvernik Street), which belonged to Moscow State's Lomonosov University.

Views of this construction can be seen in the final scenes of Eldar Ryazanov's popular TV comedy "Irony of Fate". This then ultramodern house was mainly inhabited by students and post-graduates, and a few floors in the second building were occupied by families of MSU employees, who became participants of a sociological experiment on the establishment of a new household. Certainly the experiment flopped, but we got a beat-group, formed by a post-graduate from Azerbaijan. My music career began from this very band, where I started playing the bass guitar when I was in the 7th form. I started listening to contemporary music more seriously, attempting to break it down into styles and trends, to single out and distinguish between the sounds of separate instruments. In the 70's (or maybe earlier) there was a notion of electronic music in Russia, which I associated mainly with cartoons, documentary and sci-fi movies, as well as with the orchestra of electronic musical instruments guided by Vyacheslav Meshcherin, which mostly played on TV and radio waltzes and easy-listening classical and pop music. The orchestra used theremins, electric organs, accordions, harps, violins and other instruments of a semi-traditional, slightly futuristic appearance, equipped with pick-ups and amplified.

At that moment it seemed uninteresting, boring and unattractive to me. The playing and the sound of the electronic instruments in Meshcherin's orchestra seemed too cold and lacking in energy, the energy which distinguished rock music from other styles. On the other hand, in our band we used the Soviet "Yunost" (Youth) organ, which could produce quite weird sounds if treated in a special way. Of course, it couldn't compare with the Hammond organ or numerous other keyboards, which could be seen on the sleeves or heard on the discs of such bands as Deep Purple, Pink Floyd, ELP, Yes, Genesis or at concerts of Soviet ensembles, which were well equipped with imported instruments and appliances. In the second half of the 70's, names like Klaus Schultze, Tangerine Dream and even Kraftwerk started being heard among my circle of friends. However, the information available about them was minimal, and the only electronic instrument we had was the "Yunost" organ, connected to self-made distortion units or a domestically manufactured wah-wah pedal.



Meanwhile, my father worked in the computation center of the Moscow State University and from time to time he arranged for a visit for me and my classmates. It was in the early or mid 70's. A huge domestically made computer (STRELA and later the more modern BESM-6) occupied a large pavilion, working 24 hours a day. Visually it reminded me of a space station or the control room of a nuclear reactor, where various devices produced a regular buzz and were illuminated by multicolor lights. The facility was for authorised personnel only, and technicians wore special gowns, performing odd manipulations with magnetic bands and numerous punched cards, which stored a considerable (for those days) amount of information. Several times my father showed me pictures made by the machine, as well as made it speak and play some primitive and poor quality music. However, it impressed me for my whole life. At some moment (around 1978), for my birthday my friends presented me with "Oxygen" by Jean-Michel Jarre, some electronic disco and fusion music, and it became obvious that in those living and technical conditions it was impossible to make electronic music.



Only at the beginning of the 80's did the situation improve a little. With the emergence of punk and new wave, electronic music became more comprehensive and accessible also in a technical perspective. My colleagues from the Center group, where I played the guitar in 1980-1981, started experimenting with electronic instruments provided by Mikhail Mikhaylyuk, a professional musician (member of electronic studio project "Valery Chkalov's Squad") and simultaneously an unofficial vendor of musical instruments. It was the first time I came across a Roland rhythm box, bass line (it was the legendary Roland TB-303) and Casio instruments. I was particularly impressed by the Korg MS-20, an excellent analogue synthesizer, which seemed to open the doors to the world of real electronic music. By the way, many of these instruments were adopted by Notchnoi Prospekt (Night Avenue), founded by me and keyboard player Ivan Sokolovsky in 1985. Before that (1981-1984) within a student beat group called Prospekt we attempted to combine the sound of electronic instruments with guitars, using self-made electronic drums and the "Yunost" with another mini-organ, the FAEMI, which in combination with a fuzz box produced an impression of a very aggressive noise instrument. Under the influence of the early stuff by XTC, The Stranglers, Gary Numan, Cabaret Voltaire and Joy Division, we intuitively tried to mix the energy of punk and new wave with a colder, but in the same time more aesthetic and futuristic electronic sound.

Of course, we were not alone in this endeavour, but in Russia there was a long-lasting conviction that electronic music of the end of the 70's / beginning of the 80's was a disco variation, an exclusively commercial phenomenon, unacceptable from the point of view of true rock music.



However, since 1985, while ignoring the pressure by the administration of the Rock Laboratory (a semi-professional organization, initiated in 1985 by the Ministry of Culture, KGB and Komsomol [Young Communist League] in order to unite and control underground rock groups), membership of which allowed us to perform legally, Sokolovsky and I abandoned traditional rock instruments (except for the guitar) and started using exclusively drum machines, keyboards and synthesizers as a duo, sometimes engaging our percussionist friends Sergey Pavlov and Alexey Raskatov (both ex-Prospekt) and the female singer Natasha Borzhomova (Her family name was Agapova).

Our electronic arsenal was certainly far from perfect. We used several variants of the Soviet electronic organ FAEMI, different mini-Casios, and small Bontempi keyboards, which were brought by Ivan's mother from abroad. From time to time we added synthesizers such as the Korg Poly-800, Korg MS-20, Roland Juno-106, Roland TB-303, and Korg and Boss drum machines, which we borrowed from our colleagues. Sometimes we used Vermona instruments (made in GDR), which were very popular in the USSR. Later we used the Yamaha RX-11 drum machine and the Yamaha DX-7, DX-21 and DX-100 synthesizers. The Soviet industry launched various keyboards on the market, including the better known Elektronika instruments, electric organs by Lel', as well as the Polyvox synthesizer (which resembled the legendary MiniMoog) and some other instruments produced in different republics of the Soviet Union. However, these instruments, in spite of their low prices, seemed to us too cumbersome, unreliable in operation, unpredictable to control and very rough-sounding. Only in the 90's could we rightfully appraise all the highs and lows of these instruments. They were particularly in demand for the creation of industrial and experimental music, becoming highly collectible rarities.

Those days (1984-1987) we recorded blank pieces on tape, using a UHER reel recorder and, later, a modified NOTA reel player, with which we performed on stage, playing the guitar and portable Casios live. This practice of the mid 80's was later adopted by various pop groups, who went further into complete lip-syncing instead of playing live.

In the second half of the 80's a so-called "electronic scene" was established in Moscow. It mainly tended towards pop forms, but also revealed some innovation and a search for independent ways of playing and composing electronic music. Of course, the main reference for most Russian musicians was Depeche Mode, whose popularity in Russia was immense. Among representatives of the Moscow electronic scene of the 80's I need to mention such bands as BIOCONSTRUCTOR, ALLIANCE, Vladimir Ratskevich's VECTOR, DOCTOR, Alexey Tegin's SECOND GROUP, the GOODBYE TO

YOUTH duo, Alexander Sinitsin's UNION OF COMPOSERS, Yuri's Tsaryov's METRO, multi-instrumentalists and composers: Eduard and Artemy Artemyev, Michail Chekalin, Andrey Rodionov, Yuri Chernavsky and Michail Michaylyuk as well as the electronic side-projects of Yuri Orlov (NICOLAS COPERNICUS) and Vasily Shumov (CENTER). In Leningrad this electronic sound was adopted by AVIA, TELEVIZOR and MODEL, as well as the studio duo NEW COMPOSERS and the legendary avant-gardist Sergey Kuryokhin. There was a kind of a scene in the Baltic republics as well, but local electronic musicians, except for ZODIAC, Disco Alliance and Sven Grünberg, as a rule, were hardly known outside Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

It needs to be mentioned that in the 80's Russian electronic bands faced a lot of problems, especially in concerts. First of all, the acoustic systems of those days were of poor quality and mainly designed for rock instruments. On the other hand, the audience was very sceptical about electronic music and just couldn't comprehend experimental forms of musicianship. That is why the performances of electronic musicians in the 80's were held in extremely difficult and unfavourable conditions as compared to numerous rock bands. Very exemplary in this respect was an audition of the Rock Laboratory's groups in 1988 in order to attest and rate them. For the whole day, in Gorbunov's Cultural Center different experts (such as well-known in Russia band-leaders and composers Yuri Malikov, Alexei Kozlov, Yuri Saulsky, etc.) and musicians assessed the performances of their colleagues. All electronic bands (though there were only three of them) flapped, especially Notchnoi Prospekt, which wasn't attested at all (like, by the way, the favourites of Moscow audience ZVUKI MU) and received the minimum rating in the amount of five rubles (or something of the sort) per concert. Against the background of mobile rock-bands, electronic musicians with their synthesizers looked awkward and ambitious. It took a long time for them to plug and tune and the result sounded unconvincing and flabby.

As for Notchnoi Prospekt, since 1987 we gradually started to enrich our instrument set, moving towards industrial-electronic psychedelia. In addition to sampling equipment and a powerful analog synthesizer Korg MonoPoly we started using an acoustic drum-kit, on which Sergey Pavlov played, and the electric violin of Dmitry Kutergin, who was a former leader of the semi-electronic band DOCTOR and played with the famous underground project DK, as well as electronic composers Eduard and Artemy Artemyev's and Sergey Kuryokhin's global art project POP-MECHANICS. We also used a xylophone and extended the range of guitar effects. Ivan Sokolovsky, who was responsible for the electronic part, also used guitar gadgets, numerous self-made devices (for example, a vocoder), as well as synthesizers and drum machines of different generations and manufacturers.





Our basic electronic kit of the late 80's consisted of Roland TB-303, Korg MS-20, Korg MonoPoly, Korg Superpercussion and a childish Casio sampler. In the studio we still used various Yamahas, sometimes an excellent Oberheim drum machine and early variants of Akai samplers, which were owned by some Moscow musicians. In our special performances, prepared for festivals and gallery happenings, we attempted to use a button accordion, various pick-ups and contact microphones, acoustic string instruments and small metal constructions in combination with effect processors and loops recorded on magnetic tapes. In this period I particularly started to use Korg MS-20 as a guitar processor. At the end of the 80's the major part of Sokolovsky's collection of synthesizers was at my apartment, which allowed me to pay more serious attention to my solo works, to record various experiments on a 4-channel Tascam porto-studio and a regular Technics cassette recorder.

In 1989 Sokolovsky quit Notchnoi Prospekt to pursue his solo career. For a period we had no electronic instruments and started playing as a more traditional rock group, using a guitar, bass, drums and electric violin. Our new member, bass player Alexey Solovyov, was also a good keyboard player, who owned a Roland Micro-composer, a very promising analog instrument which became popular in the 90's. Later, he went into hip-hop and acid-house, which influenced records of NP in the beginning of the 90's. He was one of the first in Russia to fuse folk and dance music, created a club garage project (RAKETA) and became the producer of the first Russian compilations of electronic music.

At the end of the 80's the situation started changing not only in music, but also in technology. Very soon Moscow studios and musicians started replacing analog synthesizers with digital ones. All kinds of workstations became fashionable. Studio owners paid more attention to sampling equipment. Such trends were reflected in the studio processes of Notchnoi Prospekt, when during the recording of some works we sampled instruments completely and then controlled the sampler (it was the Roland S-10 and later Roland W-30, and sometimes Emulator II and Ensoniq samplers) with the help of a digital sequencer. However, at a certain moment, digital equipment also began seeming limited in terms of sound, and it was quite expensive. As a result, the instrument set of Notchnoi Prospekt and the more experimental duo F.R.U.I.T.S., created in 1992 by composer and producer Pavel Zhagun and myself, was expanded with analog synthesizers, including the Roland TB-303, Roland Micro-composer, Crumar Performer, MiniMoog and other instruments, which were highly rated in the 70's and early 80's. For some period they were out of fashion and hardly used by most Russian musicians, especially those who played traditional rock with keyboards or produced commercial pop products. At that moment, we and some our colleagues (particularly, Roman

Belavkin aka Solar X) started actively using of all kinds of Soviet synthesizers, which, as it turned out, had been produced in abundance (Polyvox, Ritm-2, Aelita, different Elektronikas, Formanta, Lel' drum machine, various synthesizers produced in the Baltic republics, etc.). All these devices had a very specific sound, different from Japanese or European instruments.

In the middle of the 90's Moscow experienced a real boom of demand for analog synthesizers and old drum machines. At the same time, Moscow was flooded by the latest equipment from abroad, and, besides instruments from well-known producers, some Moscow musicians obtained exotic and quite expensive instruments from Quasimidi, Waldorf, Clavia, Doepfer, etc. Relatively cheap groove-boxes, which allowed one to produce music operatively and, most importantly, with good quality, came into fashion. Many musicians in the 90's gathered impressive collections, where one could see instruments of different generations, companies and countries. The champions were Richardas Norvilla (BENZO, E-SHAK and other projects), Yuri Orlov (NICOLAS COPERNICUS, F.I.O., COLD HAND OF MOSCOW), Nikolay Nebogatov (Spies Boys/NN Records), members of the SOLARIS STATION project and some other representatives of Moscow electronic scene.

In the 90's, my personal collection was replenished with the Roland TR-626, TR-707, Korg DDM-110 drum machines, the Roland SH-101 synthesizer and Russian devices - the RITM-2 analog synthesizer, LEL' drum machine and trigger modules. Moreover, I returned to the active use of various guitar effects, especially distortions and fuzzes, which were mainly self-made. The availability of midi instruments and older trigger devices gave me an opportunity to promptly commute between different studios and effectively play experimental concerts and dance sets. In my opinion, the so-called hardware (especially of old design) can be successfully combined with modern computer technologies, creating a unique sound and providing an illusion of live playing and a feeling of improvisation.

The second half of the 90's, for me, was spent in endless tours over Russia, both solo and as part of some small projects, where I had to play electronic music of a wide range in absolutely different places and environments. More over, the availability of compact and mobile instruments in combination with DJ techniques helped my visits to Europe, when I established interesting contacts and enhanced my performance abilities to play in any facility and to get promptly adjusted in any collaborative project.

The current situation in Russian electronic music is very similar to Europe or America. A total computerisation of musical processes is taking place, which is conditioned





by the natural development of technologies, as well as by objective economic reasons. It is understood that computers provide endless possibilities to musicians. However, computer technologies are able to level or standardise the product to such an extent that various aesthetic, national, emotional, personal and other subjective features of the producer could just disappear. For many people such a situation of "sound and technological cosmopolitanism" is unacceptable, but for others, on the contrary, it is very attractive and the only possible one. Meanwhile, Russia still remains a closed country, including its cultural sphere. Vast territories and a considerable part of the population stay in informational and technological isolation. The absence of a unified music market also affects the development of musical processes, including in the field of electronic music. Of course, a certain role is played by the specific Russian mentality, which still can't be clearly understood and, most likely, is a combination of some very subjective social-psychological, linguistic and cultural peculiarities, conditioned by local age-long traditions, as well as the peculiarities of the historical process within a given territory. Such nuances can influence not only the local or regional situation, including the musical sphere, but also different world-wide and global processes. This influence can be positive or negative. With an adverse development of the situation negative moments will prevail, finally helping the global growth of absurdity, uncontrolled anarchy and, as a result, an inevitable collapse of world civilisation.

To a certain degree, Russian electronic music in general is a continuation or development of the traditions of the Russian avant-garde (neo-futurism, suprematism, constructivism, absurdism, etc.) in combination with the mass worship of scientific and technical progress. Since the 1920's Russia (and later East Europe and a part of Asia) became a large training ground for testing various social-economic schemes, technological ideas and different inventions, as well as national economic experiments. At some moment, a specific idolisation of machines, industrial architecture, electricity, science and the very labor process occurred in Russia.

Moreover, the industrialisation of society and scientific and technical progress in general obtained a political character, becoming a part of the communist ideology and a means of fighting against western imperialism and capitalism. The Russian electronic environment subconsciously reflects this phenomenon, being kind of a symbol of "sacralisation" of the very act of music production, with the help of sophisticated devices and the latest computer programs.

As a result, a certain hypothetic task of Russian electronic music would be to combine harmoniously and effectively its intellectual potential with the cult of technology. On the other hand, for local musicians it makes sense to overcome a certain

technological dependence or even inferiority to achieve artistic freedom, mental liberation and independence from various cliches and notorious international standards. Just then, in my opinion, an interesting result is possible, which can absorb the entire variety and depth of the Russian "cultural chaos", providing at the same time a considerable influence on world-wide creative processes.

Notchnoi Prospekt (1985), photo by Oleg Kornev





László Hortobágyi (1986) by László Lugosi



# László Hortobágyi

Interview

by

Lucia Udvardyova\*

\*  
Unearthing the Music's core-team member / journalist and curator

Hungarian musician and musicologist László Hortobágyi was born in 1950 in Budapest, where he still resides today. An explorer and scholar of music and sounds from all over the world, he first visited North India in 1967 in order to learn instruments such as the rudra-vina, sitar, surbahar and the tabla, but also to record music and delve into Indian musicology.

In 1981 he founded the Gáyan Uttejiek Society, an imaginary musical organisation which functioned at the same time as a studio and an archive of his discoveries in ethnomusicology. A keen innovator in the technological arena as well (devising his own sound processing software and using computers in music as early as 1988), he frequently combines musical structures from the past and the future, East and West, in order to create the lush, exotic soundscapes of the worlds to live in each of his pieces.

This interview was conducted by Lucia Udvardyova in January 2018.



László Hortobágyi (2007) by Kinga Darko





## Prologue by László Hortobágyi

I would like to express my gratitude for the intention of the questioner, and for asking such quality questions. Apparently, the questioner is not of Western origin, as questions asked from that part of the world elicit techno positivist giggling (and not the exploration of cause-effect relationships); I feel solely far-fetched individualism and vigorous disgust towards an algorithm of a global common denominator of any kind. There is no Western/American film or blog in which an investigation of social ranking or social alienation would occur. Everyone has heard of the New York based 'artist' of the menstruating *Barbie doll*, but who designed the *Hubble* Space Telescope? (I'll tell you, by way of example: Nancy Grace Roman, NASA.)

In the Western world, the concealment of real working processes and their enjoyment is part of a mendacious, hypocrite tradition in which alienated *meme-plex* portfolios of competing human objects are racing with each other in a network space. The sanctimonious practice of the techno positivist *smackreation* (*one snap creation*) phenomenon is deeply conservative: instead of the constraint of evil in humans it is interested in this evil's liberation and its conditioning for power-oriented purposes.

Therefore, one of the biggest questions of the future is whether the media that enables the masses to upload virtual reality (and which has also practised neuromarketing) – for example, *Facebook* ('*Fatebook*', in reality, whose *filter algorithms* undermine Western democracy) is really able to create a concentration of power over its users connected through a permanent network and won't even '*the gates of hell prevail against it*'. Its daily routine teaches the participants that re-digitalized human cultures should be regarded as the source of profit and individual enrichment. Financial interests are able to swallow all human feelings, hence society looks like scavenging *bio-aliens*' rag-fair. We can say it out loud: our age's homogeneous social system - that is increasingly becoming global - has an astonishing and unique ability to deprave human spirit and traditional culture. Now that the *IoT – Internet of Things* - is a reality, a global syncretic unity of existing things and organisms shall soon come in which *IP* numbers of men and smart *home power* meters will be combined in the same registration protocol as the *Big Data* on the "surface" of the Earth.

At the same time we might also say: the erosion of the social system ripens its inhabitants' enlightenment *a posteriori*.

## Interview

### How do you recollect your childhood? You were apparently inspired by fantasies of other-worldly and alien cultures. Do you think this was somehow influenced by the Cold War 'Space Race', or the political turmoil of the 1950's? (the Hungarian revolution, etc.)

One must provide the freedom of a personal space for him/herself. Otherwise it will amount to a deficiency on a collective level, which has led to a civil society without citizens in *Hungisthan*. Unstructured society always has its own severe consequences. In Eastern Europe's destructed, mutagenic societies – also in *Hungisthan* – state and communal life functioned within the logistical system of the *Austro-Hungarian Empire* whose rigid structure was a tapped pattern of the traditional *Prussian* scheme. This logistical structure continued working almost unbroken after the 'communist' overtake in 1948, but it also hybridised with the *Byzantine*-like *Moscovite* structure. This liquid, semi-Asiatic experience of daily life consisted either of the 'legal' order of civil service or the local *comprador* castes scrounging on the Cold War, a game played by the World Powers (and of course all the fake life priorities vindicated by the police in order to maintain their power), or formed the *kuruc*-like [anti-Habsburg rebels in Royal Hungary between 1671 and 1711 – *ed.note*] resistance – but it is impossible to establish what happened when. The elastic social consciousness epitomises its strategy for survival in such situations: *be adaptive, but don't be law-abiding*.

The collective consciousness set up for surviving strategies (tending to egoism, but not to autonomous individuality) should have integrated a common logistical system – inter alia – that feeds on historical experiences completely unknown in this land, for example proportionately and conventionally supported public burden or century-old practices of urban self-management. Therefore, not only the *Trianon-Holocaust* trauma-collectives calcify into inclusions; all the other inextricable and indissoluble injuries have become paranoid and social-epileptic '*niches*' in the conglomeration of social homeostasis, in which non-existent and - by authority, always deformed and controlled - social research and its deficient database through which an incomplete social vision can be brought into parity, materialises the complete lack of discourse between classes. After all, there is no place in the world where there is representative democracy without a stable wealthy and politically empowered middle-class articulation of interests and traditions.

*Hungisthan* is not the only place lacking this; it is impossible to find such places anywhere in the whole post-communist *Zone* (see: *Tarkovsky's Stalker*). However, because of the lack of middle classes, a cluster of hatred emerged between social





groups – as the only channel for communication -, one has to face such historical circumstances.

Slowly, the awareness about the Ukrainian famine, *holodomor*, during which 3 million people died in the 1930's – as a decision of the Soviet leadership; and the fact that Germans killed three million Soviet POWs during the war become more widely spread. In 1943, organised Ukrainian militarists killed thousands of Polish people in the hope of an ethnically homogenous state; or let's recall the little we know of Katyn – what would had happened if Stalin hadn't destroyed Polish intellectuals, if *Wehrmach-Schutzstaffel* hadn't been trained for the preparation of such massacre during the execution of masses of Ukrainian Jews.

There was no such region in the world in the 20th century. The closest similarity would be to the Chinese famine between 1958 and 1960 with about 30 million people dying - though that took place on a much larger area. Or the rapid execution of the Cambodian massacre that 'affected' 1,7 million people – well, the values of the eastern mass society are reflected with regards to the human existence's reason d'être.

The clusters of slaughter that took place in this region remain unparalleled, with (at least) three biggest European massacres of the 20th century, more or less, happening in spatial overlap. This is where – Zakopane - *Stanislaw Lem* wrote his novel, *Eden* in 1959. This geopolitical and social background of this tiny spot on Earth is the reason why the Western world doesn't understand almost anything from the thinking of the people living here. When all this evolves, there is no other '*Fate-book*' left for the immortal, but the misconception: that an individual can only be free internally. At this point, in the spirit of a thousand year-old practice, the '*Road*' ('*marg*' in Sanskrit) opens for the masses towards the dark inner spaces and irrational worlds of the individual - we call it stylishly **Mahāyāna**. Or towards a scientific world – in lesser cases – stylishly called *Hinayāna*.

Personally, I'm pretty certain that this ship-wrecked, Asian-type of existence lacking alternatives, lead me to the elaborate investigation of music. I was attracted by the rationality in music. That it can be a perfectly established, rationalised stairway to heaven or hell, or rather to the past and the future. After all – no philosophical-religious trend talks about this – there is nothing good in humanity's existence in the Universe – the tiny contaminating entity of the *Galactica* -, as it's not good for anyone or anything. Least of all, for nature itself and for the majority of people having the imprint of suffering as their allotment for thousands of years by defective family and social softwares.

Although, man as a matter of fact, is hyphenated from this involuntary biological existence by language (and humour), science and music. (*Some people say that porn is also included...*)

By language I mean the ability of putting things down, such as in mathematics. Music, however – also as science – is able to physically 'save' your 'fate-booking' existence and is developed by accident during evolution by a rational system of codes. For me, the story of the dragons was the same, kind of a *bodhi* condition. They are wonderful beings with seven heads, breathing fire and flying. Then someone always comes to chop their heads off, all seven of them, instead of taking a closer look to see how they breath fire, how beautiful their skin is, and how damn rare entities they are. I cannot understand why must dragons be killed? What is happening here?

**When did you first encounter music and in what form? Were you always interested in both its execution and study?**

The materialised socialism I was born into was an atomised and mind-withering Asian-type system. It was easy to recognise its similarities with daily lifestyles of Asian systems having great history. In my opinion, a daily life of a sensitive human being living in Budapest between 1964-65 was not too distant from the essence of an *imaginary* Asian-Indian daily lifestyle. It must be a human thing, but the world we live in always needs to be explained. Hence, until now, the existence on Earth was lucrative only for a few. The subjugated majority needs disciplinary ideologies – *socium's* own network structure, its automation and *Gödel's* regulation produces this – it rewrites the prevailing "*fate-books*" with a zero starting point, and gives 'sense' to miserable life on Earth, once advertised as temporary.

It was also obvious, that the majority of people went to the *East* to heal their Western misery. What I saw was a much bigger hell in the East, but a hell that has been functioning for thousands of years, a delicate hell that should be investigated. From the aforementioned, what followed, was the daily practice that became a *ganja*-like inhalation of uncontrolled musical genres which lead me to certain decision-making situations on stylistics. When, at the end of the '50's, I was dead into Indian classical music (*Hindusthan, Senola, Zonophone 78* r.p.m.) I listened to it on shellac disks I had found in the vaults of the grand family *secretary desk*; all I was listening to at that time had crucially determined what came next. The perceived '*common language*' in music, regulated by traditions, with its practice and rules became the measure.

The period lasting until *J.S. Bach's* death (July 28, 1750) - from the music of the middle ages (*Martim Codax, P Abelard, Landini, Wolkenstein, Ciconia, Languedoc*, and troubadours etc.), starting from the grand gothic maestri (*Tinctoris, Obrecht, des Pre, Abricola, Ockeghem, Ghizeghem*, and later *Palestrina*) mapping through the whole *baroque* period, was the source of pleasure. Professionally quite valuable, but from the





point of view of progression, classical music and opera (dominant today, even if dead, still alive as (*zombies*) living dead) were unacceptable and impossible for me to consume - but there are great exceptions from this period as well e.g. *Max Reger*, etc. As it was a redemption to do so, I appreciated listening to *Louis Vierne*, *Dupre*, *Durufle*, *L. Burgeois*, *Petr Eben* and the sound and the construction of *Cavaille-Coll's* organs. This led me to participate in designing and constructing certain Eastern-European organ projects between 1969-1974. I built a three-manual one for myself, for home use with the help of my friend, *Péter Soós*.

From all the existing music I had collected I could hear the common multiple of the world, and its underlying but identical language. It was not only the music that was important when collecting, but also the socio-cultural '*bio-voltage*' floating from different segments of their time and culture, as a reaction; and the elaboration and interpretation of their message. Important, but only secondary, was the analysis of the musical superstructure and structure. Respectively, there is only one rational way to learn what was the baroque way of bow-using in order to be able to express what it wanted to express. From the *troglo-dyte* or the *African Ga* tribe polyphonic drum language to the French organ master, *Cavaille-Coll* with hundreds of registers in his organs – actually all these things have one thing in common.

Here, the common root overarching cultures and time is nothing but the distillation of millennial human grief that connects the seemingly strange but at the same time familiar worlds inhabited by humans and the millennial aim to escape from those worlds by their common ancient art-technique. The fact that one is tempered and the other is a *Hindu* scale with 22 degrees is only the cultural-anthropological packaging.

**How was it to study and make music during the previous regime? In Hungary, there were these three categories of arts – supported, tolerated, banned. What was your position vis-a-vis the regime? Were you able to pursue your interests and music freely? How did the infrastructure and access to information - especially in terms of the advancements in technology etc. work back then?**

In a certain sense, the situation here in *Hungisthan* was worse than elsewhere, because effectively it was a one-party state selection system's 3 T. world. (in English: *rule of the power structure: subvention-sufferance-proscription*)

Post-WWII Eastern-European products of music history emerged between the frame of a materialised world of '*socialism*'. In Western countries, where the industrial revolution triggered the original accumulation of capitalization through the exploitation

of faraway continents and countries, it was made possible for exotic goods and music to become freely available on the shelves of all shopping malls. But in the East, or rather in Eastern Europe, where us, people could feel the drifting of history on our skin, a history we were not able to form. We could only imagine it.  
*So we imagined more than actually happened.*

It could only happen here that a brilliant band from Debrecen called *Panta Rhei* – at the beginning of the '70s a *Moog*, *Serge* or *Buchla* synthesiser or its documentation were unprocurable – built themselves a self-developed one, and performed the music of *Bartók*, among others. This didn't last for a long time because the official attitude and *Bartók's* heir barred it. Information seeped in with difficulty and manipulated radio broadcasts seethed people's imagination; they overthought reality and adjusted their intellectual benchmark according to their own imagined qualities. These humanoids with steaming brains, later during the age of the *Internet*, were deeply disappointed when they saw and heard the reality of the fulfilment conditions of the real world.

The legal bands of that era were legitimised by their ideological loyalty-portfolios and caste preferences of the privileged, not their talents. It's only symptomatic that these idealised bands' fake *halo* is still looming large, the reason for this being the era's practice in selection; only those who were legally permitted to make recordings survived. And those of course, who are able to be in sync with mass social vibration and false consciousness, and false consciousness's irrational daily practice.

Such a social homeostasis implements all cruel self-clearing reflexes with completely unconsciously created sociological rules, through which the 'homeostate' badgers out its *xenoliths*, its cancerous cells - the ones that don't want to live synchronously with the ethos of the prevailing social stratification.

Here, lots of musicians passed away to the other side.

*Ergo, this selection, by distorting the personality, will be reduced to suicide, addictive lifestyle and diseases caused by individuals to themselves. Besides that, through becoming obsessed with a kind of general depression, it has effects on those individuals, who otherwise, possibly just because of their strangeness and deviation, could have new ideas and approaches that would stimulate society. This kind of selection hindered innovation and destroyed the pursuit of community improvement and renewal of shared energy.*

I, for example, was reading *Fairlight* and *Synclavier* user manuals, knowing that I will never ever be able to actually use them. I imagined that with these technical prostheses I could reconstruct and re-orchestrate the counterpoint structure of *Palestrina's* lead,







or the *banjar* orchestras rhythmic comparisons from the island of Bali, but I will not recount all my dreams that never came true. Later, as it turned out, even in places where these devices were available, none of such endeavours had been achieved either (though there are some meagre exceptions). They had actually rather served the music industry. Even though that's why they were made – often with military background; The career of Australia's *Fairlight* started with an 8-bit sampling sonograms database for submarines, for example.

A man, living in *Mukachevo* or *Cluj*, had an easier life in this respect, because information about contemporary technical opportunities in music-making had never reached him in the first place.

When the borders opened in the middle of the '80's, it turned out, of course, that the imaginary reality stood far away from the visions; Western practice seemed to be dumber and more primitive than at home. The sound was better, but the '*message*' was primitive and kitschy, *too*. Just like today.

The original die-hard fans of progressive music still stand in perplexity at the concerts of *Grand Funk* or *Led Zeppelin* at a *Playboy House party*, seeing them playing in sequined jabots, not even to mention their astonishing amount of later detected musical plagiarism.

The distinction from daily life, this abstraction, this pure alienation helped in one thing only. I have noticed, that despite of the mildewed of the social system *voted* for by more and more people – these parts of the Earth, which were previously in isolation regarding time and culture, we're still able to float information and make it accessible even at the periphery of these Western kingdoms. But only as much as a white man is able to understand from these cultures.

I also realised that - thanks to globalisation - this flow of information is finite and only lasts for a certain amount of historical time, because after (a while) these sources of information disappear. *Heisenberg paradox*: the observer at the same time destroys the source of his interest.

That is how I invented a private - mythological *Hungisthani* world music, and as such (imagined) India's future music which became part of the repertoire of *Gáyan Uttejak Orchestra* as the mixture of a musical language of the past and the present.

It is an imaginary musical vernacular for whose evolution all conditions were given, but (for understandable reasons) it could never be materialised. In my opinion *Guo*'s repertoire can be viewed as part of a musical utopia developed in a failed utopian

social system and collection of visions. There is a psychedelic community on this Earth with decent values and persistent stability, new ecological concepts, and apart from the phony kindness of religiousness, possessing the attitude of being able to attain "*biblical redemption*" of all creatures, living their life with an evolutionary classless solidarity. They are the *catacomb*-beings of our age, leaving this misguided world with their culture and music, obligated subjects of the prevailing society in this manner, cast away sociologically, so they stop being the political base of ideology and power hence fermenting this world's possible fate with their growing magnitude.

Whereas there will be no more revolutions on this planet anymore, the Western youth movements – which I think are the last spontaneous countercultural movements of humankind – will be perished on the thousand year-old ramparts of states and corporations, where the shadows of the past will sit as a nightmare on our descendants' mind.

The conventional social homoeostasis is so broken and restructured that no collective global will, not even an *e-jihad*, is able to redeem it. The very last bastion of resistance would have been the world of hackers, but the first pilot-fish member of hackers who infiltrated into the *Pentagon's* secret pages in a brilliant way, could not go further than putting a text saying '*lick my ass*' instead of downloading all the secret information and sending them to satellites to make them available for everyone.

For a moment, it seemed that virtual inheritors of the seized youth revolution will be the last communities of freedom in hackers' tiny '*podS*', but that was the best these errant cyber-knights could do. Later, real publications (*Wikileaks*) were filtered through such strains that broadly invalidated any *considerable* consequences of its social impact.

In our age, collapsing generations can be compared to a *tsunami*, rich in pigment and waving through continents; and all the critical intellectuals who are able to see more or less the absurdity of the whole system are banished to smaller and smaller islands. But a global community that I call *Planet-Earth Transociety Movement*, and its inhabitants, create their virtual culture through spiritual exoduses that cover the hemisphere as onionskin, invisible to the real world.

**"Today we have the following choice: to live in a Gulag, or to eat hamburgers," you once said. Following the collapse of communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have underwent so-called transition to capitalism, often at turbo-speed. How do you view the post-1989 development, also in the arts (music) in your home country?**





It must be a human thing, but the world we live in always needs to be explained. Hence, until now, the existence on Earth was lucrative only for a few. The subjugated majority needs disciplinary ideologies – as the result of *socium*'s own network structure, its automation and Gödel's regulation - which rewrites the prevailing 'fate-books' with zero starting point, and gives 'sense' to miserable life on Earth, once advertised to be temporary.

In post-1989 *Hungisthan*, chaotic conditions have not been cleared in terms of political and historical traumas until today.

In this circle, it is necessary to know history and that Europe is chopped up in disparate societies and divided into asynchronous historical-structural zones. In these countries, to expropriate the right of the monopoly of exploitation over compatriots, and to take away from the new fellow countryman and give it back to the old: it never happened.

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The erosion of rotting public institutions could be compensated by personal network connections, but personal relations are not perishing because of the disintegration of public institutions, rather *vice versa*. Citizens have learned their adaptation strategies during dictatorships; to defend their corruption systems they sunk deeply into their familiar, client-based network of clanship that strengthens its tribal nature in contrast to society's democratic character. These are pretty tight ghetto-like psychological and ethical structures, and though they seem to be rigid, they actually are quite obsequious: that's what's the most dangerous about them, in the long term.

*Here - and also in Western 'democracies' – economic interests are deflecting political processes into a direction that the already overwhelmed democracy is unable to (follow), housing political decision-making towards commonwealth, and its base of existence remains capitalised human blood.*

Although life is much more colourful in these demolished Eastern-European societies than in the recently declining Western communities, it is nor the East and neither the West – in *Hungisthan* it is called 'ferry land' - that has been commuting between two shores for centuries.

Therefore, surviving here is only possible with the help of abstraction and alienating transformation as a part of a reactive curiousness and comparative global worldview that allows an intelligent, *Hungisthani* humanoid to become a cosmopolitan.

In this, for example the universality of Hungarian folk music would help. So, being here has its benefits as well, but it is not a privilege to be part of this old nation. Though you

Interview

\_\_\_\_\_ László Hortobágyi

} by

\_\_\_\_\_ Lucia Udvardyova }

cannot be really surprised by any other country or culture if you're accidentally born to be *Hungarian*.

The 'art' of the West to me appears in the form of *Virginia* class nuclear-powered submarines. It is worth to have a look at rocket controller navigation software and gravitational gyroscopes and their technical documentation to be aware of what is to be found there in the service of an evil purpose. At the same time, what an astonishing achievement of the human mind; compared to this, everything is just pale. *Monstrance*, lying in the seabed of the Red Sea, exists in parallel to a *galla* farmer that pesters the craggy Ethiopian highlands with a wooden plough.

It's worth to compare contemporary classical avant-garde concerts, or other art-resistant groups' performances and their efficiency - how they suggest changes in society symbolically, sometimes they are quite droll - to the communication specialist at the *Pentagon* or any other humanities' jargon to the efficiency of a multinational industry's logistic engineer.

In our age, all human ambition should measure itself to this level. Here, in Eastern Europe, we're used to standing on the riverside, and watching boats float towards the future. We are not sitting in them, but we know very well why, and sometimes we do everything to not even be able to fit into them. This also means that we have unique analytical capabilities. Some of us manage to convert this ability into the field of sciences or arts. The various flourishing schools of Indian philosophy were also part of an atomised society without property, not to mention the classical grand German schools of philosophy and their *Weltschmerz* world.

Nothing has changed after 1989 in *Hungisthan's* musical life, all the social structures subsisted, all the vultures transformed into peacocks on the other side of the social tree.

Nowadays on the collateral of this global procedure the 'modern *nation-state*' flourishes as a wishful thought besides the traditional phenotypes of exploitation and capital allocation, respectively against the *EU* (or the inevitable *World-State*); the (economical) revolution pursued this vision, proving Eastern European social systems' virulent persistence.

In the past, capitalism was able to feed the nation (even though the food was *named* a hamburger); materialised socialism, the world of contemporary *gulags* or the *talib* is unable to do so. Though it is likely that the price of a satiated stomach is an iPhone (which has a capacity "*to fly to the moon*") and an *emoji* language which refers to the standard of prehistoric hieroglyphics.





To *Hungisthan*, only such type of *proto-capitalism* arrives; its Western motherlands were wretched under a power structure that has never been seen before; this structure was built up by approximately 4,000 multinational corporations that unconsciously launched the process of globalisation.

After all, the corporations of Western countries optimised for carefree-cloudless consumption had bought off all possible deviances from all fields of life, elastic Eastern-European societies were also not able to show any kind of self-contained cultural image. So there was no breakthrough in music, the former cultural rank's (ungifted) performers and its beneficiaries' hydrocephalus system continues to clone it's latifundium with constant efficiency.

As social systems are combining into one finance-capitalist global structure on the planet, electronic world music becomes an increasingly monotonous and primitive 'vernacular' that is just as desolate as its predecessors; it cannot be differentiated by its performers, though, no matter if they are from New Zealand or Vladivostok.

Humankind deprived itself of its most most amazing ability (to be able to play music) - which is able to elevate it beyond human existence - into the sweet poison of the music industry. If someone remembers *Arkadij & Boris Strugackij's sleg* - they will understand what is happening here.

At the same time, alternative **trance** parties offering modest-progressive magic are the only thing bringing warm liberation and community in this society that is becoming more and more alienated and irrational. Such as in early *goa trance* small communities' electronic language, also certain types of *dubstep* (despite their later devolution) are warning signs to me: their best materials *created* in Ukraine and Transylvania instead of Birmingham or Detroit. Here, I would like to refer back to *Planet-Earth Transociety Movement's* virtual presence.

As a local *shipwreck*, I am part of all the aforementioned conditions and the World. I, of course, tumble *inside* my own head daily, but that's not enough.

At the moment, I am a crippled *sudra* that diddles in a wet sandpit, and who has to decide what is closer to its heart: the *Fairlight*, or a flame-thrower.

I do not believe that other composers would be thinking in different ways with regards to crossing certain limits.

«the rules of music cannot be changed without shocking the states' primary rules» –  
said Socrates.

It is also not coincidental that *Chin Si Huang-it Qin* (i.e.260-210) had the number of  
strings of the instrument *ku chin* decreased since its sounds elicited dangerous and  
unnecessarily deep feelings in humans...

*(László Hortobágyi 2017, [www.guo.hu](http://www.guo.hu)  
and corresponding member of "Puppies & Kittens of Budavár" website)*



el-Horto sitar 2010\_ by Unknown





Martin Machovec is a literary critic, translator, editor and a renowned specialist in the Czech underground movement, with his academic interests encompassing the Czech literary underground, samizdat texts and the works of Egon Bondy.

This interview was recorded in his flat in Prague, 23.11.2015, by Anna Kukatova - a Masters student at the State Academic University for the Humanities in Moscow, whose research interests focus on East European Studies, including the underground music culture in Czechoslovakia and the psychedelic rock band The Plastic People of the Universe.

Interview

# Martin Machovec

by

Anna Kukatova





Photo © Tomáš Beneškovíc (2015)







**The underground in Czechoslovakia is much better researched than the underground in the GDR, most likely because there was no real underground at that time. Of course we can consider the punk movement of the 1980s and relate it to the underground movement, but I think that if we look at the 1970s period, we find that the situation in Czechoslovakia was unique and it is quite impossible to compare them.**

I'm afraid so. I have never studied the unofficial cultural movements in other Central European countries in detail, but the political developments in each of these satellite countries probably went at a different pace, even in Russia. There was this very famous movie, "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears", which was made in 1980. Those were very depressive years in Czechoslovakia, after the Charter 77, and that film was totally apolitical. I have some friends who were part of the hippie movement in the Soviet Union. I know the guy (the director) who lives here now, he is about two years younger than me. And of course he was in all those 'Psikhushkas' (*note: an ironic Russian diminutive for a psychiatric hospital*) and of course it was quite hard, but when we try to compare those years, the harshest years of oppression here in Czechoslovakia rarely coincided with the harshest years of oppression in the Soviet Union or Poland, where martial law was imposed starting in 1981, so it was a little bit better here. It's surprising that each country's development went in a different way. I'm afraid there's nothing you could consider to be a real equivalent of the Czech musical and literary underground. For the GDR the situation was different because they always had their "big brother" in the West and there was no language barrier. Moving from East Berlin to West Berlin was sometimes just moving from one bloc to another! For years you could observe the place out of which you were kicked, from behind the Berlin Wall. That's crazy, and you could still live in the same city!

**I wanted to ask you about the very term 'underground', its notion. It seems to me that everybody has their idea of what it means. How can we define the term underground regarding Czechoslovakia? Is it only a so-called «anglicism» or has it developed into something transcultural and specific?**

It is so complicated and so puzzling, isn't it? I mean, this is the trouble with this semantic mess. If you go back to the beginning and try to trace the history of this Anglicism, same as in Russian, we have two synonyms. We can speak of 'andegraudniki' and about 'podpol'e', 'podzemí' in Czech, which is much broader. We could speak about 'podpol'e' as far as Dostoevsky is concerned. And its transferred metaphoric meaning is sort of a "social layer" or "social attitude", which indicates a way of life or an activity which is hidden from the crowd. This is the notion which could be traced in

most European languages and, for example, in religious activities. In English we have some trouble because we only have this one word. And that assumes more and more possible interpretations, or it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In our languages the equivalent would be 'podpol'e' or 'podzemí' which, of course, suggests that such activities, which faced the brutalities of totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany or in the Soviet Union, are part of an unofficial, hidden, covered movement, well, spiritual movements, of course, I don't speak about political or even illegal armed resistance during the war. But they're always partially political because in a dictatorship every independent movement, even though it might not want to be political, is treated as one. When we use this notion it allows us to say that it's a new version of what has existed for centuries. There must have always been a group of people trying to do something in a different way, unofficially. It depends on how they were treated.

**How did the Anglicism, the English word "underground" enter the Czechoslovakian culture?**

We know that this word was used by Ivan Martin Jirous in his "Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival", 1975. There is no doubt that this notion (as far as Jirous puts it) entered the Czech rock scene in the late 1960s, influenced by independent anti-establishment and anti-consumerist oriented movements and especially the rock band The Velvet Underground in the United States, but also Frank Zappa, The Fugs, The Doors, Captain Beefheart, etc., as far as music is concerned. Jirous says he was interested in fine arts, including happenings and Andy Warhol's projects and through this he came to know about rock music, which was part of it and so different from pop music. It was experimental music. There is no doubt that the Velvet Underground chose this name to indicate they were different from the mainstream pop music bands.

**If I'm not mistaken Jirous compares the underground movement with the religious movement.**

Yes, Jirous makes this comparison as far as the Czech literary or musical scene is concerned - in the beginning he quotes some of the radical Hussites of the 15th century, Czech Protestants. But that is what he wrote in the mid-1970s. And as far as the English notion of the underground is concerned, it may have its roots around there as well. I always try to emphasize, when discussing cultural orientation, that there was something like the underground movement (podzemí) in the 1940s already, when the Czechoslovakians were occupied by Nazi Germany. Well, look at Egon Bondy and his friends, they were found in some kind of podzemí in the beginning of the 1950s, although, of course, they didn't call it "underground" they called it an 'independent





activity' or something like that.

It's only in the late 1960s that this new influence from English-speaking countries reached this country. This notion includes some artistic orientation. It's also a bit puzzling because this influence could only get to this country in a relatively short period of the late 1960s, when there were almost no barriers since the Iron Curtain was almost gone. So you could travel to the West, you could exchange opinions, you could get books, and this way people could learn about what was going on before in the West. And so they did, but then in a couple of months the border was closed again after the invasion and there was no chance to do it anymore. They could get this inspiration in only two years. In 1968 the monopoly of the communist party basically collapsed. Many people profited and took the opportunity to travel and gather as much information as they could. It's a bit funny that this influence reached the country and soon again it became almost isolated. But they could make use of that inspiration.

The underground contains the heritage of this country, as Jirous puts it, as far as the radical protestants of the 15th century and the predecessors of the 1950s go, or Egon Bondy especially. They could also be influenced in a slightly different way by underground in the United States, which was mostly musical, also literary (including The Beat generation) Independent, anti-establishment movements traceable in the States after the end of the World War II. It was not only the musical underground. When you look at the literary scene after the World War II in different countries, in almost every European country you can find some groups of writers, poets that started presuming the differences of values, assuming very negative attitudes towards consumerist society. The existentialists in France, the Beats (and not only) in the United States. Although they may not be able to call themselves underground, if you compare their attitudes they would be similar in a way. If we want to trace the cultural background of the underground movement in the West, it'd be much wider. If we were to speak about Western counterculture, it would be perhaps a broader, wider notion. Again, it has its special conditions and it wasn't faced with brutal oppression. Here it was different - Egon Bondy couldn't publish a single line before 1989. In Slovakia the situation was different. There you can hardly trace any kind of underground movement because they were either able to play music or to write officially. Ok, there were some problems, but they never had to live in a totally isolated underground world.

**That makes me think that maybe the term underground is more suitable to Czechoslovakia than for the West - is that the case?**

Well, the content, what the term referred to in the West was different from what it denoted in Czechoslovakia, especially in the 1970s. Here it coincided with a more or less illegal movement which was prosecuted. In the United States they occasionally

had problems, but they were never put in jail because of their writings or because of their music - they were democratic countries, weren't they? While these countries here in Central Europe, well, weren't democratic, they were more totalitarian. So that's what may still be confusing when they say that the Plastic People are something like the Velvet Underground or The Fugs or Beefheart in Czechoslovakia. Yes, as far as musical influences, it might be true, but as far as their position in the society — it was different. Because the general conditions were different. When we speak about underground in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s we should be aware of such differences. The word was the same, it was an English term, but they were influenced by other movements. We'd better speak of Soviet bloc versions of underground movements which, of course, responded to the local conditions. And they were different here, for instance, since the underground musicians and poets mostly supported the Charter 77 movement in 1977. You can hardly find an equivalent of such an activity in the West. There was no need for it. The Charter 77 was a movement of Czechoslovak citizens who claimed their right to be treated as Czechoslovak citizens. They called for legal measures that were adopted by the Czechoslovak government. It was the civil rights movement. There was nothing underground of this kind. On the contrary, they wrote their first proclamation, they wanted to be published. The different thing that they were prevented from publishing it here, in this country, they just really wanted an open dialogue with the government, which was, of course, unbearable for the more or less totalitarian government.

**Didn't they realize in the first place that they couldn't be published in Czechoslovakia and could only be published in the West?**

Well, who knows in what Vaclav Havel and his friends believed in the late 1976, but I think most of them were much more optimistic, hoping for at least some dialogue with the Communist Party and Government leaders. Instead of it they were treated as criminals. As long as underground musicians, poets joined the Charter at the same time they betrayed their own underground ideas, because what kind of underground is that: "We are citizens we fight for our rights as citizens". It has little to do with original underground ideas, described by Jirous in his Report. What is the most important message? I would say that it was that there is a way to resist. We can resist this pressure, and how can we resist it? There's no hope for the change of the regime, and yet we don't have to be too depressed because we can, (independently, in small groups) keep doing the things we want. The Charter 77 had different aims, it actually wanted to open a dialogue with the power, with the government. And yet one more puzzling thing. The difference between the notion of underground and podzemí. This Anglicism indicates that those ones who are in favor of it claim a certain kind of cultural orientation, the American way of "counterculture". I always remember





professor Patočka, or professor Černý and those who were prominent in the Charter 77 movement. They were university professors in the 1950s and 1960s and they were kicked out of their university posts and what was left to do? They could only have some inferior jobs and keep on writing, lecturing, doing things privately without any chance to publish. So they were mostly manipulated into “podzemí”. But not to the underground. I can imagine professor Černý, who never showed any deep understanding for Jirous and Bondy, being asked:

— So, you became part of underground movement?

— “No I don’t want to have anything in common with those dirty, filthy drug addicts and hippies, no, no!”

What professor Černý wrote only proves it. But if you tell him: “Professor, you have found yourself in a kind of «podzemí»”, - unfortunately, he would have to agree. The difference between the Czech translation is in what it denoted, what it referred to.

**I’ve read that in 1970s you actually took part in underground activities by spreading the samizdat publications.**

In a very small way. My father was active in 1968, we left the country for several months and lived in Austria. My parents were considering the possibility of leaving Czechoslovakia and living in Austria or Germany and then we returned. My father could no longer teach at university and in the early-1970s he became one of the dissidents. No chance to publish, no chance of lecturing, no chance to get any job, etc. He was originally a communist party member; he was a Marxist. After the invasion there was simply no chance. When I was in my teens I started feeling this heritage. The children of who was opposed to the Soviet invasion were prevented from entering the university. It was as early as 1972 — no chance to get to the secondary school, to high school – it was so complicated. Through my father I came into contact with his colleagues, his friends, including Egon Bondy. and via Egon Bondy I got to the friends of his in the early 1970s and also to the samizdat texts, because, again, there was no chance to get the books, so many books were removed from the public libraries. I remember a book by Jaroslav Seifert called *Morový sloup* (The Plague Column). Everyone knew about him and there was no chance for him to publish it as he signed the Charter 77. I remember when I got it, I took my typewriter out and rewrote it in two nights. So it was not only underground musicians and those crazy texts, it was just anything. I kept on rewriting texts in the 1970s and 1980s but it was never too numerous, about two dozen or something. There were professional typists who did it as a part-time job and they were paid for it, unofficially, of course. Vaculík had four or five typists and he had to pay them because they just spent days, weeks, months on it. I would say my role was quite small and limited. I was glad to have this double way of life: officially managed to get

to the university, although it was a part-time study as early as I finished my military duty in 1979, but even before, I could study in a kind of apprentice school, since I could not get to a regular high school. Sometimes there were discussions among students even in the 1970s and 1980s, but I deliberately kept my mouth shut, because I was very afraid. Among my friends there were always one or two kept in jail and my father was a Charter 77 signatory so I knew how easy it was to get to prison. Most of my classmates and later on fellow students didn't know much about it, they grew up in families that were not active in the unofficial sphere at all.

In our apartments one could never be sure whether your place was bugged, that secret police would hear you. We developed this funny way of communication:

- Hello, could you come around?

- Yes, who is it?

No questions like this. You had to recognize the other one. If we wanted to talk about important matters, we would go to the street. We knew about these police prosecutions, the harassment and trouble. When we try to interpret the beginning of the underground movement we have to study political matters. So-called home-seminars, organized in private places. My father was one of those organizers, but the most prominent would be Jan Patoka who went on lecturing at his home, so his students used to come around to his place. Again this was an underground in its broader, wider meaning. When he signed the protest against the arrest of the Plastic People they let him listen to the music and he said politely: "Thank you very much". The logic is that I don't have to accept everything in the world of art and music, but I should be concerned when someone wants to prevent my colleagues and friends from playing music I don't like at all, when someone wants to forbid them only because of this music. No, I don't like it, but they should have the right to play. If you don't think this way then you are not a democrat, are you? We should respect something we don't like.

**As far as I'm concerned, the Plastic People, when they started in late 1960s, quickly gained popularity, they had people attending their concerts. And in the 1970s, the years of unofficial existence, it wasn't impossible to create happenings and gigs, it was hard, it was unofficial, it was underground, but still there were gatherings and people knew about them...**

To understand it better we had to follow the development from year to year. The situation in a couple of years, starting in 1969 or 1970 and ending at the trials of the Plastic People and their friends in 1976. After those trials the situation was different. It was surprisingly quick. In the late 1960s the Plastics were one of the popular rock groups. They were mixing different spheres of art with one another, the heritage of Andy Warhol. It was not only about the music, but also about the show, about the performance,





basically. Art theoreticians started to pay interest. This was a message, something interesting. There is a little joke on how Jirous was trying to explain to the musicians the differences between the psychedelic and underground music. He said: "Psychedelic is music of some art rendering, it's a show or performance whereas underground is more of a spiritual attitude, it's something that you take a deliberate stand, out of our decision, it is an attitude to the world". And then one of those musicians answered back: "I see, at last. Well, when we have fires on stage, it's psychedelic, but without fires it's underground, right?". This is an illustration that they were not so much bothered by the words, by the terms, they wanted to play their kind of rock'n'roll. At first they started to imitate Frank Zappa, etc. but later on they developed their own style.

But it was the years 1968-1969. In 1970 trouble came. Again this was a period of so-called purges. Once the pro-Kremlin government was reestablished, thousands of people were kicked out of their jobs, unless they complied with the official guideline, which said: "No, it was not Soviet occupation, it was brotherly help, we were rescued from hell". As a rock musician: "sign this, have a haircut and then include one of the progressive Soviet songs". "Have songs and a band name in Czech". It was censorship, of course, and a way of breaking the bones of the artists. You will do what we'll tell you. This way, in a couple of years, in the framework of Czech culture underground music assumed a different meaning. It started to be identified with The Plastic People of the Universe, other groups and artists who resisted this pressure. Who could have thought about such purges and humiliation in the late 1960s? And as early as 1970 they came. And so they said no. Year by year this was becoming more and more difficult for them. They could still give their gigs at some villages in the country away from Prague, etc. They had some contacts and then the secret police were everywhere, it was no longer possible, so they had to find different strategies. They started organizing wedding celebrations. They started renting village pubs just for their friends - that was permitted. So they managed to do as many as ten gigs - just each time, unfortunately, one of them had to marry. As Jirous joked: "Unfortunately, in the end, each of us had to marry someone! And some of us bitterly regretted it later".

In the beginning the police didn't pay much attention to them, because they were much more afraid of the intellectuals and dissidents, who the government knew about. They were afraid of them because people loved them and knew them as their readers. But these rock musicians? Later on it proved to be more important, though. "We want our socialist youth like this and that and then look at these hairy hippies gathering". It is extraordinary that the core of this movement was shaped by the rock music fans. Jirous started helping shape this movement. Egon Bondy, the poet, was a legend for The Plastic People. Jiří Němec was a philosopher of Christian orientation. Then there were artists who managed to complete their studies at art colleges in the 1960s, who collaborated with them. Jirous' sister was organizing those happenings. That was really

surprising. In this respect we can thank the oppression of the regime and the so-called «normalization». Thanks to this pressure these people found a way to reach one another.

**Would you tell a little bit about radio broadcasting in Czechoslovakia and its role?**

In the 1950s listening to Radio Free Europe was very dangerous. But it was music, the kind of media which doesn't need words. Listening to Radio Luxembourg or RFE was necessary for young people who really wanted to know what was going on. It was more or less tolerated, especially, I think, in the 1960s. The RFE was in Czech. It played a very important role in the late 1960s, when this musical development started shaping as far as rock music was concerned. It was always so that you could learn about something on the radio and about two-three-four years later you could get a record released in Czechoslovakia. I suppose it was as late as 1969 when the first long-play vinyl of the Beatles was released in Czechoslovakia. And before it was just one or two singles.

There was a collection of "Oldies but Goldies" and I remember somebody told me that you could buy it and there were Beatles songs on it. I was a Beatles fan and I had it! 80 Crowns at that time was a lot of money. I was so glad, because there was no chance to get the record, the music, etc. So we were like: "This guy might have this new record at home!" We used to copy the tape, a hundred times, you call it 'magnitizdat', don't you? Officially it was illegal, but no one cared. At that time, it was so complicated and it was such a thrill. We used to visit one another exchanging the records. So in this way music (rock music especially) was tolerated in the 1960s, but again, only some of it was tolerated. This way a lot of the rock music scene became a political factor.

The Communist regime did not want it; they hated it so that is why we liked it even more. At last we found something that was really interesting. It was a side effect of the intolerance on the side of the regime. If you're unjustly prosecuted, it gives you the feeling that what you do is justified. Don't betray what you believe in no matter how much you are prosecuted.







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Kilheis. U Zábřanských, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 11 January 1980.  
Photography by Jiří Murzar. Courtesy of Miroslav Chadima



# Daniel Muzyczuk

” New  
Tribalism  
Against

the New



Man...

”

Ziemia Mindel Wium. 'CH3NHCH2 - nieustaje adrenalinospady (CH3NHCH2 - Constant Adrenalin Drippings), Granary Island, Gdansk, Poland, 1990. Courtesy of Marek Rogulski and Pto



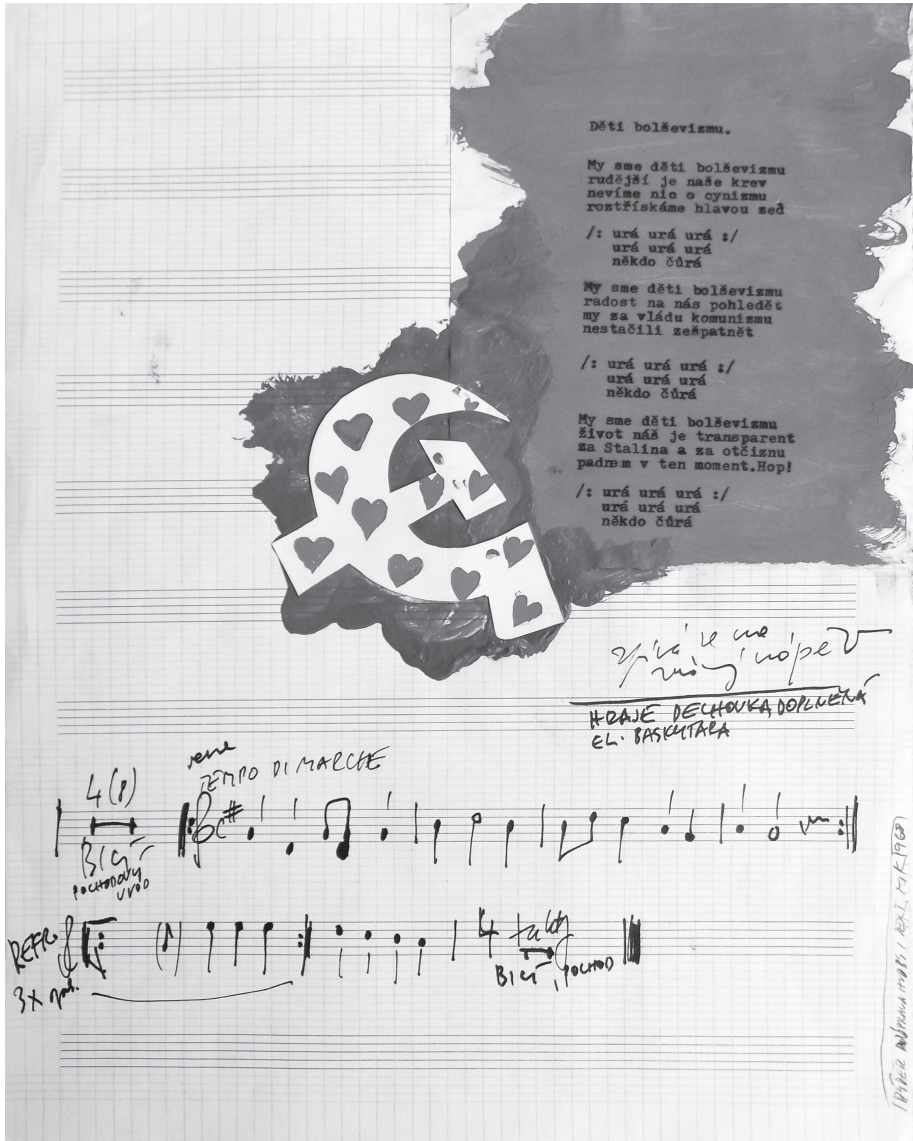
Daniel Muzyczuk is the Head of the Modern Art Department at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. He has curated projects such as Melancholy of Resistance (with Agnieszka Pindera), Sounding the Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984 (with David Crowley), Notes from the Underground: Eastern European Alternative Art and Music Scene 1968–1994 (with David Crowley), the Museum of Rhythm (with Natasha Ginwala) or the recent Polish Radio Experimental Studio exhibition at the Huddersfield Festival. He was the co-curator of the Polish Pavillion for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

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Milan Křížák, score for Aktual band song 'Děti Bolševizmu' (Children of Bolshevism), 1968, collection of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



«Punk literally makes *evident* the stifled expanse of “normality” and already in this way “liberates”, introducing a kind of alienating distance. That’s why the sadomasochism, irrational violence, “anarchism” etc. of punk is often emphasised.

Yet punk introduces distance precisely by making these elements evident, by “bringing them to daylight”».<sup>1</sup>

1 Slavoj Žižek, 'Przedmowa', Punk Problemi

In 1981, these words from the editor welcomed the readers to the punk issue of the Slovenian magazine *Problemi*. According to the chief editor, Slavoj Žižek, the symptom known as punk can be considered as a twofold phenomenon. Its first aspect is self-propelled degeneration. With youth music and culture perceived by the dominant majority as worthless, there is a growing sense of self-deprecation among subculture members: their radicalism is a reaction to the increasingly contemptuous attitude of the representatives of the accepted lifestyle / attitude of those who represent a conventional lifestyle. On the other hand, punk is not only a symptom of the fear of one's own dark side; it also offers radical promises of individual freedom in socialist society, leading to the establishment of new structures seeking alternative ways of life. Somewhere between these two aspects lies an area that for the purposes of this essay I will refer to as neoprimitivism. This may mean the expressive painting and sculpture of the 1980s, but I am interested in a much broader approach here, taking into consideration visions of a new social organisation that in the conditions of real socialism united visual artists and musicians into ephemeral communities that set themselves goals beyond the limited horizons of Party officials.



degeneration suddenly awakening  
degeneration hitting your eyes  
degeneration permeating every moment  
degeneration of truths that will turn into carrion  
degeneration of our relationships  
degeneration of states of madness  
degeneration of simple life  
degeneration of the term nothingness  
degeneration of puking and shitting  
degeneration of loving and sleeping  
degeneration of all beauty  
total degeneration of man  
degeneration no consolation is left  
degeneration we are degenerate ourselves  
degeneration our thoughts are deformed  
degeneration the symbol of degeneration is us  
degeneration realising our sick dreams<sup>2</sup>

2

Pavel Zajiček, 'Degeneracija' in Martin Machovec, ed., *Czeski Underground. Wybór tekstów z lat 1969–1989*, trans. Maciej Domagalski (Wrocław: Atut, 2008) 113; Pavel Zajiček, *DG 307. Texty z let 1973–1980* (Praha: Vokno, 1990) 36.



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'Perversion', 'decadence' or 'degeneration' are epithets that were frequently applied to countercultural artists long before punks endorsed these terms of abuse with pride. Loud and obnoxious music was directly connected to goals that were inconsistent with the social order. The lyrics above by the band DG 307 (an abbreviation of 'diagnosis 307', which was the official medical label for schizophrenia) clearly allude to such a notion and anticipate the charges that will be pressed against Pavel Zajíček following his arrest, alongside other heroes of the Czechoslovak underground, in 1976. That was the moment which gave rise to the initiative known as Charter 77, where members of the civilised avant-garde – political dissidents – decided to offer their support to a group of long-haired 'cavemen'. The latter term is used with purpose here. After all, Egon Bondy's metaphorical novel about the persecution by the security apparatus of young musicians and an old shaman (in this role the author himself) is set in prehistory. *Šaman (Shaman)* was written in 1976, when reprisals against the Czechoslovak underground intensified drastically. Bondy goes as far as to suggest that rock concerts have a similar function as the banned youth rituals of primitive cultures. He describes one in the following way:

The shaman knew that the Young Hunters Festival was eternal. He also understood why. But he also knew that the Security Office persecuted it eagerly and considered it taboo, and that many young people were too afraid to step out of line. The festival, once a universal celebration, turned into a black rite. That transformation had a strong impact on music. There was a significant difference between ancient choral singing and the new, wild, music that, as if anticipating its own demise, wanted to mobilise all its powers. Only the shaman was aware that the new, mad, sounds would become the mother of future music, that their apparent chaos would cause people in the future to develop a more mature musical form, far more inspiring than the fiddle-scraping by the senile old men during feasts outside the village.<sup>3</sup>

Wild ritual means liberation from the strict rules of socialist society. This is not the only example in Bondy's prose where this connotation is evoked. In another novel, he describes a concert as follows:

«A group of hairy individuals was jumping around me in a crazy rhythm. The rhythm was so overwhelming and that screaming so mad that no one could resist it. The tangled whirl of sounds resembled the mating roar of mammoths. Suddenly this was joined by an unusual melody that everyone succumbed to. Like a psalm, it united the musicians and audience into a single human mass moving up and down. And again

3

Egon Bondy, *Szaman*, trans. Arkadiusz Wierzbica (Kraków: Korporacja Halart, 2012) 28.

from the beginning, into unfathomable depths. It's hard to believe, but that's how it was.»<sup>4</sup>

For Bondy, the deliberate primitivism of the music and the whole event was an echo of ecstatic primal experiences by which community, in part, is established. Individual creative acts within collective rituals were an expression of countercultural attitudes not only due to the liberal atmosphere and alternative community of which they were part. The Plastic People of the Universe were also proud of rejecting technical skill as a feature of the inauthentic art of the establishment, sanctioned by membership in artists' unions and the allocation of licences for public performances. Going beyond the official system of music distribution necessarily entailed not only a new approach to professionalism but also a new philosophy of creativity and its role in forging human relationships unmediated by capital. Dionysian states of intoxication, madness or amateurism became lasting badges of underground identity.

An early example of the trend was the band Aktual which brought the postulate of simplicity to a level that anticipated the programmatic primitivism of punk rock. This was often accompanied by shocking lyrics that were viewed as rebellious by the Party, but which today make one think of strategies of over-identification – for instance, 'Miluju Tebe A Lenina' (I Love You and Lenin). Another provocative form of expression was outrageous comparison, of which the piece 'Saňte Se Prasetem' (Become a Swine) is doubtless the most radical example:

reject brains  
reject hearts  
reject everything  
that makes you human

BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!

the swine lives a good life  
only eating and drinking  
and fucking sometimes

4 Egon Bondy, *Invalidní sourozenci* (Praha: Akropolis, 2012). Based on the film *Fišer* alias *Bondy*, 2000, trans. Arkadiusz Wierzba.



BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!  
BECOME A SWINE!<sup>5</sup>

Hippie ideas, penetrating from the West, were mercilessly ridiculed by Aktual: the much-vaunted return to nature becomes impossible when accompanied by the disgust that their lyrics evoke. At the same time, Aktual's works seems ambiguous in their attitude to the utopian dreams of the counterculture. Other lyrics evoke images of communities based on non-monetary exchange and emotions. One example is 'Město Aktuálů' (The City Aktual, 1970):

We'll build a city, Aktual  
And live there all together  
Every morning, just the sunrise  
We will clean our hearts out  
Little ones will run about  
Sing songs and tell us stories  
And we'll exchange precious stones  
Instead of conversation.<sup>6</sup>

It is intriguing that as the regime in Czechoslovakia tightened the screw, the imagery employed by Knížák – Aktual's lyricist – becomes increasingly synchronised with pacifist ideas. During this time a series of ceremonies/performances were also held in natural settings. In Knížák's *catalogue raisonné*, the activities of the Aktual commune are dated 1963-1971. It first functioned at Knížák and Soňa Švecova's apartment at 19 Nový Svět Street in Prague, and from 1967 at a place called Krásné. The relocation was caused by growing oppression and is perceived as flight from the police. A text in which Knížák describes his experiences in the alternative community sheds light on the commune's underlying goals and dynamics of operation:

«Common problems, a longing for regeneration and a desire to serve this end – a kind of primitive, crude enlightenment – took absolute precedence over private problems. ... It was working toward a fantastic ideal of a total life and it sought any and all means

5 Milan Knížák, 'Stač się świnią' in Martin Machovec, ed., *Czeski underground...*, trans. Szymon Szymczak, op. cit., 22.

6 Aktual, *Děti bolševizmu*, CD (Louny: Guerilla Records, 2005) 15.



to achieve that ideal. Thus, drink, drugs and sex became an urgent part of that wild asceticism that was directed at unveiling the primal essence of existence. All means of discovery were useful, and with a kind of obstinate deliberateness, the most drastic means were chosen. As the psychic hinterland of life was laid bare, life in its biological form took a terrible beating.»<sup>7</sup>

Inner searching was also a reflection of outside pressure. Moving to the countryside wasn't enough. Knížák recalls that due to the fact that the community was considered as potentially subversive, its methods and general position had to evolve. He reflects on differences between Aktual and communes operating in the West which enjoyed greater scope of personal freedom and choice of life paths as well as their determination by capitalism. Like the earlier idea of the group that a communist could wear long hair, so the attempt to establish a new community proved 'anti-socialist'. The philosophy of Aktual was idealistic but based on pragmatic rules without reference to specific ideologies. It stemmed from an attempt to use a certain community model to transgress the boundaries of art. After all, Aktual was meant as a neo-avant-garde movement striving to overcome the idea that creativity, as a human activity, is somehow separate from the rest of life.

### **At the Source of the Act of Communication**

Knížák's remarks above emphasise the fact that principles worked out as part of life in the commune were a consequence of communication acts that had achieved the level of 'primitive, crude enlightenment'. Let us focus on the phrase for a moment. Countercultural utopias and their temporary materialisations – communes – were often predicated on a similar 'return to the roots'. However, neither the diagnosis of civilisation as the root of all evil nor other ideas evoking Rousseau or postulating the merits of 'dropping out' are the subject of this essay. Rather, I am interested in phenomena where, based on more or less conscious anthropological research, visual artists and musicians created works that were an emanation of a critical mythology, at the heart of which were attempts to find a new language. A language that was realised non-verbally in rituals that discovered authenticity in civilisational regression/ in the regression of civilisation. Of such nature were the actions *Fish Feast* and *Bird Feast*, devoted to the natural elements and carried out in 1968 by The Primitives in collaboration with Ivan Jirous, Věra Jirousová, Zorka Ságlová and Jan SágI. These deliberate efforts to fully realise



7

Milan Knížák, 'A-community' in Milan Knížák. *Actions for which at Least Some Documentation Remains. 1962–1995* (Praha: Gallery, 2000) 191.



the meaning of the term 'psychedelia', which, according to Jirous, meant intermedia practices aimed at all the senses as well as the subliminal self.

Similar motives, albeit backed by anthropological studies of a different kind, informed the work of Wiktor Gutt and Waldemar Raniszewski, who, first in the late 1960s as part of the DoGuRa collective (with Grażyna Doba-Wolska) and then between 1974-1977 as a duo, created works based on a specific notion of the community of communication. As Łukasz Ronduda writes, they were «interested in non-verbal rather than rational and logocentric communication. They explored and sought to simulate in the field of art the most primal and archaic (ritualistic) means of community building, based on collaboration, gift economy and exchange'.»<sup>8</sup> These investigations were based, on the one hand, on close study of the classics of anthropology, and on the other, on activities informed by the theory of Open Form developed by their professor at the Warsaw Academy of Art, Oskar Hansen. This set of influences was mobilised to produce works that were unique in communist Poland in the early 1970s, realised, for example, in collaboration with mental patients or children. The body and face were important media for art-making for Gutt and Raniszewski, originally inspired by tribal body-art rituals. In 1981, at the Rockowisko festival in Łódź, Gutt and Raniszewski, with a large group of friends, painted the audience's faces, documenting the resulting compositions. Stemming from the post-hippie practices of artists associated with Warsaw's Repassage gallery, neotribalism received an original updating here, becoming part of new wave aesthetics. Gutt remembers that 'Wyraz na twarzy' (Expression on a Face) were no-go for the police if they featured politically controversial content. Other persons used the compositions to distinguish themselves and their companions from members of other subculture groups. 'Expression on a Face' was not only a reflection of personality but also of the wearer's affiliation with a specific 'tribe'.

Hello universe!

Let we have one body and blood!

I'm hearing your heart is living!

I hear how it makes music!<sup>9</sup>

Vágtázó Halottkémek (Gallopig Coroners, VHK) were not only a musical or artistic phenomenon but also a social one. Founded in 1975, the band had to wait quite a long

8

Łukasz Ronduda, 'Rozmowy plastyczne Wiktora Gutta i Waldemara Raniszewskiego', Piktogram, no. 5/6 (2000), 73.

9

Vágtázó Halottkémek, 'Hello Universe!', Jump out the World-Instinct (Von Unten/Sonic Boom, 1988).

time for wide recognition. This only came with punk, when it turned out that the ecstatic and noisy music of the Hungarian ensemble resonated perfectly with the mood of the youth subculture. Writing in 1992 Anna Szemere describes the group's complex performances:

«The [Galloping] Coroners' live shows are literally cultic rituals, aimed at releasing the psychosomatic energies of the subconscious. Many of the fans, skinhead-looking 'hard' punks and young bohemians, are ready to participate actively in the event with agitated body movements, shouts and screams as suggested by the dynamics of the musical process. Occasionally, there is also a visual emphasis on simulated tribal rituals with costumes, make-up and hair styles which can include raw meat and bunches of grass attached to T-shirts or birds' feathers covering the skin all over. The music creates a completely self-contained and closed acoustic space, the illusion of a trip in time and space, into an environment where nothing reminds the listener of everyday realities and concerns. An apparently chaotic but carefully constructed soundscape is produced by the vocals, guitars and an array of drums, tympani and other, non-conventional percussion. Excessive amplification, fuzz and echo are heavily relied on to produce a thick noise. The typical concert is made up of just a few longer musical units bearing no title and following one another without pause. The whole process of the performance stimulates as well as acts out ecstasy.»<sup>10</sup>

These ritualistic practices attracted the attention of the avant-garde filmmaker Gábor Bódy. In 1981, Bódy organised a musical event called the Smink Festival; the main prize in the accompanying music competition was awarded to VHK. Bódy recorded their show, which was later broadcast on West German TV launching VHK into fame.<sup>11</sup> The band's music was and is not just a kind of secular ritual acted out during live performances; it is an expression of a philosophy informed by mysticism, occultism and folk culture. It was that element which attracted Bódy who himself studied hermetic doctrines (as evidenced for example by his 1983 video *De occulta philosophia (Philo-Clip)*). He decided to cast the VHK leader, Attila Grandpierre, in one of the leading roles in his film *Kutya éji dala* (Dog's Night Song, 1983)<sup>12</sup>. Grandpierre plays himself, and the film



10 Anna Szemere, 'The Politics of Marginality. A Rock Musical Subculture in Socialist Hungary in the Early 1980s' in Reebee Garofalo, ed., *Rockin' the Boat. Mass Music & Mass Movements*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992) 110–111.

11 Bódy was a DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogram artist-in-residence in 1982.

12 Another major role in the film is played by Marietta Méhes, the vocalist of Trabant. In one of the scenes, she performs with A. E. Bizottság, interpreting 'Szerelem, Szerelem', a song that closes the group's 1983 debut album, *Kalandra Fel!!*

shows the two sides of his life: his regular job as an astrophysicist (in scenes at the observatory) and his career with VHK. Bódy was interested in showing the complex nature of the new youth culture. On- screen, the VHK members give an interview in which they present one of the band's tenets and the source of its name: 'Life has ceased on Earth, everything is an object, dead. Life on our planet has long ended, but most people haven't noticed yet.' In an interview about the film, Bódy refers directly to the shamanistic aspect of VHK, saying,



66

«For me myth only means that I want to reveal the individual event in the cosmic, in the general light. If something happens to someone then there should be a chance that it might happen to anyone anywhere or at least it should have reference to the individual. ... As to folk culture, here I rather miss myths. The natural rhythm one can feel in such myths and I myself was able to feel it through my grandfathers as a fragment of radiation, this I naturally miss from my life, from our lives. ... They (VHK) take their way of thinking, their music back to folk music, to shamanism, creating community – on cosmic basis. Conjuring up totality in the momentary life of human, trans-conditions. These are not alien from natural folk life, folk art, indeed, from any life.»<sup>13</sup>

A return to the sources and to folk music should be construed here as an act of resistance against the official policy of forcibly integrating folk culture with the culture of the socialist state in Hungary. Kathryn Milun describes the movement and its motives in the following way:

«contextualizing shaman punk as a movement of the surplus consciousness that arises out of the experience of the socialist state's attempt to appropriate folk music in Eastern Europe distinguishes this movement from the Western resurgence of shamanic traditions in trends of what is called in the United States "New Age" culture.»<sup>14</sup>

Official institutions across Eastern Europe exploited folk culture as a binding agent to provide cohesion between the socialist ideologies of modernism and internationalism, and the fact that, in practice, the Eastern Bloc was divided into nation states. Traditional folk song-and-dance ensembles became, for instance, an export product of all countries in the Bloc. The 'cleansing' of folk cultures of all elements incompatible with the official

13 László Bóna, János Hollós, 'An interview with Gábor Bódy' in László Beke and Miklós Peternák, eds., Gábor Bódy. 1946–1985. A Presentation of his Work (Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1987) 157.

14 Kathryn Milun, 'Rock Music and National Identity in Hungary' in Surfaces. Revue électronique, Volume I (1991), <http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol1/milun.html> – accessed July 2016.

vision was one of the reasons for the return to the roots of folk that occurred in the 1970s, for example in the work of the Polish band Ossjan. In Hungary, VHK offered a critique of modernism by returning to archetypes, aligning their shamanistic punk to the mythical 'original' music of Hungary.

## **Spontaneity**

I'd like to focus for a moment on the relationship between improvisation and regression. VHK members don't define the group's music in terms of improvisation.<sup>15</sup> Grandpierre points out that it doesn't apply in their case: «Improvisation is not the correct word to describe our music. At our best, we are in touch with life-completing, primordial powers and our attempt is to hand over the control of our musical activities to these powers».<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, precisely this element finds an expression in a 1985 project where the members of VHK were invited by György Galántai to explore together the potential of his metal sound sculptures. Made with machine parts and bearing poetic names such as 'Engedem, hogy ugráltass' (Make Me Jump!) or 'Emlékmalom' (Memory Mill), the 'instruments' were used for a live performance. The author explains their idea thus: «The sounds are expressions and the products of the sculptures, and are one with the person in touch with them. They effect a type of communication. A relaxed and liberated attitude is a must in connection with these sculptures, for the relationship, as in the case of instruments, is a spontaneous one, and cannot be planned ahead».<sup>17</sup> Galántai, an artist with a background in the conceptual neo-avant-garde, struck an alliance with a music band bent on shamanistic connotations and irrational ecstasy. This unique alliance set out to show that the main purpose of art is self-expression unhindered by the dominant cultural models. Understood in this way, improvisation becomes a non-verbal act of communication.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1970s, in the Eastern Bloc, the question of whether music can become a ritualistic experience that alters the consciousness of artists and audience alike resurfaced. One such attempt at revision and regression was the Czech band Kihlets. The group's founder, Petr Křečan, who had earlier played in prog-rock groups such as Extempore,

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15 Cf. David Crowley, 'Scenes of Improvisation'

16 Jordan N. Mamone, 'Contemplating the Heavens with VHK's Atilla Grandpierre', Vice.com, <http://www.vice.com/read/contemplating-the-heavens-with-vhks-atilla-grandpierre/> – accessed July 2016.

17 Quoted in Galántai. Lifeworks, exh. cat., (Budapest: Artpool & Enciklopédia Kiadó, 1996) 173.

18 Cf. Crowley, op. cit.





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saw Kilhets as an opportunity to pursue new, authentic and spontaneous ways of making music together. (Even the name suggested a revival – Kilhets is a reversal of 'Stehlik', the title of Extempore's concert programme). Completing the line-up were jazz guitarist Miroslav Šimáček, and guitarist and saxophonist Mikoláš Chadima, known to Křečan from earlier alternative projects. In a similar vein to VHK shows, Kilhets concerts were peculiar spectacles. However, their theatricality was informed more by The Residents and the power of the image than by a radical approach to performance. The make-up and primitive masks worn by Kilhets were meant to indicate that the audience was facing something utterly new – a band where it wasn't individual expression and personality that mattered, but performative collectivity where the visuals were as important as the music. Rather than resembling the bombastic costumes and stage sets of rock stars, Kilhets embraced anonymity. In a similar spirit Chadima remembers one of the first concerts at U Zábanských, a venue in Prague, in 1979:

«We were standing backstage and looking at each other as if we'd never seen each other before. And then someone said, 'Wow, that was wild!' and we all started talking at the same time, hectically expressing our feelings. We all felt the same. No one actually remembered what had happened. We only knew that none of us had ever experienced such joy, ecstasy, freedom and communication. We were convinced that was due to the fact that we were separated from the public by masks. I, for example, wore a hood with a single opening for the saxophone. I felt fabulous in it. Unable to see anything, I was able to focus completely on the perception of sound!»<sup>19</sup>

Another trademark feature of Kilhets' live shows were long moments of silence. The band played on stage eight times, in various line-ups. Some of these performances (e.g. at the IX Prague Jazz Days in 1979) were met with misunderstanding, due not only to their visuals but also to repeated assaults of noise, which were too much even for fans of alternative bands. These radical experiences allowed the Kilhets musicians to pursue their artistic investigations in a more pared-down manner in subsequent projects, and the band's eight live shows stand out together as a unique example of a collective and community-building reversion to the sources of the energy of sound.

We could speak in similar terms about the practices of the Praffdata collective, founded at a Szkolnym Ośrodku Socjoterapii (Youth Socioterapy Centre / SOS) in Grochów, Warsaw in 1984 as an independent group of musicians and visual artists.

A radical institution, the SOS had been conceived by activist educators inspired by

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Mikoláš Chadima, *Alternativa: svědectví o českém rock & rollu sedmdesátých let. Od rekvilifikací k "nové vlně se starým obsahem"* (Brno: HOST, 1993) 217.

by countercultural ideas of autonomy. It was a middle school for 'problem kids', those unable or unwilling to comply with the expectations of education system at the time. As the SOS leaders perceived art-making as a means of finding a common language, Praffdata's early musical and performative practices enjoyed the teachers' support; they also had access to equipment. Expanding its activities, the collective also found an ally in the Gdańsk formation Totart whose members, in turn, saw the Warsaw group as an inspiring example of intermedia work. For the Totart leader, Zbigniew Sajnog, Praffdata was a fulfilment of the dream of collective improvisation: «in probably the most industrious improvisations I've ever seen, Praffdata aimed at achieving an intense community experience, well organised group work that, moving from preparation to performance, turns into impetuous polymedia improvisation».<sup>20</sup> Praffdata also embodied the postulate, expressed by Sajnog and Pawel Konnak in the 1990 text *Totems Revealed*, of the de-professionalisation of musical expression:

«Originally, rock music had different functions and it was them that made it different; it constituted a distinct culture in which everyone, even the meagrely talented, could participate; it has created a kind of supranational bond between those people, and these are its important meanings, not manual dexterity or absolute pitch. For professionalism please go to the music academy!!! ... Music of expression, music of improvisation, music of transgression, music of effusion, music of full presence, music of conception and construction – all these musics are losing their listeners because the harmony of the natural path of development is being disturbed. A certain phase has been isolated and, for economic gain, presented as an absolute, a fragment made into a whole through the cunning exploitation of the intellectual laziness and spiritual inertia of homo sapiens.»<sup>21</sup>

Among the members of Praffdata were two painters, Faustyn Chełmecki and Maciej Wilski, who often practiced spontaneous painting during live shows. That was the case for example with *Traktor czy reaktor* (Tractor or Reactor), an audiovisual performance staged at the Kwadratowa club in Gdańsk in 1987 in protest against the planned construction of a nuclear plant in the nearby Żarnowiec. While Chełmecki and Wilski painted on a wall of carton boxes, musicians performed improvised trance music. According to Konnak:

20 Quoted in Pawel Konjo Konnak, 'Tranzitoryjna formacja Totart w drodze do Nieśmiertelności i Wolności' in Krzysztof Skiba, Jarosław Janiszewski, Pawel Konjo Konnak, *Artyści wariaci anarchyści. Opowieść o gdańskiej alternatywie lat 80-tych* (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2011) 154.

21 Pawel Konnak, Zbigniew Sajnog, 'Ujawnienie Totemów. Część pierwsza', *Oofy!! Music Pub*, no. 1 (1990) 34–35.





«They all swapped instruments with each other, so it's hard to say who played what in Praffdata. Tyc and Sylwian, dressed up as a tractor and a reactor, fought a regular duel. Expressive action painting was enthusiastically received by the rearguard audience, and people spontaneously joined in the work of demolishing the reactor.»<sup>22</sup>

Praffdata often took up an overtly political stance, participating in cannabis-legalisation rallies or highlighting the problem of the sexual needs of prisoners (*Pornostroika*, 14 February 1990, Riviera-Remont, Warsaw). But the group's mission went beyond such activism. As Jarosław Guła said, 'We want Praffdatas to be founded in many cities at home and abroad, and we want them to enjoy full freedom of operation. One day a festival of Praffdatas could be organised, and it wouldn't have to be of artistic or musical groups only – these could be, for example, confectionery producers'.<sup>23</sup> In a similar spirit, Praffdata distributed posters showing nothing but the group's logo. Conveying no other information, the posters functioned as points of reference revealing the idea of a new, urban, tribalism.

### **From Counterculture to Dictatorship**

The failure of the communist project of creating a 'new man' led to a desire for spiritual renewal, and a return to the roots and sources of creative energy. Searching for sources can however assume less positive forms too, as exemplified by some aspects of VHK's work. Designed by Géza Barcsik, the cover of their *Hammering on the Gates of Nothingness* LP, released in 1992 by Alternative Tentacles, shows wooden gates built by Seklers (ethnic Hungarians living in Romania) and a globe with Hungary in the centre. A search for primal energy in raw folk music and its ecstatic element can come dangerously close to nationalism, and a universal message can dwindle into national particularism. In his essay about links between punk and shamanism, Grandpierre quotes Béla Bartók:

«[folk music] is a powerful, elementary expression of the people's musical instinct, which comes into being unconsciously, without any cultural influence, and is a pure and authentic form of music. ... only someone who can probe into his own nation's psyche and most concealed secrets can create such music that gives an expression

22 Konnak, *Tranzytoryjna formacja...* op.cit., 80.

23 Ibid., 70.

of folk music.»<sup>24</sup>

A romantic return to the sources becomes a quest for a nation's subconscious mind.

But the process could have a darker aspect too. Ahead of Russian parliamentary elections in 1995, musician and composer Sergey Kuryokhin announced that he was supporting Alexander Dugin, a member of the nationalist movement and chief ideologist of Eduard Limonov's National-Bolshevik Party (NBP). Kuryokhin appeared at the party's rallies, and even organised a Pop Mechanics show devoted to Dugin. Limonov, a writer who spent 70s and 80s on emigration founded a syncretic movement that was about to form a marriage between contradictory ideas, rooted in nostalgia for communist past and based on imperial and fascist motives. Alexander Dugin, a philosopher and politician became the main ideologist. His worldview is structured by a profound feeling that Russia cannot conform to the Western liberal ideologies and has to create its own way of governance. Dugin's theories were built on Russian 19th century philosophers, French poststructuralism, occultism as well as such counterculture figures as Hakim Bey. He is also known for close analysis of David Bowie's songs. This eclectic collection attracted members of alternative circles such as Yegor Letov the leader of one of original punk bands Grazhdanskaya Oborona. It is also worth noting that the members of the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) considered themselves as true heirs to the pre-transformation counterculture. That is precisely the image of the 'nazbols' that Emmanuel Carrère presents in his novel devoted to the life of Eduard Limonov:

«What you have to understand ... is that Limonka and the nazbols were the Russian counterculture. The only one: everything else was bogus, indoctrination and so on. So of course the party had its share of brutes, guys recovering from military service, skinheads with German shepherds who got their kicks from pissing off the *prilitichnyi* – the upstanding citizens – by giving the Nazi salute. But the party also included all the frozen backwaters Russia had to offer of self-taught cartoonists, bass players looking for people to start a rock band, amateur video freaks, and timid guys who wrote poetry in private while pining after girls who were too beautiful for them and nursing dark dreams of wasting everyone at school and then blowing themselves up, like they do in America.»<sup>25</sup>

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24 Attila Grandpierre, 'Punk As a Rebirth of Shamanist Folk Music'.

25 Emmanuel Carrère, *Limonov: The Outrageous Adventures of the Radical Soviet Poet Who Became a Bum in New York, a Sensation in France, and a Political Antihero in Russia*, trans. John Lambert (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) 266.





Alexei Yurchak suggests that Kuryokhin's involvement with NBP was a case of overidentification as a strategy meant to ridicule the nationalist bolsheviks:

«By overidentifying with Dugin's illiberal rhetoric, and by doing this through mass forms of communication ... [Kuryokhin] provoked the moral outrage of the liberal intelligentsia. This outrage revealed the latter's Romantic attachment to the concepts of 'freedom' and 'democracy' (key terms in the discourse of the time), with each understood as a timeless, ahistorical value, disconnected from concrete contexts (such as the market). Blinded by this Romantic view, the liberal intelligentsia was unable to recognize a fact that would become obvious a few years later: that the post-Soviet advent of freedom had actually contributed to the production of new forms of unfreedom – particularly the mass impoverishment brought about by the neoliberal reforms of 'shock therapy.' As Kuryokhin put it: 'At first there was a feeling that the era of freedom was ascending. Then freedom arrived. But freedom is a dangerous thing.'»<sup>26</sup>

This however seems to me an oversimplification and a projection of Kuryokhin's intentions. Yurchak describes Kuryokhin as a 'yurodivy, a holy madman' or even as a 'visitor from space' able to command a logic we can't comprehend. But there are at least several clues suggesting that Dugin's position might have seemed a reasonable option to Kuryokhin. His affinity with Dugin was based on a shared fascination with Aleister Crowley, the poet, artist and notorious occultist. Kuryokhin's National-Bolshevik Party identity card was number 418;<sup>27</sup> this was also the number used in the title of a Pop Mechanics concert in the Palace of Culture in St. Petersburg in support of Dugin and Limonov in 1995. Andrei Rogatchevski claims that the performance was a spell that was supposed to enchant voters into selecting the members of the party in elections to the State Duma.<sup>28</sup> The use of the quotes from Crowley's writings in the libretto read by both Limonov and Dugin and the symbolism of the 418 number seems to support this claim. We have other sources that confirm the magical associations of Kuryokhin's music. In an article explaining the methodology of the work of his orchestra, he claimed

26 Alexei Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011) 329.

27 For Aleister Crowley the number had special meaning: 'Lift up thyself, o my prophet, thy stature shall surpass the stars. They shall worship thy name, foursquare, mystic, wonderful, the number of the man; and the name of thy house 418.' Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law. Liber AL vel Legis*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/oto/engccxx.htm> - accessed August 2016

28 Andrei Rogatchevski, 'NBP, Kurekhin and Others', lecture at the Interdisciplinary Research Seminar, November 7 2014, University of Tromsø, Stockholm, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dThk7WHoE8w> - accessed August 2016



that: 'Pop Mechanics is a ritual dedicated to secret gods. By the way, religious cults and historical events also can be components of Pop Mechanics.'<sup>29</sup> But Kuryokhin's interest in the occult was just part of a larger project, one in which a postmodern phenomenon like Pop Mechanics became an instrument in a political struggle for a new Euroasian ideology. In an 1990 interview with Walter Rovere for an Italian magazine *Musiche*, he sees Russian national identity presented as 'madness', a principle for reconciliation of different creative energies:

«The concept is total madness. This is very important, because it's the Russian style of Art. Most people ask me what is Russian Art, what is Russian jazz, what is Russian rock, what is Russian culture? I believe that Russian culture is total madness. If you play many styles of diverse music and bring to it elements of this madness you have Russian music.»<sup>30</sup>

This conception lends a national character to his music which, especially in the compositions written for Pop Mechanics, was a collage of different styles. Their underlying element was precisely this kind of 'Russianness'. This common component was a very specific 'return to the roots'. As in the case of bruLion's postmodern syncretism, Kuryokhin's music not only has an organising principle that imparts meaning to non-matching parts but also makes it possible to reconstruct a shattered reality. Just as all the nations of Euroasian Empire dreamt of by Dugin might be organised by a supranational element, so the different genres used in Pop Mechanics' music become Russian as soon as the element of madness is at the fore. In the same article on Pop Mechanics, Kuryokhin further explains his approach to culture. In fact his essay was not only an explanation of Pop Mechanics, it was also a presentation of his view on the role of Russian culture in the future and the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In a manner close to the essays of Dugin, his ideas were coming to project the internal construction of a work of art into the form of government. He claimed that postmodernism can lead to 'true' romanticism or to sentimentalism. If Russian folklore stands at the basis of national culture that is sentimental, then national culture will be doomed to be just epigonism. This tendency has, he argued, to be resisted, and heroism should replace artificial folkishness. But if 'madness' was the basis of Russianness, then a renewal of romantic attitudes could also be 'mad'. Moreover, it should affect the world



29 Sergey Kuryokhin, 'The Morphology of "Popular Mechanics"' in Viktor Mazin and Thomas Campbell, eds., *Kabinet: An Anthology*, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum 1997) 195.

30 Kuryokhin cited by Andrew Jones, *Plunderphonics, Pataphysics and Pop Mechanics. An Introduction to Musique Actuelle*, (Wembley: SAF Publishing 1995) 80.

of politics. He presented Limonov as a true romantic who, instead of working through art, decided to act and 'grabbed a machine gun'. The form in which culture might be used for political ends becomes obvious at the end of the article. Kuryokhin observes that politics influences culture and saw a way forward in establishing 'a strict totalitarian regime in culture' that would allow culture to direct politics.<sup>31</sup> This was an explicit proclamation of the strictly political nature of culture that, together with the focus on national identity, offered a recipe for the cultural politics of a new empire.



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The Russian literary postmodernism of writers like Victor Pelevin has presented religio-ideological syncretism as an outcome of the crash of grand narratives. A similar tone can be observed in the attitudes of the authors of *bruLion* and Kuryokhin. That the chaos after the fall can be made sense of depends on the idea that everything has a common base and the West will always find it hard to understand the nature of Slavic nations. From this perspective, the conservative-populist intensification witnessed throughout the former Eastern Bloc can be viewed as a worrying legacy left by some of counterculture's radical attempts to 'return to the roots'.

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Kuryokhin, 'The Morphology of "Popular Mechanics"' in Mazin and Campbell, *Kabinet* PAGES.



DC 307 performing in Veleň, Czechoslovakia, 1973.  
Photograph by Jan SágI



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