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IN THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM: ART AND ANIMALS UNDER SOCIALISM

Abstract: The experience of socialism and its legacies in Eastern Europe created a specific context for artists’ engagement with animals and their approach to the natural world. The blueprint for building the socialist utopia had spared little concern for the environmental consequences of breakneck industrialisation, with rivers rerouted, landscapes devastated and nature viewed purely as a material resource. The welfare and interests of animals were far down the list of priorities in a system which valorised the proletariat and demanded sacrifices for the glorification of the socialist state. The cruel fate of the world’s first space traveller, Laika the dog, who was sent on a one-way mission into orbit in 1957, was symbolic of official attitudes towards animals under socialism, as well as providing a focus for feelings of empathy from human subjects that felt equally oppressed.

It was in the 1960s that live animals first entered artistic practice through happenings and performances, which occurred in parallel with the neo-avant-garde exodus from studios and galleries to enter public space and natural environments and was part of the utopian drive to abolish the distinction between art and life. However, it was only after the changes brought by the counter-cultural orientation of 1968, with the emergence of the women’s liberation movement, a new concern for human rights and the rise of ecological thinking that neo-avant-garde artists began to conceptually address the position of the animal. Birds turned out to be particularly appropriate living metaphors to convey the suppressed desire for freedom, as well as offering a way to explore the ethical and environmental dimensions of relations between the human and the animal.

This paper explores changing attitudes and approaches to animals in East European art of the neo-avant-garde during the Long Sixties through an examination of key works by István Haraszy from Hungary, Slovak artist Peter Bartoš and Petr Štembera from the Czech Republic, while considering the impact of new thinking about the natural environment across the porous ideological borders of the Cold War. Engagements with the animal were most frequently conceived in metaphorical terms as a means to talk about the human condition which, due to the specific social, historical and political circumstances of the Eastern Bloc, was particularly true of artists living under socialism.

Keywords: art and animals, art and ecology, East European art, neo-avant-garde, ethics, human rights, animal rights, Cold War, 1968

In a dark cellar, in front of a tense audience, an artist ‘tried to shove some paprika potatoes down a chicken’s throat, then held the squawking animal in front of the microphone,’ which produced a noise that ‘resounded in the cellar with the strength of a steam-hammer.’ It was then put in a bag of vomit that was pulled over another artist’s head, going through several more awkward situations before ending up hanging from someone’s neck. Thishorrendous episode with a chicken forms part of the recollections of artist Gábor Altorjay, one of the protagonists of the first Hungarian happening, The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan), which took place in 1966 in a flamboyant attempt to abolish the distinction between art and life.1

Chaotic scenes of flying feathers and the manhandling of chickens were, however, not just elements of the Budapest happening, but also a feature of the first such artistic event in Croatia, which took place several months later in Zagreb. The Happnaš, a coinage referring to ‘our happening,’ was also set in a cellar, which was arranged as follows: ‘on the chairs were empty snail shells, on the walls were projected photos of naked women from Playboy, while on

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the stage were a dresser with milk and bread, two 10 kg sledgehammers, balls of newspaper, and several chickens in a cage, a guitar, violin and harmonica. The actions, which were also carried out by three male artists, involved smashing the cupboard, making improvised sounds with the instruments, and throwing the props back and forth with the audience, chickens included.

Although animals feature in art history from prehistoric times of cave drawings and were regularly portrayed in classical sculpture and painting, it was only through happenings and performances in the 1960s that live animals made their grand debut into artistic practice. This occurred in parallel with the neo-avant-garde expression of scepticism towards traditional media, voicing of institutional critique and embracing of public space or natural environments for artistic interventions, as part of the utopian drive to redefine the boundaries between art and life. As will be shown, the tendency to instrumentalise animals as accessories of artistic experimentation coincided with the emergence of more sensitive approaches to their participation in artistic actions, as neo-avant-garde artists began to conceptually address the position of animals in art and society.

Due to the specific social, historical and political circumstances of real existing socialism, artistic engagements with the animal in the Eastern Bloc were frequently conceived in metaphorical terms as a means to talk about human conditions. While the dove frequently appeared as an allegory of communist liberation and of world peace in official representations, outside of the realm of propaganda, birds and animals also featured as enduring symbols of the desire for freedom and were frequently employed in nonconformist artistic circles as a means to signal the multiple repressions of the communist system. In some cases observation of the similarities between animal and human fates under dictatorship evolved into artistic investigations that ended up questioning the rigidity of the human–animal divide, giving rise to tentative experiments in cross-species communication and steps towards a more equitable relationship with animals.

If there is one animal whose destiny symbolises the interconnected issues around human and animal rights in the era of the Cold War then that is Laika the dog, the first space traveller in history. (Fig. 1) Laika was one of three stray dogs taken from the streets of Moscow to be trained for the space mission. Stray dogs were chosen on the ostensible grounds of their ability to endure extreme temperatures, although looks were also a factor, as a Soviet space pioneer had to be photogenic. After several days of technical delay to the launch, during which the dog was left strapped in the rocket, the mission went ahead with a clear outcome for the dog. The Soviet leadership wanted a propaganda success to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, leaving no time for the construction of a capsule for the return journey.

The fate of the Soviet Union’s pioneering canine cosmonaut, who was launched into space in November 1957, sent ripples around the world, creating lines of empathy that crossed political boundaries. As the realisation gradually dawned on the millions of people who were following her story in the world press that there would be no James Bond style escape for the little dog, questions began to be raised about the decision to send her into orbit in the first place. Although the official story at the time was that she lived for as many as ten days after the launch and was then painlessly put to death with sleeping gas, it was only in 2002 that the truth about her death was made public. A Russian space expert then revealed to a conference in Boston that the dog died after only 5 to 7 hours, most likely from overheating and stress.

In subsequent years, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet system, those involved in the Sputnik 2 space project have expressed their regret at what happened to Laika. One scientist stated at a press conference in Moscow: ‘The more time passes, the more I’m sorry [...] We shouldn’t have done it [...] We did not learn enough from the mission to justify the death of the dog.’ This statement would suggest that the furthest scientists could go was to make a utilitarian argument over whether her sacrifice was justified in terms of the scientific data it would bring. In 2008, Russian officials unveiled a monument to Laika near the Military Medicine Institute in Moscow, which was conceived on the model of a war memorial that celebrated the heroism of Laika and her sacrifice for the nation, rather than questioning the use of animals in the space race or other scientific work.
Official attitudes towards animals in socialist Eastern Europe were strongly influenced by Marxist doctrine which made a sharp distinction between humans and other species, reserving for humans the ability to work towards complex aims or produce things of beauty or universal value, while relegating animals to a subordinate status with no place in a utopian teleology focussed solely on the development of humanity. The general attitude towards animals in Marxism can be traced back to the mind–body dualism of Enlightenment thought and there is little in Marx’s writings to contradict widely held assumptions in the 19th century about human domination of other species. It is only with a degree of ingenuity that a concern for animal rights can be read between the lines of Marx’s markedly anthropocentric vision, such as by implicitly extending the promise of communist liberation from humans to other sentient beings.6

Continuity in the prevalence of uncaring attitudes towards animals in societies ostensibly based on Marxist principles was also symbolised by the popularity of hunting as a pastime of communist leaders. Reflecting a political culture in which a concern for animal welfare was dismissed as decadent bourgeois morality, Khrushchev had for example no hesitation in asserting his power to organise hunts in strictly protected nature reserves.5 The moves towards de-Stalinisation initiated by Khrushchev notably had little impact on official Soviet attitudes to nature and there was no break from the megalomaniac projects of the Stalin era that sought to straighten and reroute rivers and even change the direction of the winds, following the directives of the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature of 1948.10 The communist system therefore constituted a particularly extreme variety of the compulsion within the 20th century industrial civilisation to dominate nature and over-exploit the finite resources of the planet.

The ecological challenge to the model of exponential growth at the heart of industrial society crystallised in the flourishing of environmental initiatives and activism in the wake of the counter-cultural movements of 1968.11 This period also witnessed advances in thinking about relations to non-human animals, foremost within the scope of discussion of the issue of animal rights, as prominently voiced in Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation in 1975. This contentious book brought discussion of how to extend the idea of rights to animals, which in terms of ethics proposed the equal consideration of the interests of animals, as well as an insistence on their inherent value as ‘subjects of life.’12 In spite of the barriers that the Cold War erected to the flow of information, a parallel reconsideration of the ethical questions around the treatment of animals was also occurring in the Eastern Bloc. For example, debates taking place in Soviet scientific circles around the issue of cruelty in the mid-1970s discovered links between cruelty to animals and to fellow humans, attributing them to the ‘failure to develop empathic responses to the pain of others.’13

In addition to its liberalising counter-cultural influence, in Eastern Europe the ramifications of 1968 were most strongly felt in the far-reaching consequences of the devastating crushing of the Prague Spring. As Hungarian writer and oppositional activist Miklós Haraszti, who attended many of the gatherings of the artistic underground in the period, recalled: ‘I sympathised with the movements of 68, which means all of 1968 together – Prague, Paris, the German stu-
dent movement and the American student movement – and the events of that year made me realise that all we really wanted is freedom. The turn towards human rights and away from other kinds of ideology was in fact the meaning of the Prague Spring for us. We understood that we can only be free if everybody else is free. By the mid-1970s, the desire for freedom and demand for human rights was a preeminent concern within critical intellectual circles in Eastern Europe.

In the face of an increasingly restrictive political atmosphere in the capital as a consequence of the reversal of the slightly more liberal party line of the late Sixties, Hungarian artists decamped in the summer to Balatonboglár on the south shore of Lake Balaton, where artist György Galántai had transformed a disused chapel into a space for artistic experimentation on the margins of the socialist system. One of the most politically provocative works shown at the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in the summer of 1972 was István Harasztý’s mechanical installation _Like a Bird._ (Fig. 2) It consisted of a cage and a live parrot, with electric doors that opened if the parrot stood on a twig, but closed automatically as soon as the bird tried to escape. As a result, the bird stayed imprisoned despite the doors of the cage being wide open. The work was recognised as having heavily political overtones, as the situation of the parrot was a direct metaphor for the situation of individuals inside communist Hungary. For the secret police it was clear that: ‘The mechanism, and in particular the case of the bird, exemplifies the apparition of human freedom.’

At the time it was first shown in Balatonboglár, the work was exhibited outdoors and the bird actually escaped in the end. However, as one of the most distinctive examples of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, it was included in later exhibitions on several other occasions. In the catalogue text of the retrospective exhibition of the artist in 1998 we learn that when the work was for the first time exhibited indoors, in the closed environment of the István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár in 1977, the bird had to be ‘replaced’ three times during the show, as they kept dying as a result of stress. Since then, the title of the work changed from the subversive ‘Like a Bird’ to the more neutral ‘Birdcage’ and is now shown without the living animal.

When the work was initially shown in the experimental atmosphere of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio, the artist and the audience identified with the bird, and felt as imprisoned by the system as the parrot was by the cage. _Like a Bird_ literally spoke about freedom, in the exalted sense in which the notion appears in the work of noted Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, who asserted that: ‘human rights are only interpretations of the value idea of freedom in different contexts and relations, and from various standpoints.’ However, once the work was perceived more as an art object with museological value, it lost much of its immediate affective power, and the artist did not see the need to include the bird in the installation. Transposed to a static gallery environment, the empty cage recalled instead the fading of the neo-avant-
garde aspiration for a radical transformation of socialist society.

Despite the fact that doves are rich in the symbolism of ‘freedom, peace and meditation,’ which had clear political and existential resonances in the context of post-1968 normalisation in Czechoslovakia, the engagement of Slovak artist Peter Bartoš with birds went beyond the realm of metaphor to deal with their biological characteristics. While the artist’s actions Na sloboedu (To Let Free), with the release of a fish in 1968 and a dove in 1971, could be compared to Haraszti’s Like a Bird, in that they both had clear metaphorical connotations in the repressive political context of real existing socialism notably Bartoš’s action enacted the liberation of the bird, rather than its confinement for allegorical purposes. There are also indications that Bartoš was motivated by feelings of inter-species kinship in his understanding of the release of the dove as ‘an act of the highest social communication and cultural understanding.’

The artist’s interest in birds in fact began in his youth, when he kept street pigeons under the roof of his home, developing into a fascination with the tradition of the breeding of doves and the possibilities of genetic experiments. In the early 70s he actually engaged in the breeding of pigeons, which he based on the principles of ‘democratically oriented breeding,’ which had three units: the exhibition line, the racing line and the health line, which was intended for the breeding of a third generation. The Bratislava Pigeon Aesthetic (Fig. 3) even won a prize at the breeder’s competition in 1976, however, two years later, at the international performance festival in Remont Gallery in Warsaw, one of the three pigeons was accidentally crushed by a bystander, which for the artist was a traumatic experience leading him to eventually abandon his work with the ‘living readymade,’ as he referred to them.

However, the artist continued his investigation of the question of human relationship to animals, and to nature in general, which for him was an act of love. The empathic approach that was embedded in his practice came especially to the fore in the numerous versions of his ‘zoo-park’ works. These were informed by his own experience of employment ‘as a conceptual artist’ – a job description that remarkably was actually specified in his contract – in Bratislava’s zoo-

![Fig. 3. Peter Bartoš: Bratislava Pigeon Aesthetic, 1972–73 (image courtesy Dusan Brozman)](image courtesy Dusan Brozman)
tope in the city, a designated urban ecosystem in which wild nature can flourish. Here the concern is no longer with the deployment of animals as metaphors for human aspirations, but rather with artistic plans to actually further the welfare of animals in the urban environment.

The glaring abyss between human and non-human animals that had opened up since the Enlightenment was also addressed in radical performances by Czech artist Petr Štembera. His exercises in asceticism, practising Yoga, and studying Zen Buddhism, while at the same time denouncing painting as a ‘dead end street,’ quickly led to the liberation of his practice from traditional artistic media. He started actions which tested the endurance of the body and its potential as a tool for direct investigation of the natural environment. Štembera’s wish to be one with nature was the subject of the landmark performance *Grafting*, which took place in 1975 when the artist decided to implant a shrub of a fruit tree under his skin, using the farmer’s method of grafting. In the artist’s words, he wanted to ‘make contact with the plant, put it in my body, to be together with it as long as possible.’ The performance ended when the wound in his arm became infected, demonstrating, so to speak, the biological limits of post-humanist hybridization.

Living animals also appeared in Štembera’s performances, including fish, birds, insects and mammals, as for instance in his performance, *Parallel Deprivation with Hamster* from 1976. Explaining this experiment, the artist recounts: ‘after 3 days which we had both spent without any liquid intake, I offered myself and a hamster wine to drink, every morning and evening over the next few days. The action was to and did end when one of us, in this case the Hamster, took a drink.’ Štembera’s aversion to wine as a result of his preference for beer reflected the impact of local cultural conditioning, while the animal’s reluctance to drink wine was clearly of a different order. At the same time, the insistence on ‘parallel deprivation’ points to the communality between humans and animals when both are
deprived of basic rights, opening up the possibility of solidarity between species.

The performance ‘3:1 Possibilities’ from 1976 also involved interaction of the artist with animals, in this case insects. The artist describes it as follows: ‘Ants had three possibilities to come out from a box which I opened at the beginning of the action: to go to the light, to the sound I made with stones, or towards jam that I had on my fingers. They chose the third option and ate jam and partly also my fingers. I started to eat jam as well (they were biting my tongue). If ants chose first or second option, they would be free.’ This performance indicates how interconnected and essential the issue of freedom was as a leitmotif of East European artistic and interspecies investigations, while also effectively bestowing on ants a speculative capacity for decision and agency within the process of the art work.

Štembera’s performances that took place after 1977 became more politically and socially engaged as a consequence of the severe repression that followed the publication of the dissident manifesto Charter 77, a tragic turn of events that altered his understanding of the role and potential of artistic activity. In the performance in Warsaw from 1979, Štembera covered a chicken with a net and placed it between a radio and a television set that were both turned up loud, while he sat nearby reading a newspaper. The chicken tried to escape, and the performance ended once it gave up its attempt to get free. According to the artist, the intention was to examine propaganda and the role of the man ‘who is constantly being driven to distraction by one-sided means of communication,’ in a piece in which, at a moment of intensifying political oppression, the position of the animal was once again to provide a clear metaphor for the human condition.

The decision to include living animals in happenings and performances in East European art of the 1960s began as a manifestation of unadulterated, artistic freedom and ended up as a symbolic gesture in the pursuit of freedom. In practice, the long tradition of using representations of animals to talk about human needs and desires, as metaphors of the human condition, was confronted and destabilised by the neo-avant-garde’s introduction of living animals into the equation. The shared experience of discomfort, pain and the denial of freedom between artist and animal raised the metaphor to a new level and triggered ethical questions that fed into the rise of ecological thinking in both the arts and society.

NOTES

3 On the relationship between sexism and species-ism, theorists Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan maintain that: ‘All oppressions are interconnected: no one creature will be free until all are free […] Women and animals have shared these oppressions historically.’ See Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations, Adams, Carol J. and Donovan, Josephine, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.
4 For the consideration of birds in contemporary art, see Fowkes, Maja and Reuben, River Ecologies: Contemporary Art and Environmental Humanities on the Danube (Budapest: Translocal Institute, 2015), 18-20 and 35-80.
6 Most openly in the Western press, where signs of Soviet moral failure had propaganda value. See for example, ‘Soviet Fires New Satellite, Carrying Dog Half-Ton Sphere Is Reportedly 900 Miles Up,’ New York Times (3 November 1957).
9 Khrushchev acted to permit hunting by the Soviet elite in three major nature reserves, declaring them ‘hunting natural reserves.’ See, JOSEPHSON, Paul et al., An Environmental History of Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 174.
11 The most influential of which was The Limits to Growth, see MEADOWS, Donella H., The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind (London: Earth Island, 1972).
12 SINGER, Peter, Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man’s Inhumanity to Animals (London: Paladin, 1975).
14 See, ‘Miklós Haraszti and Tamás St. Auby in Conversation,’ in FOWKES, Maja and Reuben, Loophole to Happiness (Budapest: Translocal, 2010), 43.


18 He went on to release another dove as part of the ‘I Am performance’ festival in the Remont Gallery in Warsaw in 1978, see Bátorová, Andrea, Aktionskunst in der Slowakai in den 1960er Jahren (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009), 77.


21 Srp, op.cit., 70.

22 Srp, op.cit., 70.