From July 10 - August 16, 2009, the downtown satellite of the Goethe Institute New York, Ludlow 38 presented a two-person exhibition featuring the work of Július Koller (*1939 in Piestany, Slovakia; †2007 in Bratislava) and Jirí Kovanda (*1953 in Prague, lives in Prague). Both artists have been exhibiting since the 1960s/1970s, respectively. Their work bridges disciplines and reflects on the circumstances of life in a particular social and historical context and within an unofficial art world of the socialist era. The exhibition at Ludlow 38 addressed central issues in the work of both artists: (im-)possible communication, the place of the human in the universe, and the way these artists fictionalize their questions and doubts about the world.

Only in recent years have Koller’s concepts of the Anti-Happening, the Anti-paintings, his actions, objects, texts and the archive he built up since the 1960s received the attention they deserve. The exhibition at Ludlow 38 took Koller’s Universal Cultural Futurological Operation (U.F.O.) as a point of departure, a central body of works that developed over decades from Koller’s Weltanschauung, which lay in an “anthropocentric principle of understanding man in nature and in the cosmos” (as Koller said in a conversation with the artist Roman Ondák).

The exhibition presented a collection of text cards and postcards that evolved from his ideas about U.F.O.-nauts and flying saucers as well as a mock magazine layout on the Ganek gallery, a fictional place in the High Tatras without possible access, that derived from the expeditions Koller undertook with a small circle of friends. The exhibition of works by Koller was the subject of an intervention by The Steins. The first evening of the exhibition featured a reading of “The Seventh Voyage” from Stanislaw Lem’s The Star Diaries (1977) in two 15 minute parts, in the company of Lem’s own illustrations, together with the display of Koller’s U.F.O. works. On view only for the first couple of days of the show, the re-created Lem drawings are reproduced in this publication. Two days after the opening, on July 11, 2009, the exhibition was re-hung, and, in addition to Koller’s works, the work by Jirí Kovanda was introduced. The relations between daily routines and the role of the individual in the public domain dominate Jirí Kovanda’s actions that take place in open space or in warehouses and apartments, with or without the participation of the public. Although Kovanda rejects a strictly political reading of his work, some of his actions and interventions could have subtle political significance and represent a disturbance in the order of things in his very own way without the need for extraterrestrial help.

I am pleased that Klara Kemp-Welch agreed to contribute a short essay on the notion of dissidence in the work of Koller and Kovanda to this publication. I would also like to thank the artists, the estate of Stanislaw Lem for granting us permission to reprint the chapters that were read in the opening night performance, the Steins, Yildiz Aslandogan, Michael Brandl, Carla Herrera-Prats, Walter Saitl and Kontakt as well as gbo agency and New York Document Scanning for their invaluable help in making the exhibition and this publication possible.

Tobi Maier
Curator
Your friend Pavel Tuc documented many of the actions from the 1970’s. Can you tell us about other artists doing actions like you at the time?

JK: At the time I was working together with three artists – Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch and Karel Miller. We organized performance events in different private spaces - cellars, store-rooms or empty apartments.

It was only for a few invited friends, it wasn’t public. Works by my colleagues were more expressive, more estetized, and they never made performances in public spaces.

TM: When you made actions like I hold or Kontakt were you aware of Vito Acconci’s Following pieces from the mid-1970’s that were similar?

JK: Yes, of course, it was one of my favourite pieces.

TM: Also you told me that some images of early Július works were transmitted to Czech republic, none of my important writing they had any influence on you and other artists?

JK: It’s not as simple, we had quite good informations, but not complete, and no direct experiences, it’s important. I personally don’t remember writings by Judit, but somebody else could read somewhere, I don’t know. For me and my work was much more important Carl Andre.

TM: The humble sculptures created from the 1980’s onwards have a kind of poetic and melancholic stance to it. I am thinking of crumpled paper (1980) or walked sausage (2002) or Last Dessert Automatique (2002) for example. How do you find the ideas and ideas for these interventions in the public space?

JK: I can’t speak about it like this, I don’t know, it depends... It’s about to make “visible” the space, to lie in the space, to experience better our being in the space and at the same time it’s my trace in the space.

TM: A question people were interested when we were doing the show at Ludlow 38 was: “When you were waiting for the telephone to ring in, how long did you wait till somebody called you? I guess it has to do with the New Yorker’s anxiety today of being always connected by means of technology...”

JK: Technology wasn’t important for me at the time. It’s again more about contacts between people and about a sorrow to be alone. The time is absolutely unimportant. Five minutes or one hour? The gesture is important, it’s always the same.

TM: For the exhibition at Ludlow 38 you made a new piece Unified (2000) that is assembled of two wooden boards taped together and inserted between two corners of the front gallery. The work is somewhat reminiscent to your Installation JK, 15th November 1979 Praga. Can you say what motivated you to do the piece in Prag?

JK: For this piece and similar ones the concrete space is absolutely important. It’s about to make “visible” this space, to lie in the space, to experience better our being in the space and at the same time it’s my trace in the space.

TM: While we are doing this interview you are in three shows in New York, the 2 person show with Koller at Ludlow 38 and two solo shows at Andrew Keeps and Wallspace galleries in Chelsea. While the drawings and sculptures at Keeps work as a nice addition to the documentation of your actions at Ludlow 38 I was particularly enjoying the new work at Wallspace. How do you feel your work today in a new context differs from the actions, drawings and sculptures you made in the 1970’s and 1980’s?

JK: Maybe the biggest change is that my work now is made for public spaces, for galleries, for a lot of people, not only for a few friends. My contemporay work is maybe formed more “complicated”, there are, I think, more levels. It is more “about”, more “art”. But inside is always the same thread.