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Contemporary Slovak Art

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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Contemporary Slovak Art

When I was writing this introduction to the contemporary Slovak Art collection's catalogue, intended for the Merkel Villa in Esslingen, it was certain that it would not be anything unusual to organise the exhibitions of this or a similar kind in the countries of our neighbours, though not long ago, it would not have been possible to organise them in this form. It was just today that Václav Havel, a former dissident and political prisoner, was elected a president of Czech and Slovak Republic for the second time. The fact that this time he was elected by a free parliament manifested that our country definitively got out of the paralysing grip of totalitarianism. The following years should be filled with intense effort of the country to approximate to the world, to Europe in terms of politics, economics, and last but by no means least, in terms of culture. One might ask why I began with these facts, when my article was intended just to comment on the works of seventeen artists, who belong to various generations, and whose works ostensibly have nothing in common with the changes of political orientation of Czechoslovakia. The German viewer, having no personal experience of socialism, can hardly imagine where the limitations imposed on artistic work lay, where the territory of freedom, forbidden to artists, was, and in what the system of power saw and found its so-called ideological enemies, which had to be silenced because being felt to be dangerous. In this perspective, and despite the diversity of the works exhibited here, it appears that they have a common denominator; the artists, the creators of them, did not flirt with the sterile taste of the state's official cultural policy, the characteristic feature of which was mediocrity. Undeniably, the works reveal that artists – personalities – who managed to diverge from the monotonous and disciplined art of the previous two decades produced them. Each artist, in his or her way, and in accordance with his or her temperament, innate mental ability and talent, after a time came to the conclusion that the official opinion on what a work of art should look like

was pointless to be taken seriously. I feel it does not need to be stressed that some of the artists presented here understood the situation because they had a chance to experience the atmosphere of the 1960s, and the others who came to this conclusion as young, while studying or at the early stage of their artistic life. However, the artists watched and perceived changes of the cultural situation in the world differently and were also stirred by it in different moments of their life. That explains why they reflected the reality of their internal world differently, as well as they differently responded to the external social situation and its effect on the sphere of art and the spheres extraneous to art, depending on vitality, sensibility and intellect, in order to defy the unifying perception and thinking.

The plurality of opinions – so normal and usual in all spheres of life in the developed European countries – was, until recently, unknown or denied in the countries of the socialist bloc, in which there was only one truth to believe. It does not need to be emphasised that this model of thinking was also transplanted to the sphere of art, and it does not mean that it was restricted only to official judgements. Even most of opposition critics, familiar with alternative art, preferred the artists who fully accepted the doctrines of some artistic movement to those who freely manoeuvred in the space of creativity. Such a view, paradoxically, was associated with an unequivocally avant-garde approach to creating and judging, which, while respecting one trend, was intolerant towards others. In my opinion, the fact that postmodernism in art renewed the interest in traditional media and introduced new themes for presentation is less important than the change of the way how an art scene, an artist or a work of art are expected to be judged. Now, when along with a miscellany of artistic expressions, various evaluations of them are acceptable, which, however, are not based on the sports-like judging methods considering who and when outstripped whom, or how a routine was performed. This appears to be the most satisfying consequence, as for artists, so for art historians, theoreticians or critics, who can now openly reveal the contradictions existing in their taste, as well as show their fascination by various manifestations of Being, diversity of artistic work. When evaluating, they may take into account the measure of their own inner responses, may rely on their intellect and sensibility, latent creativity, feeling of harmony – as well as disharmony – they can also refuse a work's of art content; they may take into account the profundity of a communicated message, and vitality, humour, sophistication, public appeal, spirituality, naivety, desire, rationalistic games, hedonism, fresh courage, the wealth of imagery, sentiment, while the first plane of a work of art, so appealing to the uninitiated, will not be of a primary importance.

Last year, in such an intellectual mood, we spoke with Mr Alexander Tolnay, Director of the Esslingen City Gallery, about the possibility of organising an exhibition of contemporary Slovak art which would take into account the plurality of artistic opinions of the suggested artists. At that time, when the political situation in Czechoslovakia impeded any direct relationships with the West, it was always a matter of luck – *i.e.* whether there were any individuals willing to take a risk – on which the number of successfully realised common projects depended. I admit that it was a very tempting idea for me to present a selection of Slovak art in Esslingen, where the exhibitions of Hungarian and Czech art had already been organised, and thus to show the foreign audience, as well as the audience at home, that our art, though little-known in the world, is comparable with the art of other European countries. So, Mr Tolnay and I decided to select the artists who, as I said at the beginning, managed to resist the unifying pressure of the official cultural policy, and who are extraordinary personalities of evident and authentic originality.

The preparation of the show of Czech art in Esslingen did not cause much trouble. Thanks to the patronage of the director of the Prague City Gallery, the selection of works made by the theoreticians, Jana and Jiří Ševčík, could be used for this purpose. By contrast, long after Mr. Tolnay had left Bratislava, I had doubts that our common project would succeed. The idea of finding a sponsor for such a large-scale project, someone who would finance also the transport of the works of art, while also meeting all the requirements to satisfy the bureaucracy, and all without any support of an official institution, seemed rather like a utopia. Therefore, the change of the political situation that the Velvet Revolution brought about made me enormously happy. Though it might seem somehow simplified, but thanks to this change the exhibition that you have an opportunity to see here could be organised by the most competent institution, the Slovak National Gallery. Thanks to this institution, Mr. Tolnay and I could co-operate in peace on preparations for the exhibition since our first meeting, during the whole year, to the final stage, when the exhibition was ready to open. Most of foreign critics do not distinguish between Czech and Slovak art, though these two grew out of different traditions. Because of the different historical conditions, the Czechs and the Slovaks, though closely related nations, have quite differing characters, which is reflected in all spheres of life, above all in culture and, quite understandably, in art. The members of the two nations behave differently towards the world when they are at home, and they behave differently towards home when they are in the world, which was not the fact occurring only in the previous, historical periods, but exists also at present. In spite of the periods of oppression, the Czechs also

experienced full self-recognition and self-awareness as a nation in the preceding century, so they do not have problems with the sense of national identity. On the other hand, the Slovaks still feel the need to speak about this problem on various intellectual levels. Despite Slovakia's position on the crossroads of Europe, which it has occupied since the prehistoric times, some artists assume that Slovak folk tradition is untouched and pure, and their own artistic expression is based on it. However, at the same time, they are intolerant towards those who claim that the coexistence of ethnic communities and religious beliefs in Slovakia is a precondition of the European citizenship being encoded in the very nature of their artistic expressions. It might be just this divergence of opinions, the dynamic plurality of them, which explains why the artistic expressions of most Slovak artists – providing they are talented enough – are more positive, spontaneous and vital than that of Czech artists, who, by contrast, much prefer the aesthetic side of work. I am glad that the whole project, based on the conception of my colleague, Alexander Tolnay, presenting to the audience in Esslingen at first a selection of contemporary Czech art and then of Slovak, shows the art of both the nations more fully, pointing up the differences.

Seventeen artists who exhibit here were selected from among those whose work is based on the pluralistic view of life and the world, and whose relations to the native tradition are complex, more complicated and contradictory. Their interest lies primarily in expressing themselves in authentic and original way, making full use of their own experience, displaying fully their attitudes to life, their characters and natures, values they appreciate, intellects and feelings, opinions and desires, while at the same time, they strive to resemble no one but themselves and renounce convention. Though this does not always carry with it the explicitness. Romanticism-inclined artists start from the points of rationalism, intellectuals tend to put a high value on a physical experience and ephemeral hope. On the other hand, realists try to overcome depression by sarcasm or playing, hedonists seek harmony in the way of asceticism, those inclined to irony admit the beauty of expression, idealists deal with reality or the reality of art, those endowed with vitality express themselves using the austere means of expression. However, viewing this miscellaneous collection of works one can notice the facts contradicting the foregoing; some artists admit their scepticism, artfulness, atavism, their civic feelings, as well as their spirituality. Nonetheless, there is development apparent in the work of all and they all refer to their own memory in the process of changes.

It would be relatively the simplest way of presenting the artists in the way of showing their starting points and characterising the work of each in terms of generation they belong to; thus we would get the generation of the artists born in the 1930s (Milan Paštéka, Rudolf Fila, Juraj Bartuzs, Jozef Jankovič, Michal Kern, Július Koller), then those born in the 1940s and at the turn of another decade (Juraj Meliš, Vladimír Havrla, Rudolf Sikora, Klára Bočkayová, Daniel Fischer, Peter Rónai), and finally, the generation of the youngest artists (Jozef Šramka, Ivan Csudai, Laco Teren, Martin Knut, Miloš Novák). Ten years ago, this way of explaining the system of relations existing in contemporary Slovak art might have been quite applicable, though, naturally, without commenting on the youngest artists, who were not at work then. Now, this approach carries with it the risk that the commentary will be one-sided; the presenting of the artists mechanically in order takes into account neither dynamic transformations of their work nor the plasticity of the picture of contemporary Slovak art, in which avant-garde tendencies were replaced by postmodernist. The artists responded to these changes according to their disposition and not because they belong to some generation.

After a long period of being closed into our own self, when the aesthetic questions were solved from the ethic point of view, which was the best that could be hoped for – an artist could show his or her character mainly by not renouncing his or her artistic opinion, which, on the one hand was positive, but on the other hand, it isolated and continued to distance Slovak art from world art. In the mid 1980s, the young artists encouraged an apparent relaxation of the atmosphere. The artists who did not have the personal experience of the 1960s and the perfidy of the so-called ‘process of cultural consolidation’, openly responded to the artistic movements of those days. Moreover, they did not have to defend their former viewpoints as their older colleagues had to. Full of youthful and fresh enthusiasm for what was new in the world of art – tendencies such as the ‘neue Wilde’, the new sensibility, the trans-avant-garde, they spontaneously began to use such classical artistic media as the picture and the sculpture. Actually, with them, it was nothing special because in most cases they even did not know any avant-garde artistic methods, nor did they have a thought that the ways of expressing oneself by concept or through performance were for the official Czechoslovak cultural policy unacceptable, moreover, that the ruling circles did not consider them to be art but saw in them the ideologically adverse influence of the West, and the artists who produced them – persecuted and interrogated by secret police for many years – were alleged to be enemy agents. The young artists, who briskly entered the art scene in several waves, Jozef Šramka in the first wave, Laco Teren and Ivan Csudai

in the second, and Miloš Novák and Martin Knut in the third, managed to break the ice and free the real art, which vegetated at the outskirts of the official art. This art was being produced by the alternative groups of artists, who were practising the avant-garde styles of the 1960s, including the new figure presentation, Constructivism, and above all conceptualism and post-conceptualism orientated tendencies.

The emergence of a new wave of young artists posed many problems. In comparison with the rejected unofficial artists, these young represented the politically untroublesome 'golden youth', who, owing to their prominent parents, were allowed to study, travel abroad and explore the world. With respect to those who were condemned by the communist regime during the whole period of the 1970s and 1980s, could not exhibit, and sometimes even struggled for survival, it was certainly unjust. (In Czechoslovakia the Art business did not exist then – and even today it is not functioning properly; the state had the exclusive monopoly in this sphere, owning all art galleries). Young artists, who had little information about the alternative art scene, did not have deeper understanding of the relations existing there, and were often intolerant. After a time, when the situation crystallised, it became obvious that the invasion of new artists, not burdened by the past, could bring some benefits. The rivalry between the official and unofficial art scene in the previous years turned up to be false. In fact, there were two groups of artists coexisting here: those who were already recognised at home and abroad in the 1960s, and a little younger, who were working alongside the older, and identified with the older colleagues' world view.

The other group was represented by the artists, who, excluding a few exceptions, in compliance with the empty slogans proclaiming the ideological purity, produced works that were to satisfy the mediocre taste of the official representatives of power, which was often downright gain seeking. The late 1980s, when differences between the young artists, who emerged in several waves, could be seen in the quality of the works produced, and in the originality and political orientation of the artists, brought a change of the situation. Dialogue became real, shifted to the field of creative process; and it was the artists of various tendencies (of course comparable to those in Western Europe) that were communicating here with the help of artistic means.

In my retrospective of contemporary Slovak art, the position of young artists is not at the end of the line. *Jozef Šramka* (1957) has been an original artist since his entering the Slovak art scene. He is successful in presenting his themes in a playful, even naive way in order to make them lighter. As

a sensitive, vital and spontaneous artist, he followed his intuition telling him in what direction his work, then caught somewhere between Italian and Hungarian topical tendencies, should progress, and to what extent his spontaneity could be expressed in his work. In the context of contemporary Slovak art, his works produced an impression of incredible lightness, which also added a new tone to his scale. In Šramko's sculpture also the memory of modern Slovak sculpture resonates; in the 1960s, the works executed in wood chiefly represented this artistic discipline. In this exhibition, he is the only artist representing the first wave of the artists who emerged in the early 1980s.

Laco Teren (1960) and *Ivan Csudai* (1959) studied restoration techniques at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, thanks to which they acquired the skills of the masterful techniques, as well as respect for artistic performance of others, while their imagination and creativity were left unbounded. The fact that the questionable teaching methods of this 'socialistic academy' did not affect them is reflected in their work. It is their natures and characters that they both reveal in their work. Teren's interest has always lain in the public matters. Unlike the members of the young generation who entered the art scene in the first wave in the 1980s, he made contact in a programmatic way with rejected artists of the alternative art scene – mainly Jozef Jankovič – and he tried to define with their help his own attitude to the situation he lived in. Having enough talent and vitality, he did not need to model his work on any other artists' work. What characterises his work is his boldness in handling taboo themes, inventiveness in fabricating other dynamic 'snapshots' of the stories about the absurd 'world of socialism'. Introverted Ivan Csudai does not conceal in his paintings the fact that he was influenced by the period of the turn of the last century – its art and literature. By concentrating on the figure rather than on other themes, he points out that the phenomena determining human fate – the bodily, eroticism, passion, and fatality and absurdity resulting from them – do not change.

The youngest of the exhibiting artists, *Miloš Novák* (1965) and *Martin Knut* (1963), have never been detached from the home avant-garde, though for years the official cultural and political atmosphere artificially created such a detachment. While studying architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, they were also absorbed in the teaching of Juraj Meliš, and above all of Rudolf Sikora, who did not only devotedly teach them, but also helped them to establish the Sizýgia creative group a few years ago. From the beginning, they purposefully orientated themselves in Czechoslovakia's complicated reality. The influence of the 'teacher' Rudolf Sikora is not

evident in the first plane of their work. The ascetic moralist Miloš Novák, whose affinity for geometric forms grew out of his earlier study of architecture, was close to him owing to his own – rational – disposition. On the other hand, Martin Knut began his artistic life as a thoughtful and vital expressionist. A certain sort of "emptying" present in his recent pictures, and being out of tune with the preferences for spiritual qualities, which Rudolf Sikora has been proclaiming by his work for a long time, says much and in a sophisticated way about the artist's past, about the origin of his artistic experiences. His renouncing of the gesture, colour, steady shapes is motivated by the self-awareness and self-control of man who is able to appreciate the value of an allusion.

Paradoxically, quite a lot of time had to elapse, as well as debating of awakening critics were needed for everybody to realise that the young artists who emerged in the mid 1980s are not exclusive bearers of 'new' sensitivity, but the genesis of this tendency with its contradictions links back to much earlier impulses. *Rudolf Fila* (1932) and the circle of younger artists grouped around him, from which only two artists exhibit their works here – *Klára Bočkayová* (1948) and *Daniel Fischer* (1950) – who already asserted an intellectual attitude to work in the 1970s, and communicated via a classical medium – the picture. The transformation of the tenets of the avant-garde into personal expressing methods, and the use of their principles in new and symbolic meanings – as it is in the work of Klára Bočkayová, and the oscillation between relevant and irrelevant relation to an actual and presented reality – in the compositions of Daniel Fischer – characterise substantial changes of artists' standpoints. The leading figure of this circle, Rudolf Fila, whose work had undergone a process of metamorphoses from lyrical abstraction into gestural painting, and from among the artists who were at work in the 1970s, he fully understood the significance of the intellectual shift which resulted in tendencies towards conceptualism, though he himself did not work in that style. After having admitted his admiration for mannerism and its manipulating the visual side of a work of art and the viewer's perception, in painting he was dealing with the problem of interpretations introduced into the context of Slovak art by action artists (above all Alex Mlynarčík). From this position he moved very easily towards conceptual thinking, which he began employing in his work, though, of course, in the way of cultivated painting typical of him. Such a postmodernist attitude, inspired by action art and conceptual tendencies, is characteristic of the whole of Rudolf Fila's work since the 1970s. Viewed in the context of contemporary Slovak art, it appears that what makes the work of middle-aged artists interesting today is just that post-conceptual position, existing modified in various artistic presentations. To

show the whole of it would be rather complicated. The circle includes the artists who entered the art scene at the turn of the 1960s and 70s, knew action and conceptual art, were inspired by it like by other avant-garde tendencies, but did not renounce sculpture and painting as the vehicles of expression. They, however, handled these traditional media freely, each in accordance with his or her subjective feeling and expressing. In this exhibition, along with the works of already mentioned Rudolf Fila, Daniel Fischer and Klára Bočkayová, the works of *Vladimír Havrilla* (1943) represent this tendency. His magic realism is based on the knowledge of the whole scale of possible intellectual shifts in meaning acceptable in contemporary art. His inclination towards pure ethical messages, which he has been striving to communicate via his work, springs from his knowledge and belief of the possible influence of art on the individual and general consciousness. Again, that is the belief in those ideals to which the Slovak conceptualism devoted its effort. The work of *Juraj Meliš* (1942), in which the conceptual tendencies are also discernible, but modified and presented on a purely visual level, is more contradictory. He wanted to incorporate into his work everything that aroused his interest – Pop art, the environment, admiration as well as mockery of the Slovak wood sculpting tradition. The results of this effort are compositions – some of them are presented in the exhibition – disarming by the directness of their message.

The works of *Michal Kern* (1938), *Rudolf Sikora* (1946) and all the works but one installation of *Július Koller* exhibited here belong to the postconceptual circle. These artists are important conceptualist who, along with others whose works are not presented in the exhibition, were in the centre of the action not only at the turn of the 1960s and 70s, but also at the time when the conceptual activity had to retreat to the position on the unofficial side of cultural life in ‘consolidated’ Czechoslovakia. Koller, Kern and Sikora continued to develop their work within this tendency; though each was working in his own style. Sikora did not entirely renounce the visual communication in his work, as well as he maintained the aesthetic quality conveying verbal composition by means of cultural signs. He made use of them in his free groups, as well as in artistically accented schemes, which, all in all, have always been artistically effective. When some years ago he decided to point up this side of his art, he did not have to search for new and unfamiliar themes. His composition is powerful, as is his experience of what he strives to convey deep, this time, however, he is communicating with the viewer in a more efficient way – using such a vehicle as the picture, where, in addition to powerful thoughts, he can employ all his talent as a painter, which enables him to master handsomely the chosen means of expression. The core of Michal Kern's work is

constituted by intimate actions, which he presented on photographs accompanied by his verbal commentary. He mostly pointed out that there is a possibility to meditate via nature. Like Rudolf Sikora, he did not renounce his long-time fascination, which the presented compositions confirm. Humbly respecting the higher principle of life, he still persists, even though a more powerful visual quality is conferred on his message, his aesthetic feeling and the theme that he has been dealing with for many years are openly revealed, and he also persists with his attitude to the interpretation of this theme. Large-scale photo-canvases actually portrayed tree shadows; but without the artistic directing of Michal Kern, who was standing behind them, our experience of them would not be adequate.

Július Koller (1939) is today oscillating between conceptualism and postconceptualism. Art is mingled with life in his conception of work. For a long time he has been admitting the possibility to express oneself not only by verbal statement, but also through performance, installation and painting, which he understands as part of a realised idea. 'Civilism' in his expression is permanently political in tone, as in the sense of 'high' politics, so in the sense of every-day civil situations; this tone is still maintained in Koller's recent paintings on topical themes.

Peter Rónai (1953), with whom Július Koller has recently co-operated, has been progressing in the opposite direction. He began his artistic life as a painter, fascinated by phenomena such as ordinary everyday life and its banalities, the overlapping of various layers of reality and the producing of civilisation buzzing. He was gradually giving up the traditional media of expression, more frequently worked with objects, installations or performances in order to point to the relativity of human effort and art itself. His work can be classified in terms of the deliberate return of young artists to the tenets of the avant-garde.

The artistic memories of the last three artists exhibiting here – *Milan Paštéka* (1931), *Jozef Jankovič* (1938) and *Juraj Bartusz* (1933) – along with the artistic memory of already mentioned Rudolf Fila, reach back to the most distant time in the past. Milan Paštéka and Juraj Bartusz began their artistic life at the time when artists strove to evade the restrictions of Socialist Realism in the way of stylising the figures geometrically. And a little later, when it was possible, though still unwanted, Jozef Jankovič worked more freely with assemblages and non-figurative structures. Each artist has achieved that what his work looks like now by following his own way, and developing his own way of expression. Paštéka moved away from dramatic expression towards the personally modified 'new figure presentation' style. Then the transformation into neo-classical style

followed, from which he returned to his former expressive starting-points, which, however, were presented in a new form, open to a wide range of contradictory meanings, from irony through absurdity to fascination by the physical on the one side and the spiritual on the other.

Jozef Jankovič incorporated influences close to his nature into the transformations of his figure presentation. The influence of Surrealism and the *art brut* tendency are reflected in the way he organised various parts of the human body in a new context and into a dynamic grotesque. In the period of the climax of Constructivism, he produced the works in which the human figure was caught in and hurt by geometric elements. Inspired by conceptual tendencies, he created incongruous, non-feasible architectures – impossible designs – and being aware that the art production was growing more intellectual, he began to use a computer. What makes his more recent work convincing is a confident presentation, resulting from a variety of experience, while the identity of his art and thinking is preserved. In terms of the expressiveness of his figure presentation, in the first plane he strives to point to uncertainty that man is feeling today, the loss of inner constants of human life, and vulnerability to social pressure. Juraj Bartusz is a wholly different type of artist. In the mid 1960s he abandoned the geometrically stylised human figure and moved towards Constructivism, which was a little later replaced by minimal art. He was not indifferent to kinetic art, conceptual tendencies, he also used a computer in the creation of sculptures and returned again to the figurative expressiveness and the gestural expression. Since the mid 1980s he has been working in the style of new spontaneity. He reassessed his means of expression with each new tendency, and a retrospective view reveals that his desire for the new was sometimes only for the sake of the new. The metamorphoses of his way of expression were far too fast, and from time to time disrupted the continuity of his development as an artist. From a distance, however, the common denominator of the whole of Juraj Bartusz's work is more distinct; in all stages of his work, he reacted positively to all that was generous and bold, which said yes to vital principles.

The spectrum of the work of the seventeen artists does not provide an exhaustive coverage of the activities in the Slovak visual arts, which is in an unenviable situation today; twenty years during which it existed closed in itself left a mark on its appearance. The artists that could be well known in the world now – undeniably, their works were recognised abroad in the 1960s – appear alongside the young and unknown artists. Their chances to attract foreign audiences, to which their names are unfamiliar, are therefore equal. Thus, an exhibition like this might be for German viewers, who is

familiar neither with the Slovak artistic nor cultural context, like a message from another world, the language of which they only partly understand; several very similar words have in fact completely different meanings. Nevertheless, I believe that the audience in Esslingen will be open and willing to decipher and understand them.