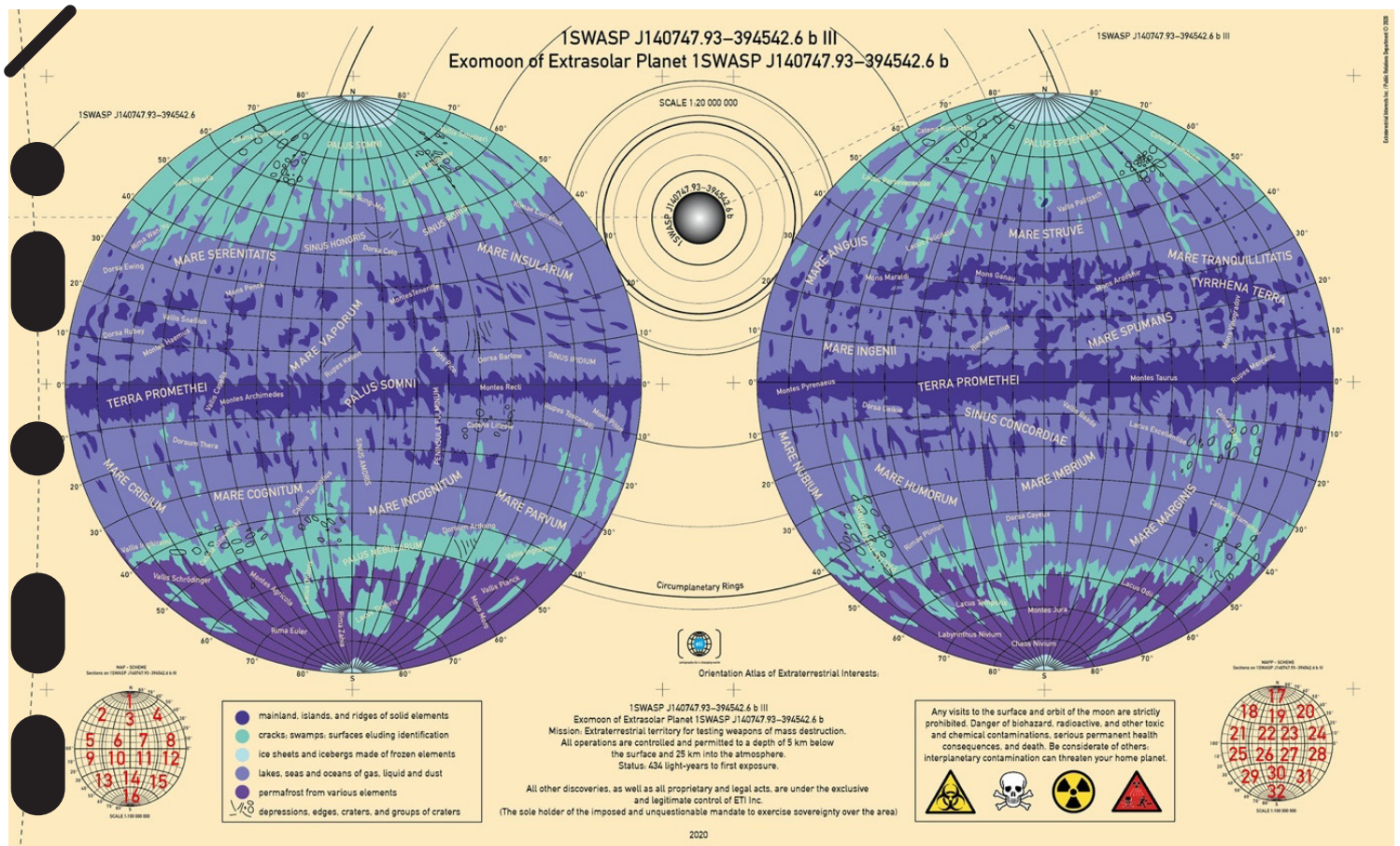


# Cosmo- engineers

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Zbyněk Baladrán: Exomoon of Extrasolar Planet 1SWASP J140747.93-394542.6bIII (2020) [Courtesy of artist and Gandy Gallery]

# 1. Introduction: The hidden passage


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Federico Campagna (2018).  
Technic and Magic. London:  
Bloomsbury Academic, p. 1.

2

Ibid, p. 2.

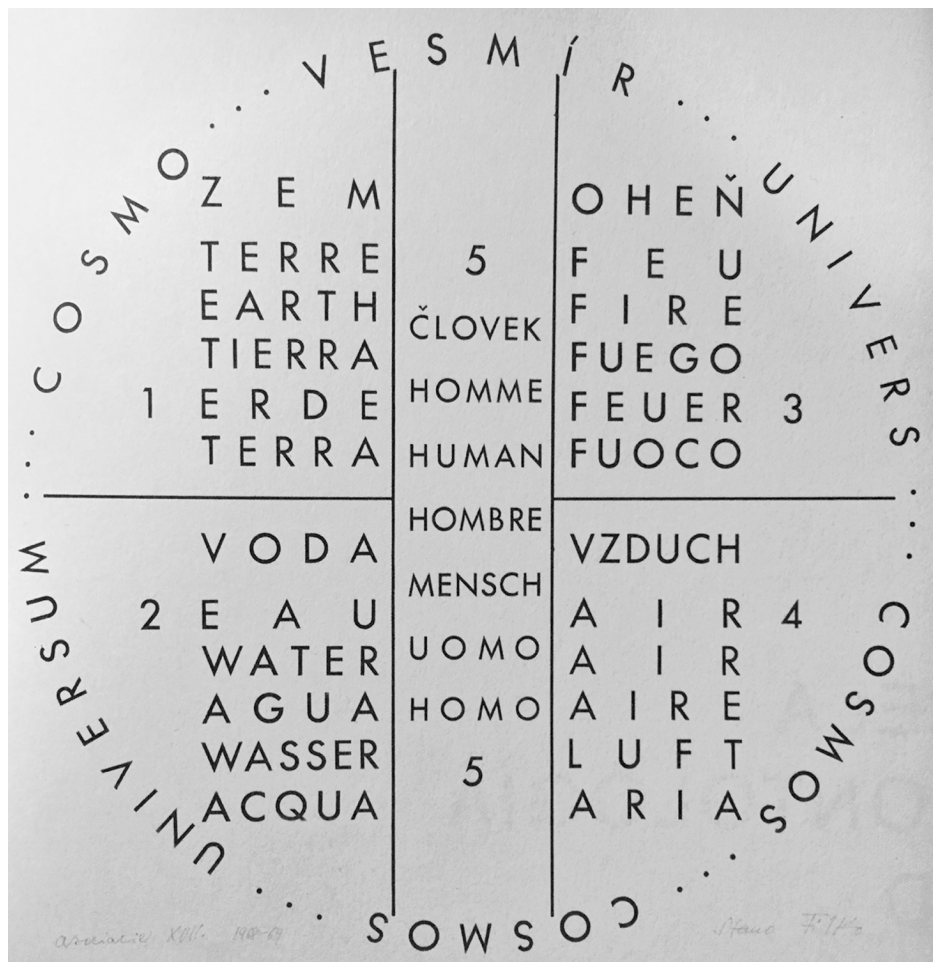
In his *Technic and Magic* (2018), the breath-taking journey to the depths of the ideological assumptions that shape the battlefield of reality, the Italian philosopher Federico Campagna hears „a rumour about a passage hidden within the battlefield leading to a forest beyond it.“<sup>1</sup> As it turns out, this hidden passage seems to be a wormhole, one that takes you beyond the fabric of the world, unveiling its hidden scaffolding. Here lies according to Campagna the realm of metaphysics, accounting not just for basic ontological questions of „What does exist?“ and „What is existence?“, but also for „what is possible and what is impossible within our world.“<sup>2</sup> Seeing the map of the reality dominated by instrumental rationality he labels as the world of the „Technic“, he attempts to reconstruct the reality otherwise, re-enchanting the world under the banner of „Magic“. While under the regime of the „Technic“, the reality is rendered



as completely foldable into a system of linguistic classification, „Magic“ brings back the moment of that which exceeds verbalisation: the „Ineffable“, the excessive, the poetic.

Such a picture of the rivalling implicit orderings of the reality presents us with a *cosmological dimension*, one where social, cultural and political worldviews are under constant process of formation. My aim in this essay is however not to repeat Campagna's very Heideggerian dichotomisation of the two worldviews, dating all the way back to ancient Greek duality of *techné* and *poiesis*. Instead, I would like to follow Campagna's intuition about decisive role of cosmologies in our social, cultural and political life, somewhere else – I am going to trace artistic attempts to bridge the supposed gap between the poetic (as an instance of the magical) and the technical (as an instance of instrumental rationality) in the gestures of *poetic engineering*. Such a genre is resolutely pragmatic, analytic, anti-aesthetic, and sensitive towards the mundane and immediate. It leads to a speculative practice of world-making, where the art is understood as a cultural technique, and as a cosmologically productive tool. For that reason, I would like to nickname the poetic engineering differently as *cosmological engineering*.

Where do I find the acts of cosmological engineering? As a Slovak thinker, I have recently realised that the genealogies of the Slovak art and thinking are rich repositories of cosmological endeavours. This essay is a reflection on the process of discovering the pre-history and history of cultural and intellectual production that became so urgently needed in the wake of the ecological emergency, and which became central to my own philosophy, too. Since I frequently deal with concepts of cosmology, planetology, and of the „world as a whole“, my desire is to embrace the tradition of the Slovak cosmological engineering, in order to better understand tacit dimensions of my own thought (that constantly lives its own life), and of the current



Stano Filko: *Associations XVII* (1970) [Courtesy of SNG. Taken from exhibition catalogue by Lucia Gregorová Stach – Aure Hrabušický (eds.) (2016). Stano Filko: *Poetry on Space – Cosmos*. Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery]

moment, where my peers and colleagues strive to articulate the map of reality that would evacuate us from the battleground of the infinite capitalist present, articulated in the deadlock of ecological emergency.

Stano Filko: *Associations XVII* (1970) [Courtesy of SNG. Taken from exhibition catalogue by Lucia Gregorová Stach – Aure Hrabušický (eds.) (2016). Stano Filko: *Poetry on Space – Cosmos*. Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery]



## 2. Stano Filko: „The hidden scaffolding of the world“

3

Lucia Gregorová Stach – Aurel Hrabušický (2016). *Stano Filko: Poetry on Space – Cosmos*. Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, p. 46.

The shape of the diagram resembles Congolese *Bakongo* „cosmogram“ thematized recently in the works of Tabita Rezaire.

5

John Tresch (2005). „Cosmogram“. In Melik Ohanian – Jean-Christophe Royoux (eds.) *Cosmograms*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p. 69

6

Jan Verwoert (2011). „World as Medium: On the Work of Stano Filko“. In *e-flux journal* 28 [online]: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/28/68020/world-as-medium-on-the-work-of-stano-filko/>.

Starting with the analytic aspect of the cosmological engineering, it is best exemplified by its prominent visual artefact: a *diagram*. Between years 1967-1970, Slovak conceptual artist Stano Filko prepared an album titled *Associations* – a collection of diagrams, images and collages that explain his vision of the cosmological structure of universe; of the „hidden scaffolding of the world“<sup>3</sup> he traced in his artistic practice. One of the images from the series depicts a circle representing the universe divided into 5 elements or segments – earth, fire, air, water and the sphere of the human,<sup>4</sup> while another places the map of the solar system to the centre of the square in the generic neighbourhood. Both of them, in a different manner, represent a type of diagram with an explicit cosmological ambition, labelled by historian John Tresch as *cosmogram*. In one of his essays, he uses an architectural example of an Old Testament temple known as „Tabernacle“, which was designed as an easily transportable house of Jehovah.<sup>5</sup> Wherever it was deployed, its role was not just that of a place of worship, but simultaneously also of a large model of the universe: its structure and measures represented basic cosmological relations, such as relations between the God and his chosen people, relations between the people and the rest of creation, or simply – and more generally – relations between different ontological domains, attributing different properties and agencies to different parts of created universe. Cosmograms thus can be defined as *diagrams of intrinsic logics of our universe*. They diagram, for instance, the logic of relations between the domain of the human and non-human, or the divine and the profane.

Based on the observations made by Jan Verwoert, Filko's oeuvre is in its essence a gigantic cosmogram, or rather an abnormally large collection of cosmograms.<sup>6</sup> From the general system of his own practice, divided into five zones (red, green, blue, white, black), through the aforementioned diagrammatic drawings and collages to his general interest in astronomy, space, and in realisations of



Júlíus Koller: Subjective-Objective Cultural Situation (U.F.O.) (2004-2007)  
 [Courtesy of Květoslava Fulierová and Júlíus Koller Society. Taken from Daniel  
 Grůň, Kathrin Rhomberg, Georg Schöllhammer (2017). *Júlíus Koller. One Man  
 Anti Show*. Vienna: mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien]

7  
 Ibid.

micro-cosmic projects in the form of speculative „social happenings“ (HAPPSOC series with Alex Mlynářčik), we can gather enough evidence to call Filko a „cosmological engineer“ in his own right. For Verwoert, the true medium of Filko’s practice was always the world itself, in the form of intuitively graspable yet always ephemeral totality that can be approached through a multitude of possible cosmological structures and orderings.<sup>7</sup> As a heuristic gesture, the diagram becomes the tool to situate the perceiving subject in front of a map of the world as a whole, synthesising the scientific drive for objective description of the totality of the cosmos with a phenomenological imperative of „the world as a whole“ as a fundamental arc of human being in the world (just recall Jan Patočka and his claim that the „problem of philosophy is the world as a whole“). Filko’s practice thus thrives to

Thomas Nagel (1986). *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

### 3. Július Koller: Proletarian cosmology

Gilles Deleuze – Félix Guattari (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 189-190.

Daniel Grůň, Kathrin Rhomberg, Georg Schöllhammer (eds.) (2017). *Július Koller. One Man Anti Show*. Vienna: mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, p. 8.

achieve what Thomas Nagel demanded from philosophy at the beginning of *The View from Nowhere* (1986): „to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included.“<sup>8</sup>

The case of Filko also shows us that cosmograms function as „abstract machines“<sup>9</sup> that can govern the transition between different cosmologies, or that can „place“ you – as a sort of interface – on a given cosmic background. From this fact of their abstract nature, it follows that they do not need to be necessarily pictorial (or explicitly discursive, for the sake of the argument). In reality, they can instead be manifested in a very anti-aesthetic manner – their ambition is not to provide a specific perceptual experience, but to produce some situation or context. This aspect further pronounces the cosmological aspect of cosmograms – they directly situate you in a given *cosmos* that they provide a gateway to. Furthermore, their profile can be absolutely minimal – they can be just a simple gesture, a detail, a gentle intervention that problematizes the cosmological rendering of a site or of a concept under standard conditions. In some of its instances, cosmological engineering then can be alternatively understood as a proletarian mode of artistic production, or a kind of production motivated by a proletarian way of life (and directed towards the reinforcement of its dignity). Such is the case of Július Koller and his famous *cultural situations*.

Koller explicitly declared that his artistic project is deliberately anti-aesthetic. The curators of his posthumous show at Viennese mumok – Daniel Grůň, Kathrin Rhomberg and Georg Schöllhammer – recollect his statements: „I want to put an end to aesthetics“ „to create proletarian modesty“ and „to engage instead of arrange.“<sup>10</sup> Especially the last of these claims further elaborates on our provisional theory of cosmological productivity of



certain artistic practices – cosmologies are never dealt with as static conceptual structures, they are lived and performed; or in other words, we are always engaged in a cosmology. Koller's cultural situations fit this theory of cosmological productivity – his gestures



Agnes Denes: *Visual Philosophy 1968-2018* (2018)  
[installation view, courtesy of acb Gallery]

in the series of photos taken by Květoslava Fulierová and titled *Subjective-Objective Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)* (2004-2007) serve as demarcations of singularity that his body stands for: Koller puts himself into a position of a cosmological agent that can create new worlds by the most mundane gestures. And to circle back to the introductory polemics with Campagna's dualism of „Technic“ and „Magic“, what would be a better confession of a belief in the magical, poetic dimension of reality than a claim that you can indeed give a life to a new cosmos by a symbolic action?




I would like to thank Ondřej Holub for bringing the work of this philosopher into my focus, thanks to his yet unpublished manuscript „Toward the Sixth Sense of Marxist Philosophy“.

## 4. Conclusion: Engineering subjectivity & „placing outer space“

It seems that Koller's work distills the very core of poetic engineering in his fascination with both excessively complex symbolic systems (the trait shared also with Filko) and with technological condition of late modernity. For him, the cosmic is not only a latent dimension working in the background of his works, but also a reality of humankind technically equipped to travel outside of its home planet. His term *cosmohumanism* echoes the scientific-technical revolution of 1960 s, impersonated by the research team of Radovan Richta and his famous *Civilisation at the Crossroads* (XYZ), and it also exists in a close proximity to philosophy of a lesser-known Slovak thinker Rudolf Šíma, who belonged to the same generation as Richta, Koller and Filko. In Šíma's work, the dichotomy between *geocentric* and *cosmocentric* perspective plays out, situating humanity as a species of astronauts wandering through the universe in their spaceship Earth.<sup>11</sup> Cosmocentrism represents for Šíma a profound change of humanity's conception of its own purpose, one that combines newly acquired humility with a sense of undiscovered potential. While Šíma's cosmocentrism adopts in this sense Promethean view on the human species, Koller is happy with his proletarian modesty, one that for good reasons seems to shy away from the excesses of too much technooptimism and too much universalism.

As we now know on the brink of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term „humanity“ or „humanism“ has been discredited as implicitly racist, sexist and colonialist. But I hope we can read Koller's call for *cosmohumanism* in another sense, too – as a reminder that each cosmological perspective contains as its crucial element a specific conception of subjectivity and agency: the subjectivity and agency that can be modulated by technological alteration (*engineering*) of the setting in which the given subject or agent occurs. The

An interest in a geometry of thinking represented by diagrams is prominent in the contemporary work of my colleague Zbyněk Baladrán. Just as in case of Hungarian conceptual artist Agnes Denes, where maps of the Earth and their unorthodox projections function as engines of a specific activity of abstract place-making, Baladrán uses the map as a diagram of place-making in a very cosmic sense: he draws imaginative maps of the exomoons orbiting exoplanets, and in



this gesture, he makes distant and abstract immediate and tangible. If at this point the chain of thought leading from cosmology through cosmograms to diagrams and finally to places – whether distant and abstract or close and concrete – is still mysterious to you, it might be helpful to imagine cosmologies as a kind of mathematical-philosophical objects: *topologies*. The Greek word *topoi* translates exactly as „place“, and thus „places“ are elementary products of any cosmology – places understood as rich phenomenological structures endowed with meaning. To quote ethnographer Lisa Messeri: „Place suggests intimacy that can scale down the cosmos to the level of human experience.“<sup>13</sup>

13  
Lisa Messeri (2016). *Placing Outer Space*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 2.

It is Messeri's ethnographic work with astronomers and planetary scientists that leads me to my concluding argument. She traces different place-making activities of planetary scientists, activities which turn abstract glimpses of light in their telescopes into real, tangible places one can emotionally attach to. Turning abstract space into concrete place happens through imagining places on our own planet as otherworldly – such as in case of Martian geologists studying Mars through geological sites in the deserts of our planet – or by means of computer or artistic visualisation and mapping. Messeri claims that the perspective when each star can have a planet that harbours life – a place that can be tangibly experienced through our faculties of imagination and technological visualisation – such a perspective profoundly changes how we see our own planet: “[It] positions Earth not as a singular blue marble floating in a sea of darkness, but as a one planet among many on which humans might be capable to live.“<sup>14</sup> The planetary place – a category that emerges from this place-making activity – at once transcends duality of global and local and develops a new register of approaches and attachments to our planet. It is no longer an abstract globe, but a concrete home.

14  
Ibid., p. 2.

Here I finally see the political-ecological (or should I say *poetical*-ecological?)



15

Gilles Châtelet (2000). *Figuring Space. Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 180.

relevance of the artistic endeavours of Filko, Koller, Denes or Baladrán – they train us in seeing art as a tool, as a cosmologically productive tool that can map and diagram new renderings of reality and the place of human subject in it, our planet including. In doing so, they unwittingly become engineers of worlds, and they transcend the duality of Technic and Magic, *techné* and *poiesis* – they diagram reality with a precision of an engineer and with a sensitivity of a poet. If a diagram is indeed an accomplice of poetic metaphor, cosmogrammatic results of artistic practices are engines of tangibility, of creatively transcending the subjective towards its previously unthought constellations. Because as Châtelet reminds us: „Metaphor does not sanction a preexisting resemblance, but acts by *creating similarity*.“<sup>15</sup>



