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EINSPACH  
FINE ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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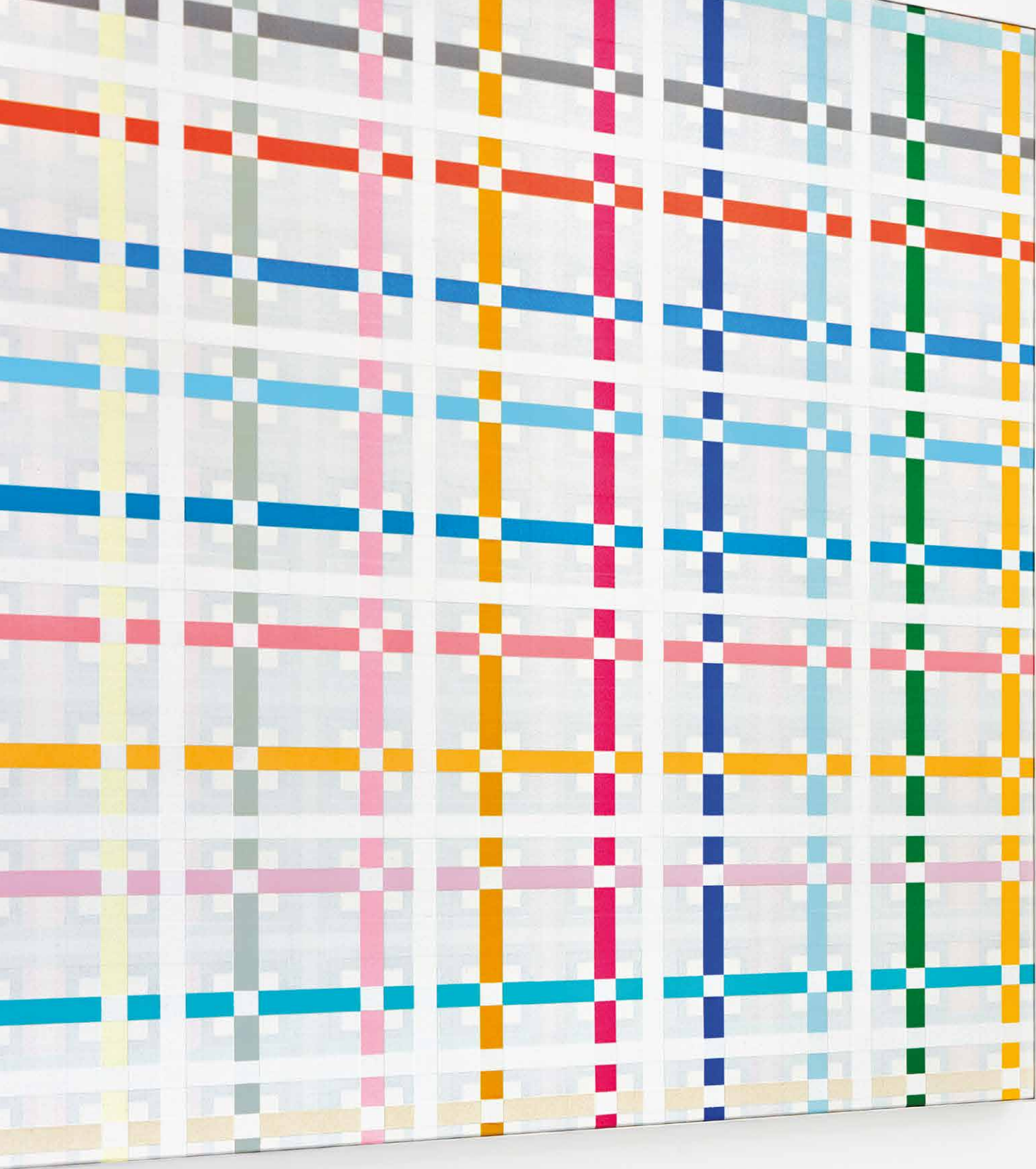
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In this issue, we present the following artists and photographers:  
Magdalena ABAKANOWICZ, Ákos BIRKÁS, Günter BRUS, Orshi DROZDIK, Tracey EMIN, Miklós ERDÉLY, Ákos EZER,  
Krisztián FREY, Tibor HAJAS, Peter HALLEY, Katalin HETEY, Tamás JOVANOVIĆS, Csaba KONCZ, György MAKKY,  
Otto MUEHL, Hermann NITSCH, Grayson PERRY, Rudolf SCHWARZKOGLER, György SEGESDI, Béla SZILÁRDI,  
István SZIRÁNYI, Zoltán TOMBOR, Amerigo TOT, János VETŐ and György Z. GÁCS

Einspach Fine Art & Photography, founded by Gábor Einspach, is a prominent for-profit gallery in the Eastern European art scene. Focusing on contemporary art, post-war modernism, and photography, it organizes international and Hungarian exhibitions in the heart of Budapest. The gallery represents emerging talents and established post-war artists who work across several disciplines, from painting to photography, from ceramics to sculpture.

**EINSPACH  
FINE ART & PHOTOGRAPHY**





Tamás Jovanovics: *The Eternal Dilemma of Abstraction*, installation view, 1–24 May 2022, Einspach Fine Art & Photography, Budapest. Photo by Dávid Biró

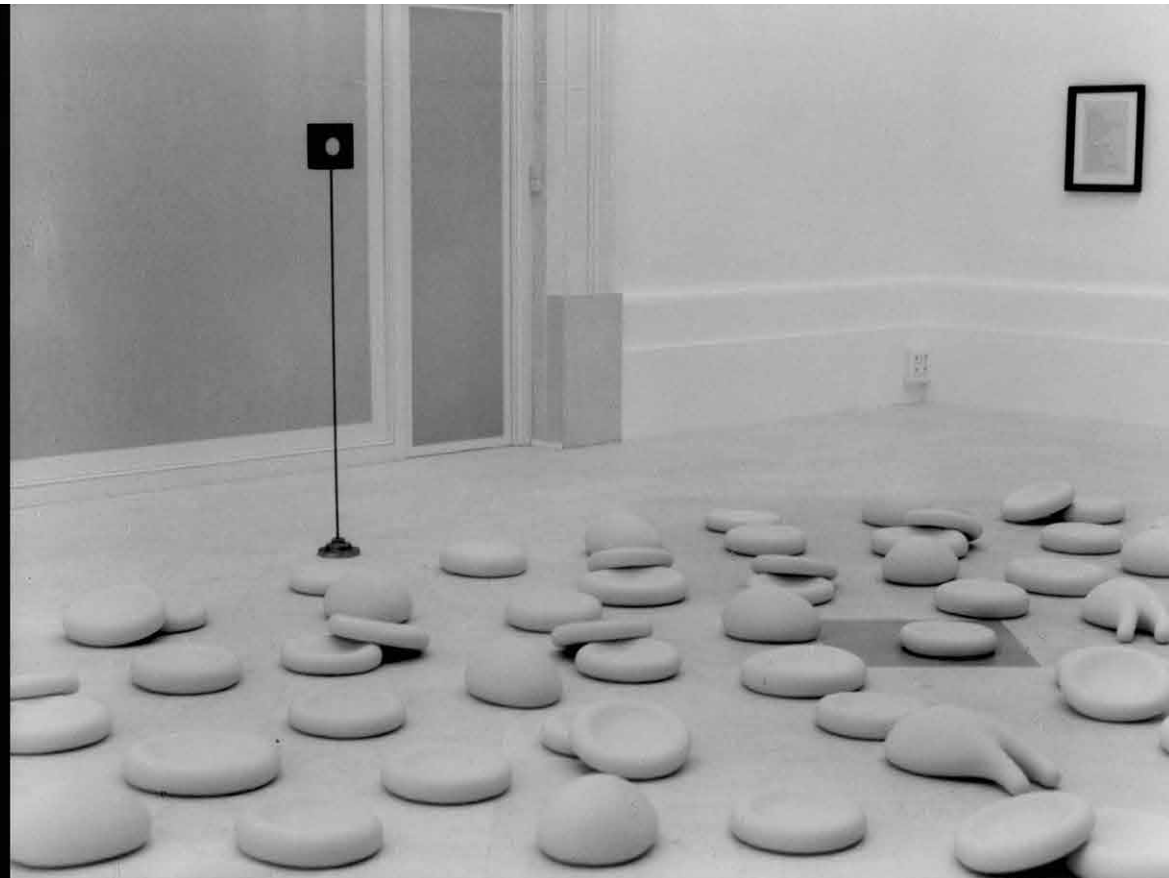


# FRIEZE MASTERS

12-16 October 2022  
booth S15

The Regent's Park, London

In the **SPOTLIGHT** section of Frieze Masters, Einspach Fine Art & Photography presents a selection of artworks from Orshi Drozdik's magnum opus, *Adventure in Technos Dystopium* (1984-1995). This body of work offers a multifaceted inquiry into a constellation of issues debated in the 1980s and 1990s around gendered identities, institutional critique, cultural memory, and the relation between art and science. In 1984, Drozdik set out on a more than a decade-long endeavour to examine and deconstruct the way scientific discourse represented nature and the human body over the last three centuries. In her investigation into the historical formation of knowledge and scientific representation, she examined the truth claims of scientific paradigms, addressing the politicization of knowledge, scientific institutionalization, and the defaults and consequences of scientific production.



NICOLA TREZZI:

AN INTERVIEW WITH GÁBOR EINSPACH

# Chapter Two

After closing down Art+Text Budapest in 2019, the founder, Gábor Einspach, opened his own gallery in the Hungarian capital in May 2021, with its opening exhibition *I Whisper to My Past, Do I have Another Choice* featuring real stars in the art world such as Tracey Emin, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Marina Abramović and Grayson Perry. In this interview, editor, writer, and curator Nicola Trezzi, who is currently the director of the Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv, speaks with the gallerist about the beginnings of his involvement in the art world, his plans with Einspach Fine Art & Photography, and the globalising Eastern European art scenes.



**Nicola Trezzi:** I would like to begin by asking how you ended up working in the art world. Was there a pivotal moment when you realised that your life would be dedicated to art?

**Gábor Einspach:** Art was always a part of life in my family. My father was a bronze caster, and as a child I spent a lot of time at the foundry with him in the summer. He would often talk to me about the 1950s, when huge numbers of statues that didn't conform to the official artistic doctrine of socialist realism were melted down in the factories. My aunt was married to the multitalented musician, painter, and writer Béla Szilárdi, who was also working as a photographer at that time. I have early childhood memories of the blue light in his darkroom and the magical way in which his images appeared on the paper. I'm sure these memories had a profound effect on me.

Furthermore, my mother's sister was a leading fashion model in socialist Hungary. One could argue that I was thus a witness to a hidden world that was home to a privileged stratum, most of them social realist painters and sculptors who had chosen to conform to the system. My aunt's family escaped to Munich in 1971. I visited them when I was allowed to and was lucky enough to be taken to the museums and galleries of Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1982, they took me to the Venice Biennale, which made a great impression on me. For a fifteen-year-old boy, peering out from behind the Iron Curtain in his first pair of brand-new Adidas trainers, it was an incredible, unforgettable experience. Another of my formative early memories was having to give a presentation at middle school, for which I chose to focus on Mario De Micheli's book on avant-garde art. The avant-garde approach, the freedom with which these artists lived and worked, had a huge impact on me.

Interestingly, Orshi Drozdik played a key role in my choice of career. I became fascinated by her at a very young age: while still at middle school I read about how she had constructed an artistic alter ego for herself, creating the persona of an eighteenth-century female scientist, Edith Simpson. While the idea was appealing to me from the start, I was truly struck by her presence when I met her in person a few years ago: it felt as if she had been part of my life for ages. Her oeuvre is remarkable, and I am happy to say that she has become a very dear friend to me.



It's a real pleasure to work with her, and I'm delighted to be presenting her work this year at Frieze Masters and Paris Photo.

**NT:** There are so many players in the art world, yet you chose to work as an art dealer rather than producing art or writing about art and so on. What's behind this choice?

**GE:** I was fascinated by the art trade, and in fact I was lucky: by the time I'd finished university, the political system had changed; the first private galleries had opened and I was able to start working with Dezső Kovács, one of the most important collectors from the socialist period. Together we opened the first Hungarian auction house, following the model of the Hôtel Drouot in Paris, where several auctions were held each week. I conducted over 300 auctions there. We sold more than 100,000 artworks, and of course everything was offline at the time. The ten years I spent at the auction house in the 1990s were my practical training. Huge quantities of hidden treasures came to light from the socialist period, whose owners had never previously dared to show them.

Sadly, a substantial number of these items were swallowed up in the Western art trade: at the time, Hungarian price levels couldn't compete with the prices offered in Austria and Germany. On the other hand, the art trade was institutionalised more rapidly in Hungary than elsewhere in the region, and in terms of its development it soon matched that of Western Europe.

Besides being a gallerist, I've worked as an art forensics expert for the past twenty years. My work isn't limited to the Hungarian courts: I regularly examine Hungarian paintings to confirm their authenticity for major auction houses and galleries throughout the world.

I taught for many years at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest, introducing students to the art market and the history of art collecting in Hungary, which is a truly fascinating topic. Some hugely significant collections were established in Hungary at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, primarily by members of the Jewish *grande bourgeoisie*. The most important artworks, however, disappeared from Hungary in the turbulent course of twentieth-century history.



Previous spread: Gábor Einspach. Photo by Zoltán Tombor

Opposite: Gábor Einspach's aunt, Judit Rihetky in an advertisement commissioned by Magyar Televízió (Hungarian Television), 11 December 1969, Budapest. MTI Photo: Róbert Horling

Left: Béla Szilárdi: *Chess I*, 1984, oil on fibreboard, 70 x 100 cm. Photo by Dávid Biró. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Some of these works are now the treasured possessions of galleries and museums in Western Europe and America or are part of important private collections. Less fortunate pieces either went up in flames during World War II bomb raids or ended up in Russia as the spoils of war and are now gathering dust in storerooms or unidentified collections. I've always been interested in the question of restitution, and it's particularly exciting when one of these important pieces turns up.

**NT:** Although the art trade, along with teaching and the issue of restitution, have always been your main focus, you have long had a keen interest in publishing. Could you tell us a little about that?

**GE:** I've always been interested in magazine publishing. I published my first journal back in the mid-1990s, in collaboration with the Hungarian branch of the KBC Bank, which offered private banking clients alternative opportunities for investments in the art market. Then, in 1999, I founded *Artmagazin*, which has since become the most important

Hungarian magazine on the printed art journal market. *Artmagazin* now has an independent online version, too.

For ten years, I worked with my friend, the passionate collector and gallery owner Tamás Kieselbach. Besides running a consultancy together, we had another joint enterprise, the Art+Text Budapest gallery. One of our publications was an English version of Sándor Szilágyi's important work on neo-avant-garde Hungarian photography, which has continued to attract international attention ever since. I was also involved in publishing the excellent monograph introducing the work of Krisztián Frey.

**NT:** Art+Text Budapest was a space that you created in the iconic Bedő House, one of the most beautiful buildings in Budapest, and I see Einspach Fine Art & Photography as its continuation, so to speak. Can you tell us how Art+Text Budapest came about?

**GE:** The Hungarian art trade was dominated for many years by the modernist endeavours of the late nineteenth century and the first

third of the twentieth century. Collectors focused on works of this kind, which generated record sales at auction. But I've always been fascinated by post-war and contemporary art: in fact, *Artmagazin* concentrates mainly on this area; incidentally, I believe the magazine has played a big role in educating Hungarian collectors and bringing about a shift towards contemporary art.

The Bedő collection was among the most significant collections in Hungary: it was one of the few that survived World War II, existing practically intact in a kind of protective enclave in the socialist era. In practice, it functioned as a secret private museum, open to just a few privileged visitors. The collection inspired both a book and an exhibition. When the collector's last direct descendant died, the collection was put up for sale and the apartment was left empty. So, there was the available space, with its own distinctive atmosphere, every inch of it permeated with art; and there was my passionate interest; and there was never any doubt that I would exhibit contemporary art there. It was a hugely successful combination: it functioned for many years and earned a good international reputation.

Below: Ákos Birkás: *Heads*, installation view, 1 February – 18 March 2022, Einspach Fine Art & Photography, Budapest. Photo by Dávid Biró

Opposite: Ákos Birkás: *New House*, 1973, oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

**NT:** I couldn't agree more, having curated two exhibitions in this magical place! Although you've always had an international outlook, the Hungarian art scene has played, and continues to play, a very important role in your projects. What makes it so special?

**GE:** The region is unique for its tragic twentieth-century history, its permanent mingling of ethnicities and cultures,

its talented individuals, and its intense and deep-rooted passions that Westerners find baffling.

Contemporary Hungarian art was attracting interest in the West even before the change of political regime: thanks to the efforts of the outstanding art historian Lóránd Hegyi, German and Austrian collectors regularly purchased works by a number of Hungarian artists back in the 1980s. With the change of regime in 1989, people were intrigued to take a glimpse behind the Iron Curtain.

The extension of Tate Modern's acquisition activities to the region has been extremely important to Eastern Europe as a whole, and to Hungary in particular. The idea for the acquisitions committees came from Nicholas Serota, who was appointed director of Tate in 1988. Through the financial and professional assistance of committee members, the scope of collecting was extended into areas of the world previously regarded as peripheral, and under Serota's direction, collecting activity was financed by supporters of the committees

from the respective regions. In the case of East Central Europe, this didn't mean a return to the pre-war periods. The collection comprises contemporary works: the classical avant-garde has become unattainably expensive, while the 1960s proved to be the earliest post-1945 period of interest. This philosophy also appealed to private collectors. Increasing numbers of collectors who had previously purchased classical works now turned to post-war and contemporary art. This was important feedback for Hungarian collectors.

In the past ten years, there has been a new wave of interest: Hungarian collectors such as Zsolt Somló have become members of Tate Modern's Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee (which is currently being restructured and renamed), while Péter Küllői has since become co-chair of the committee. Hungarian participation in the program of Centre Pompidou, for example, is particularly strong. In addition, various American museums have also expanded their geographical focus to include Eastern Europe.



Below: Peter Halley: *Untitled (1.30.14.2)* (Study 19), 2014, acrylic and fluorescent acrylic on digitally printed paper, 53.3 x 35.6 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography © Peter Halley

Opposite (top): Tracey Emin: *I Whisper to My Past, Do I have Another Choice*, 2010, neon, 60.5 x 231.8 cm. Courtesy of IL BACIO DI STILE Art Collection © Tracey Emin

Opposite (bottom): Grayson Perry: *Anger Work*, 2000, painted and glazed ceramic. Courtesy of IL BACIO DI STILE Art Collection © Grayson Perry

**NT:** I have met Péter, and I met Tate Modern's Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee in Cluj-Napoca, and I completely agree with what you are saying. At the same time, there is a recent trend among collectors to show a strong interest in works by an older generation of artists, who were earlier absent from the market compared to the younger generation. When the work of young artists started to reach really high prices with no real historical validation, collectors began to buy works by historical artists who had no market but a historical record and a good inventory. Galleries followed suit. Will you be presenting such artists? I know you have exhibited works by János Fajó...

**GE:** My selection isn't based on which generation an artist belongs to. I've always taken an interest in young and emerging artists. I set up one of the first exhibitions of work by Zsófi Keresztes, who is representing Hungary at this year's Venice Biennale; Ákos Ezer and Mira Makai, who are now working with Galerie Droste, began their careers with me; I've also exhibited work by Adrian Kiss, Sári Ember, Ádám Ulbert, and Gergő Szinyova, and I've curated an exhibition for Peter Peri.

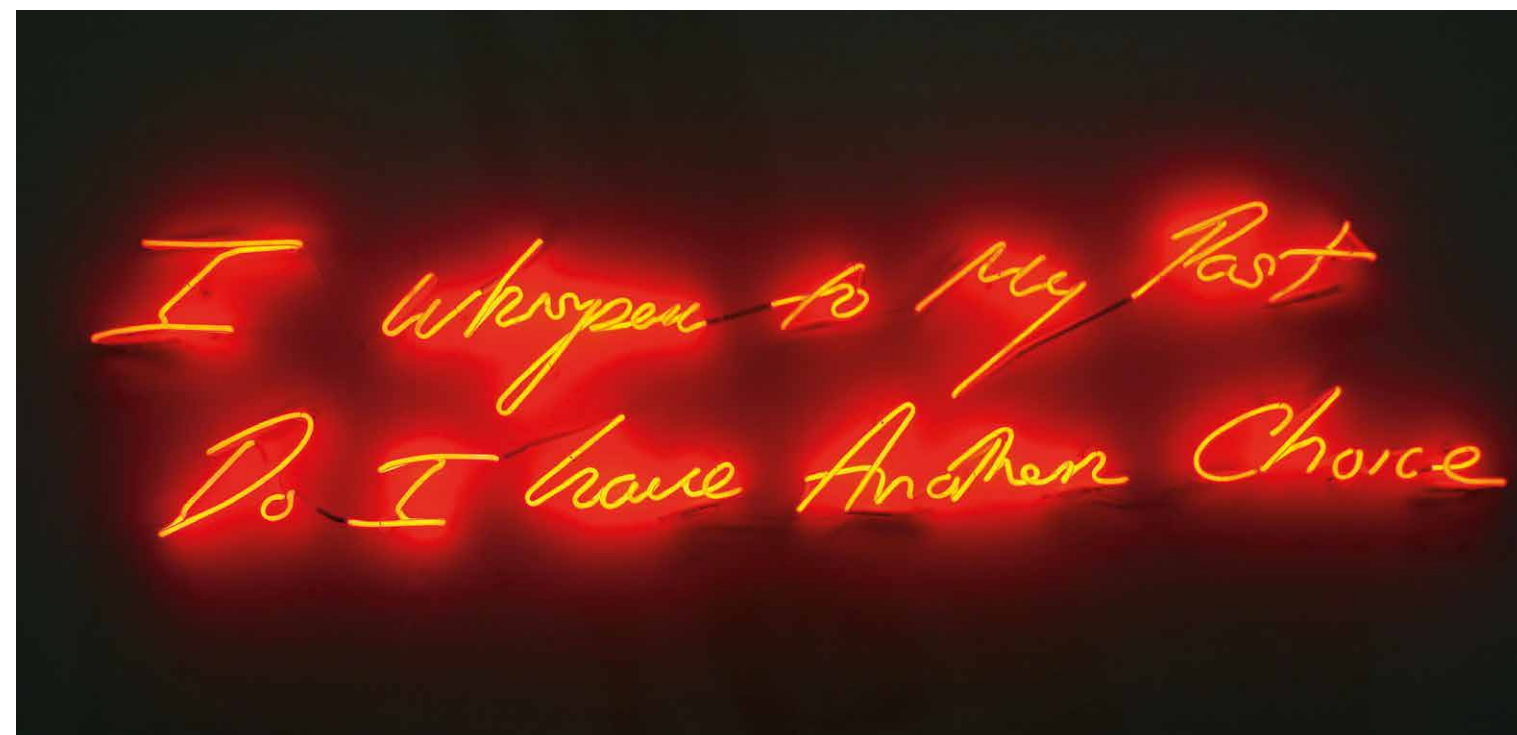
When Tate Modern's Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee first visited Hungary, I put together a comprehensive exhibition on the history of the Hungarian avant-garde, for which I selected significant works by Sándor Bortnyik, Lajos Kassák, and László Peri from the most important private collections in Hungary. The joint exhibition of works by Imre Bak, one of the most important masters of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, and paintings by Peter Halley, marked an important moment in the life of Art+Text Budapest.

I partnered with Thomas Galerie in Munich on that occasion, while the exhibition was curated by your good self! Bringing together works by Imre Bak and Peter Halley generated an authentic, profound, and meaningful connection in the gallery: alongside their formal similarities, the juxtaposition also brought their essential differences to light, enabling us to perceive and interpret the divergence between European, including Hungarian, painterly traditions and American hard edge, post-pop and neo-geo tendencies.

For me, it is particularly important to present the most significant post-war Hungarian artists: besides János Fajó, I've curated solo exhibitions of work by Tamás Soós, Tamás Konok, and Ákos Birkás, and I also continuously pay keen attention to other key figures in Hungarian post-war art.

I've long taken an interest in the oeuvre of Miklós Erdély: the first significant volume of essays on him is being published to coincide with *Frieze Masters*, with the support of Einspach Fine Art & Photography.

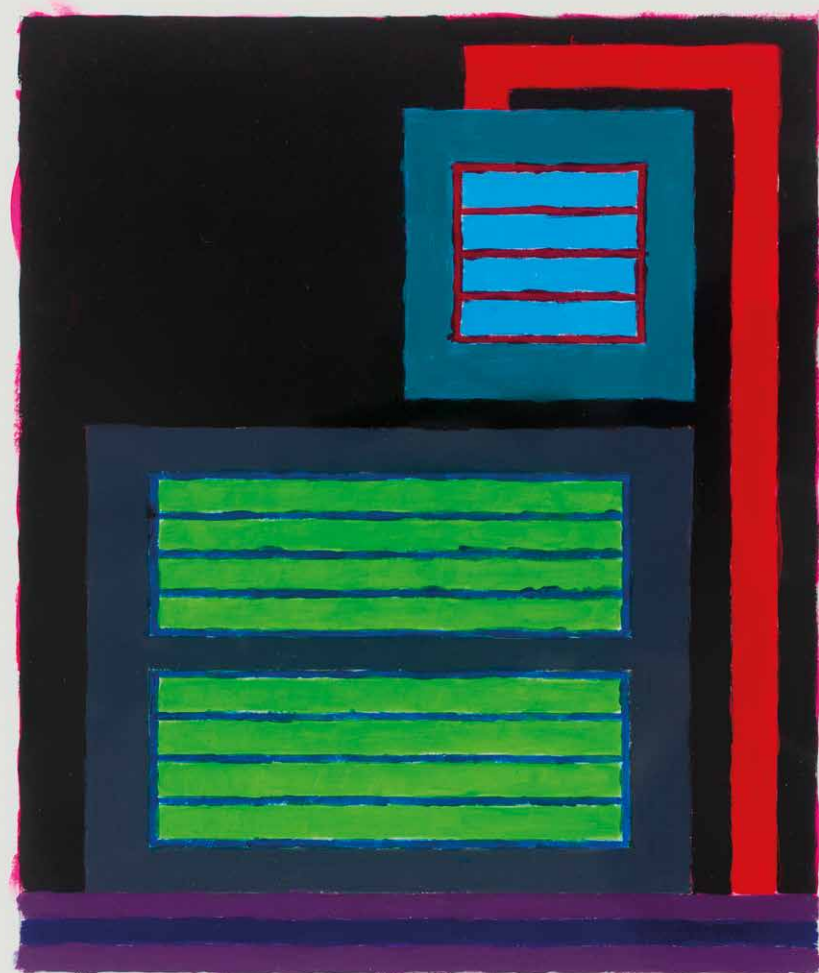
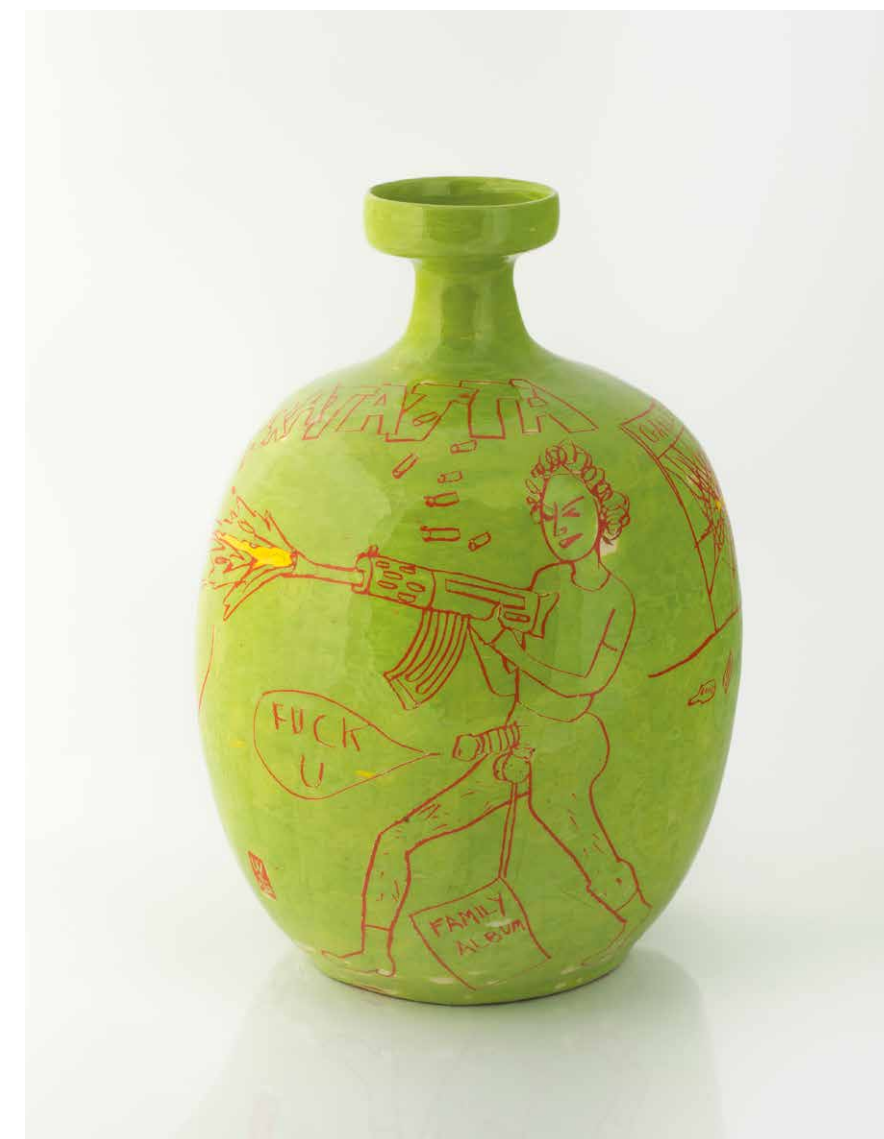
I recently co-curated an exhibition of work by Krisztián Frey at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest: my gallery acts as his representative, as it does for the bequest of another artist equally deserving of recognition, Katalin Hetey. The gallery is currently focusing on promoting the oeuvre of Orshi Drozdik. Born in 1946, her name is associated with the Hungarian conceptual art movement



both in Hungary and internationally, and with its golden age in the 1970s. The complexity of her art and her intellectual and technical erudition are significantly greater than the work of other artists in this area; since 1974, her authentic approach has given rise to an entirely idiosyncratic form of art that explores the relationship between institutionalised knowledge and the individual, which is unquestionably unique and ahead of its time.

**NT:** After the hiatus dictated by the pandemic, art fairs are back and collectors are traveling once again. For a gallery owner like yourself, located in Hungary where the collecting scene is limited, fairs offer a great avenue. How do you decide which cities to exhibit in and which fairs to attend?

**GE:** *Frieze Masters* has always been a dream of mine: I've been there every year since its inception; I love its scale, its diversity, and its quality. My new gallery may only have been open for a year, but I have thirty years of experience in the art market and thus had no hesitation about participating. I've attended the Paris Photo art fair on several occasions. Since Brexit, Paris has grown in importance for European galleries. I have many plans and we're still building and expanding the gallery in Budapest.



1.30.14.2



Orshi Drozdik: *Manufacturing the Self: The Pathological Body*, 1995, installation view, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest. Courtesy of the artist

Next spread: *I Whisper to My Past, Do I Have Another Choice*, installation view, 28 May – 15 September 2021, Einspach Fine Art & Photography, Budapest. Photo by Zoltán Tombor



An increasing number of renowned collectors have been coming to Hungary recently and the big galleries that play a determining role in the artistic canon are also paying more and more attention to the region. Works by Ilona Keserü, Dóra Maurer, Katalin Ladik, Imre Bak, and István Nádler can already be found in the collections of the Metropolitan, Tate Modern, and Centre Pompidou alongside their contemporaries from Western Europe and North America. Nevertheless, there are many other oeuvres originating from behind the Iron Curtain that are awaiting discovery and deserve a place in these galleries.

**NT:** Besides *Frieze Masters* and *Paris Photo*, Einspach Fine Art & Photography will attend *Viennacontemporary* in the autumn. Will you have a different stand at each fair? Or will you forge connections between the three?

**GE:** Vienna has become extremely important to me in recent years. I've spent a lot of time there and it's a city I love. Since photography continues to play an important part in the life of the gallery, I'll be presenting Zoltán Tombor's new series at *Viennacontemporary*. The monumental images that he produced in 2022 feature ethereal female figures with evanescent silhouettes. The naked figures bend and bow, tensing nerve and muscle. The hundreds of individual studio photographs form one enormous tableau. Because of their uniform format, identical model, and the homogeneity of their softening whiteness, they seem to form a sequential series, like Eadweard J. Muybridge's famous studies of motion. In Tombor's case, however, rather than analysing a single, natural sequence of movement using a timed camera, he gets

his nude model to pose inside the studio in front of an unfocused lens. The exhibitions in London and Paris are closely connected: at *Frieze Masters*, we're presenting one of the installations from a conceptual work produced by Orshi Drozdik in the 1980s, the series *Adventure in Technos Dystopium*, along with related materials. These works followed organically from the theoretical and practical working method developed by Drozdik in the 1970s. In 1984, Drozdik started to work on the feminist critique of patriarchal scientific discourse. First, she began to take photographs of objects displayed in different medical, science, and technological museums; then, in 1986, she created the persona of Edith Simpson, as mentioned earlier. Her research into the history of science resulted in a series of installations in which she offered a critical analysis of scientific representation and of the role of language in scientific practice. For Paris, we've made a selection of the photographs taken in the 1970s and 1980s by Drozdik. She became interested in appropriation photography in 1975. Her conceptual approach focused on the analysis and deconstruction of perspective in representation, drawing on her study of semiotics. In terms of her theoretical approach, Drozdik's idiosyncratic and autonomous critical feminist methodology was elaborated in Hungary, independent of "Western" and Anglo-Saxon feminism and post-feminism. Connecting the new media of the time – performance, performance-photography, photography, and appropriation photography – with writing and poetry, she shaped something entirely new in conceptual art: she explored patriarchy-centred representation, patriarchal art history, and art teaching, as well as the place and role of the individual in the arts from a female perspective.

**NT:** The art world has changed enormously in the last few years. I also get the impression that the last four years have been transformative for you as well, personally and professionally. Could you end by saying a few words about where you are now, and about your vision for the future?

**GE:** It was no coincidence that the new gallery's opening exhibition took its name from Tracey Emin's brilliant neon *I Whisper to My Past, Do I have Another Choice*. Emin's art, and this piece in particular, which was previously in private ownership in Hungary, are especially important to me. The world is changing, and as far as I can see, the process will become ever more radical. My own life has changed fundamentally in recent years. I've recovered from what is usually an incurable illness and I have a new partner in this new life of mine who has exceptional taste and with whom I can reflect and plan, even when it comes to the gallery. Together we're creating the kind of gallery that will not only be able to grow, but that is also adaptable to change. Central and Eastern Europe is one of the most exciting areas and there are still plenty of wonderful treasures awaiting discovery. Since a large part of the art market is now moving online, it has become less important whether the gallery operates in Budapest, Vienna, or even London in the future.

Translated by Rachel Hideg



Gallerist, consultant, and forensic expert **GABOR EINSPOCH** (b. 1967, Budapest, Hungary) has been working in the art trade for thirty years. He is the most employed forensic expert in Hungary in the field of culture. His clients include the National Tax and Customs Administration of Hungary, the Hungarian National Bank, the Supreme Court of Hungary, as well as international auction houses and galleries, among others. Besides advising institutions on collection building, he is a co-founder and the publisher of *Artmagazin*, a leading magazine on the Hungarian printed art journal market. Between 2014 and 2019, he managed Art+Text Budapest, which became a prominent for-profit gallery during its five years of operation, exhibiting at Artissima, Photo London, and Paris Photo. In 2021, he opened his new gallery in Budapest, Einspach Fine Art & Photography.

**NICOLA TREZZI** (b. 1982, Magenta, Italy) is a writer, educator, editor, exhibition maker, and, since 2017, director and curator of CCA Tel Aviv-Yafo in Israel. Prior to that, he was head of the MFA at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, and US Editor of *Flash Art International*. He has organized exhibitions at Kunsthau Baselland in Muttentz/Basel, Ujazdowski Castle CCA in Warsaw, Hudson Valley MOCA in Peekskill, NY, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, among others. His texts have been published in *artpress*, *artnet News*, and in catalogues of exhibitions held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the Israel Museum Jerusalem, Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm, and Newport Street Gallery in London. He has taught at the Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta; School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; and the Yale School of Art in New Haven, CT.

Péter Kóhalmi: MIKLÓS ERDÉLY

Miklós Erdély: *Armageddon* No. 8, 1982, paper, bitumen, graphite, glue, foil, and mixed media,  
70 x 100 cm. Photo by György Darabos. © Miklós Erdély Estate

Miklós Erdély (1928–1986) is one of the most prominent and influential figures of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, whose work has not been comprehensively monographed yet. This volume, the culmination of fifteen years of research by Péter Kóhalmi, aims to fill this gap. The attributes of this limited-edition, spectacular book include an open spine, blind-printed details and an edge-painted design on Munken Pure Rough 120 g/m<sup>2</sup> paper. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) and Einspach Fine Art & Photography supported the monograph's publication.

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Expected date of publication: 1 November 2022

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Order via email:  
info@einspach.com



Armageddon  
8.

## MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ: BROTHERS, 2010

Today, the *Brothers* have settled in the Collection of International Art after 1800 of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, with their bizarre bird's heads and raw jute canvas bodies. Previously, they sat around in the newly opened gallery space of Einspach Fine Art & Photography, perching atop a tall trestle, captivating the audience. They were created by Magdalena Abakanowicz, the fixed star of Polish post-war art and Europe's most famous sculptor east of the Iron Curtain. Not only did Abakanowicz play a vital role in the fibre art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but, as Ann Coxon, curator of the upcoming Abakanowicz retrospective show at Tate Modern in the autumn of 2022, claims, she is the godmother of installation art. Over a prolific half-century career, the Polish superstar traversed a wide range of expressive attitudes, from floating biomorphic abstraction (*Abakans*) to scattered groups of beanbag forms (*Embryology*), from roughly outlined dinosaur mutants (*Mutants*) to iconic human shell forms, deploying the ferociously raw material of rough jute canvas as a constant.

The work, entitled *Brothers*, presents a great example of how Abakanowicz depicted humans in her late career. The figure does not represent modern mass society getting lost in an undirected, existentialist void, of which the artist often stated that cruelty is inherent to the mob because it acts as a mindless organism. In the case of *Brothers*, we are not confronted by the mindless horde but by the proud, hubris-driven man, who, however pleased with himself, is ultimately an animal, a biologically determined entity. (He believes himself to be an individual but is inherently doubled.) He sits proudly on a high wooden trestle, his back straight, his hands behind his back, his head swollen. He doesn't find his eyes. A vast bird's beak protrudes in the place of his nose, distorting his face into an absurd spectacle similar to the pointed-nosed medical masks worn by Venetian doctors during the plague epidemics. A hybrid, sublime creature seeped in the tragedy of thrownness and biological determination, doomed to engage in social solitude.

/ Gábor Rieder



Opposite: Magdalena Abakanowicz: *Brothers*, 2010, burlap and wood, 225 x 125 x 65 cm. Photo by Dávid Biró. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Right: Magdalena Abakanowicz and her *Brothers* sculpture. Photo by J.Pijarowski



## GYÖRGY SEGESDI. SOC-MODERN AND HIGH-TECH

György Segesdi (1931–2021) was one of the most original artists in the field of modernist public sculpture which was at its peak in Hungary during the 1960s. His most famous work is the statue of Marx and Engels, which once stood at the Pest bridgehead of Margaret Bridge. Erected in 1971, it is a twin monument to the two great nineteenth-century teachers of socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The two bearded, prophetic figures were initially planned by Segesdi to be realised in chrome steel, but instead of this choice which was deemed too high-tech, the authorities allowed the work to be erected in the more classical raw material of Mauthausen grey granite in front of the Headquarters of the Party-State on the Danube bank. The result was a fascinating soc-modernist monument, a genuine curiosity within the Soviet sphere of interest, which evoked the constructivism of revolution-era Russia through the deployment of explicit cubist forms. Even though it was completed more than sixty years after the Parisian onset of cubism, Segesdi's work emerged as the perfect cubist monument. (Segesdi's compositional block of the two figures appears in the form of a wholly abstract chrome steel plate sculpture alongside the plaster bozzetto of the granite sculpture, giving the viewer an insight into his creative process: the sculptor was primarily interested in solving technical-formal issues, not the official ideology of Marxism.)

A year later, in 1972, Segesdi had the opportunity to install one of his welded steel plate sculptures on the campus of the University of Debrecen. Although the university park was a less exposed location than the Danube bank in the capital, it was still an important stepping stone: it was the first abstract sculpture to be

erected in a public square in Hungary, where nonfigurativity was a forbidden form of expression under the Soviet socialist realist doctrine. For Segesdi, a man of humble origins, educated after 1945 within the movement of the People's Colleges as a member of the "generation of bright winds" who, like in the Soviet song, not only waved the flag but also spun the entire world around – it was possible to cross over into the realm of abstraction, but the erected sculpture was not followed by any media coverage, only his monographer László Fábián makes sure to mention it as often as possible.

Segesdi's persistently experimental art was mostly based on the formal language of new constructivism, which was in contact with industrial modernism. His diverse oeuvre culminated in the industrial "futurism" of the 1970s: the geometric modernity of chrome steel shell structures polished to a chilling coolness. His monumental works, consisting of repeated curves encircling negative forms, are found in many places across the country, from the Novotel Hotel in Buda to the Tisza river's bank in Szeged and the spa in Hévíz. This aesthetic world and technological toolbox (sheet cutting, bending, edge welding) are evident not only in his public sculptures but also in his smaller-scale studio sculptures or his applied commissions, such as the decoration of the Anna Café in Pest. Segesdi introduced plexiglass into the toolkit of modern sculpture alongside polished, luminescent chrome steel but had also worked with more traditional materials, from bronze through porcelain to carved wood. He died in 2021, in his ninetieth year.

/ Gábor Rieder



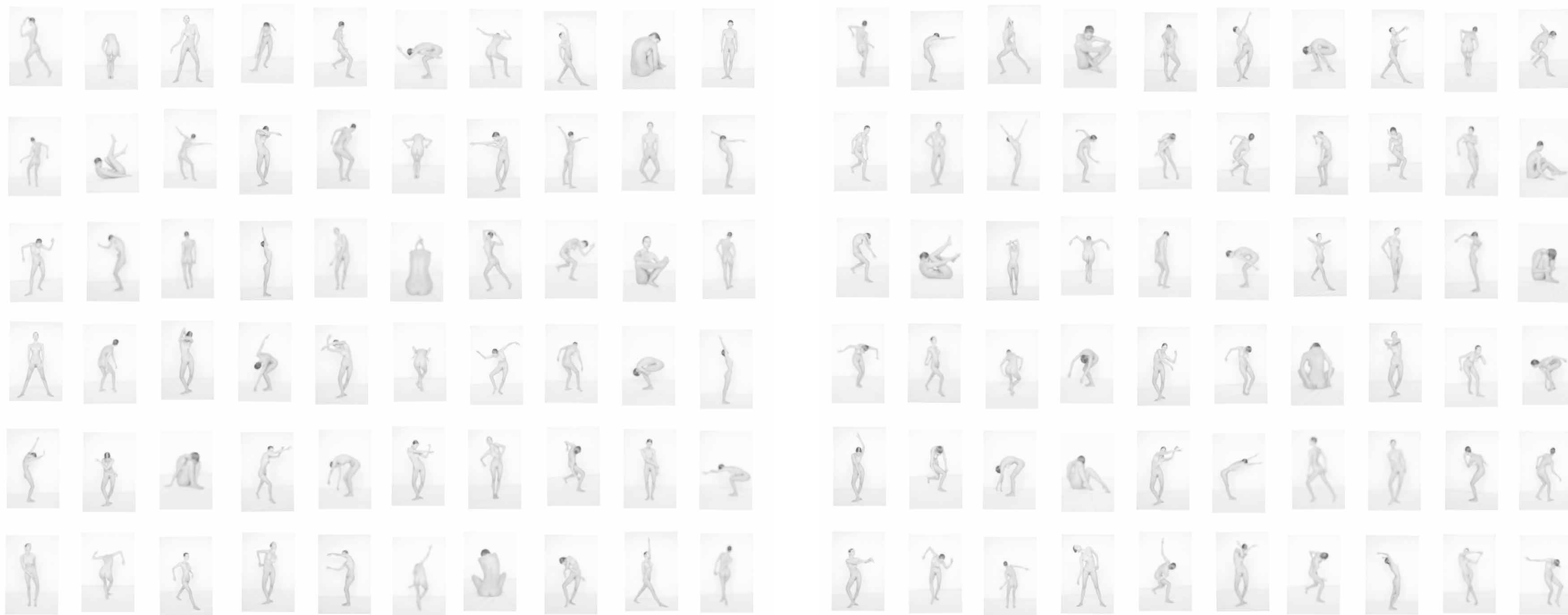
Previous spread (left): György Segesdi:  
*Metal Picture*, 1985 (detail), steel sheet  
on plexiglass, 69.5 × 100 cm.  
Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of  
Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Previous spread (right): György Segesdi.  
Photo by József Hapák. Courtesy of  
György Segesdi Estate

György Segesdi: *Curves*, 1981, stainless steel,  
24 × 16 × 8 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy.  
Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite: György Segesdi: *Marx and Engels*,  
1970s, plaster model on pedestal,  
height: 79 cm, and 154 cm with pedestal.  
Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of  
Einspach Fine Art & Photography





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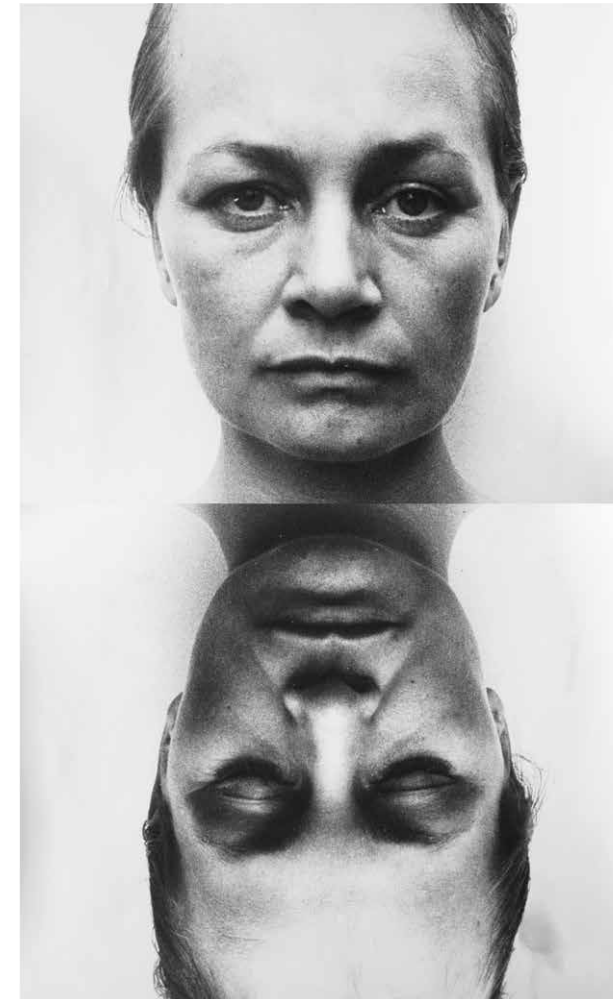
8–11 September 2022  
booth B8

Kursalon Vienna  
Johannesgasse 33, 1010 Vienna

In Zoltán Tombor's monumental 2022 photo series *Trouvaille*, airy, contourless female figures follow one another against a uniform white background in a milky-white fog. The nudes bend and stretch their tendons and muscle tones. The 120 separate studio shots are assembled into one huge tableau. Due to the uniform upright format, to the same model and to the uniform, all-softening whiteness it seems like a sequence series, like Eadweard J. Muybridge's famous motion studies. But Tombor does not analyse a natural sequence of movements with a timed camera, but sets his nude model among studio conditions. The slim, fragile female figure - in front of a blurry lens - loses its realism of detail, dissolving into an impressionistic haze like the nudes captured by early twentieth-century pictorialist photography.

Zoltán Tombor: *Trouvaille*, 2022, alu-dibond, 135.5 x 300 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP.  
Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

# Orshi



# Drozdik

(1946)



TÜNDE TOPOR:

A CONVERSATION WITH ORSHI DROZDIK

It was thanks to her that the female point of view became part of contemporary Hungarian art discourse in the mid-1970s, and she has continued to push this ever since, even incorporating it into her curriculum as an instructor at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts for many years. This interview, which focuses on the course of her life, maps the antecedents of all this, as well as the environment in which it emerged and the impacts and influences on her.

# We Painted Winterscapes in the Summer Garden

**Tünde Topor:** What kind of family did you grow up in? Was there an interest in art?

**Orshi Drozdik:** I had a beautiful and a very difficult childhood. Between the ages of six and ten, I helped my mother, Erzsébet Kockás, care for my father, Béla Drozdik, who was operated on by Dr. Pirot for a brain tumor and who was brought home from the hospital in a half-dead state after the operation. We cared for him for four years in the belief that not only were we keeping him alive, but that one day he would recover from his illness. This can be extremely strenuous for an adult, but it is even more so for a child. So, I grew up fast and developed a strong sense of responsibility, which has remained part of me throughout my life. Both my parents were educated people who were very fond of the periodical Nyugat (West). My father was born in 1902, for him, Nyugat captured the Zeitgeist, and he knew the literature of the circle of Nyugat very well. My mother was from Bratislava, more specifically she had been a deportee in accordance with the Benes Decree,<sup>1</sup> from Bratislava.

She was born in 1920, and for her, social issues and reform ideas were important, such as how to build houses for the poor, how one can feel free within the given circumstances, and the counter-movements of modernism, including the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. Later, as they belonged to the educated middle class, their property, as the property of a class enemy, was confiscated, and I grew up in an unfinished weekend house. They were both teachers, and as employees of the state, they were placed where there was a new job vacancy or simply a need. This is how my mother ended up in Abda, where my father started building the weekend house, and it was here that I was born, right after World War II. We had a large bookcase and lots of books, but only a few of the books were in the room, the rest we kept in boxes in the attic because many of them were indexed as banned at the time. Many of our books (in particular the Révai encyclopaedias) had slash marks on them because when the Russian soldiers had come looking for watches, the “bourgeois” books had been slashed up with a knife. For a child, the sight of the slashes on the backs of all the books was shocking.

This left a deep imprint on me. This was the environment in which I grew up: in a small village, living next to the train station. The railroad tracks ran along the edge of our orchard, and the two-story building of the station looked magical. Most of our games were tied to this building. When we played, we pretended to be American Indians. We would press our ears to the tracks to try to hear if the approaching train was near. We got in a lot of trouble because of that, and the station master grabbed us by the ear. We children were alone a lot of the time.

**TT:** When did you move away from Abda? As a secondary school student?

**OD:** I had already attended a school in Győr for the second half of my elementary school years, and then I went to Péterffy, a non-educational girls’ secondary school. The building of the primary school was on the bank of the Rába River, the place where the so-called gentlemen’s kiosk had been – it was here that even my father had come before the war to talk about literature and politics and to smoke his daily half-cigarette.

The dinner guests who came to my parents’ house were very erudite, they were Nyugat and Ady fans – then after the war some of them worked as night watchmen. They were not artists, just sophisticated consumers of culture for whom progressive ideas and the progressive mentality, which included feminism on my mother’s part, was important.

**TT:** Were you drawing at the time?

**OD:** I started drawing when my father died. My mother had figured this out very well, she was a very smart woman. There was not much talk about therapy at the time, but she knew about psychotherapy. I first wanted to be an actress, so they sent me to a dance school where I refused to learn the compulsory dances, I only knew my own dance, and so they said it would be a waste of time to try to teach such a child. I was also discouraged from learning to play the violin for exactly the same reasons, because I only played what I wanted to and I couldn’t learn what they put in front of to me. They also said I didn’t have a good ear, so I was also relieved because of that, but we both forced an artistic career.

When my father died, my mother put a bouquet of flowers in front of me. She placed it between two lilac bushes on the table where we had lunch on Sundays. We had a very beautiful, well-kept garden (my mother worked in it, today it would be labelled organic gardening). She said that if I wanted to be an artist, I should paint this bouquet, and she brought me oil paints. Later that same summer, in 1956, she brought a winter landscape. We had paintings in the house: among my father’s friends there had been amateur painters, and my father had also painted, using watercolours. My mother had a beautiful drawing instruction album which she herself had compiled. As for where this winter landscape came from in the middle of summer, I don’t know, but I had to copy it. She and I were painting the winter landscape together in the summer garden and suddenly she said, “child, I’m not as good at this as you are, do it alone!” Though I loved painting with her and she was every bit as deft as I, but she gave me an enormous amount of self-confidence with that one statement. In Győr, László Alekszovics had a drawing class in Baross Street, and I was about twelve years old when I started attending it after school. I received a lot of praise, but they didn’t give special attention to me separately, I stood on my little stool and drew. At home



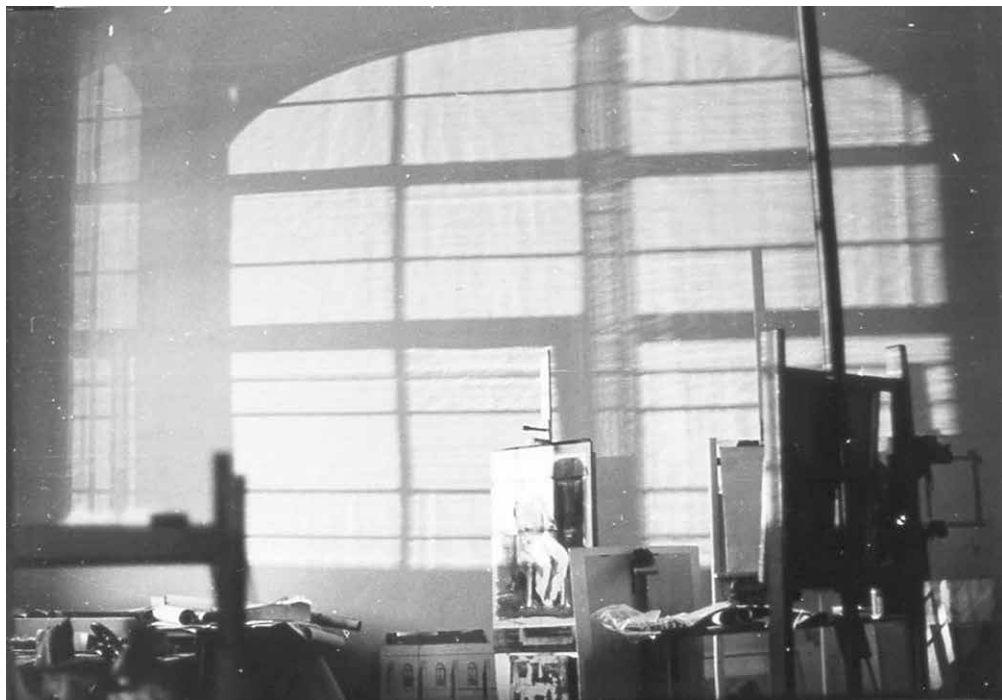
too I stood on my stool when I cooked – here too it was the same: a small child was given an adult job. Incidentally, this little stool was around for a long time; when my mother died in 1996, many such things reemerged. There were a lot of things I didn’t throw out because of the emotional attachment to her, I consider all of her objects as a bit part of my art, and her too. When my helpless father was dying on the foldout recliner, there was a long table next to him in the room which could accommodate fifteen people. My mother held dinners on a regular basis, there was always company in the house – even though poverty was dire and there was little of anything at home. My mother learned to cook from her aunt, grandma Pálffy, who was a well-educated and erudite woman with good taste and who knew everything there was to know about running a good household. And I too learned these same things from her. For example, when I was around ten or eleven years old, I learned how to stretch and tug the strudel dough on that big table. I associate this memory with the death of my father. My father died on 2 July 1956, yet I remembered a kind of autumn, September mood. Later, when I left Hungary, I cut these ties of memory.

**TT:** What was your relationship with your grandparents like? You mentioned that your mother had been displaced from Bratislava.

**OD:** The Pálffy family lived in Dunaszerdahely (Dunajská Streda, Slovakia), and we regularly visited Czechoslovakia, going through Komárom. My grandmother’s sister,

grandma Pálffy, kept the family together in the mansion, and she took great care that everyone speak Hungarian fluently and know Hungarian literature and history. The three of us children took Hungarian books across the Komárom footbridge. They were in very heavy packages, I remember how they pulled on my arms on both sides, but it was even harder for my little brother, who was five years younger than me. Grandma Pálffy set up school for family members in one of her rooms, and we would get a smack on our nails if we didn’t know a given Hungarian poem. My mother knew hundreds of poems by heart, and she would recite Ady while doing the laundry. I too would remember them for a long time, and writing has always been an important part of my art. But we also got Batya shoes over there, which were much better and more comfortable than what was available in Hungary. My father was a dandy before his illness. Even in our small apartment, we had at least three hundred shirts and twenty coats, beautiful garments, while the world around us seemed tiringly bleak and shabby. This wardrobe was an escape for me. When I was young, it frustrated me so much that I couldn’t have a wardrobe like that, well now I do, I have made up for it. In Abda, a seamstress worked in the station building, and my mother ordered things from her, we did not wear the garb from the 1 May Clothing Factory. So, we crossed over to Dunaszerdahely, but we never talked about it, or about what was said there. Even as a child, I knew that we shouldn’t talk about what we heard at home because it could get us into trouble.





“... when drawing female nudes, I realized that everything I drew resembled me. Every woman I drew looked like me.”

**TT:** When you began going to school in Győr, did the whole family move there with you?

**OD:** No, I took the train, which definitely teaches a child discipline. I wasn't particularly scattered-brained, but I was overwhelmed. My mother didn't say negative things to me except that, “child, you don't have a good memory, you can only be an artist, not a doctor.” She didn't know how emotionally burdensome it was for a child to help her helpless father every day, help wash his half-dead, waxy body. I had to overcome the repulsion that children viscerally have for disease and old age. She didn't know how much self-discipline this took and how much it affected my memory as well. If mom had given up and committed suicide, I would have had two younger siblings who I would have had to raise. I was terribly afraid of that. It wasn't until much, much later, when I was writing my short stories about this period, that all this came to my mind again. I remember that I had a middle alto voice and was delighted when I was accepted into the choir. Then they heard me singing out of tune and sent me away, even though I loved it. I remember the drawing classes most clearly from this period. Leó Békési, László Alekszovics and the painter from Győr, István Tóvári-Tóth, who always took his “ten” children with him in a small cart when he went to paint. I knew as a child that I would never have kids and I would never

drag them along with me when I went to paint. I felt sorry for my mother, too, for not being able to do what she wanted. She loved to write and read, but instead she was raising children at home and at school.

**TT:** Did secondary school signify an important of change?

**OD:** It was a completely different world. Female self-awareness develops in adolescence. They try to suppress it at the root with prohibitions and discipline, how one should sit, don't put your legs apart, don't do this, don't do that... I wasn't disciplined, I behaved very ladylike on my own. We had a sailor uniform in the girls' secondary school, and we did everything we could to decorate ourselves in some way, although I looked like a little girl even at the age of eighteen. I was enrolled in a dance school, and all the boys wanted to dance with me because there was “something special” in me, but I didn't let them get close to me. I had wanted to attend the Benedictine grammar school. They had a beautiful library that we were able to use. In the diocese of Győr, the Canon Somogyi<sup>2</sup> also tended to us, and he even allowed me to study art history in his library (I was the only girl who was permitted to visit the library to look at books). The rural intelligentsia joined forces to make sure children would not be neglected. I remember the amazing furniture, which I loved to stroke, and the books, which had

a sheet of tracing paper in front of each reproduction that one had to lift up. I was mesmerized by lithographs and fantastic paintings. I wasn't certain that I wanted to do this my whole life, but it was finally something beautiful that was meaningful to study. At school, we were taught that we don't have to remember things, while Benedictine high school students had to learn a lot of things by heart. That's what I wanted: I wanted to know everything, factually and data-wise. In the middle of Győr one finds the Benedictine church, next to the library and the school. I also liked the boys attending the Benedictine school. They were beautiful, muscular, confident, not as sloppy as the boys at Révai. There was a boy among them with whom I was in love, a tall, smart, handsome boy, his name was Feri. I always tried to be next to him, but he didn't really notice. How fortuitous that it happened that way. When I looked him up later, it turned out he had become a pharmacist. Anyway, everything regarding sexuality has changed. I would like to return to one of my childhood experiences, from when I was ten. To the experience of a drop of water, which I wrote as a short story. In the bathroom, we only lit the stove on weekends, and then we bathed in the tub one after the other because there wasn't a lot of hot water. One morning, I was standing in the cold bathroom naked to the waist in front of the washbasin in which we were washing, and the water was cold too.



Previous spread (left): Orshi Drozdik: *Blink and Sigh*, 1977, scan of black and white negative. Courtesy of the artist

Previous spread (right): Family photograph, Orsolya Drozdik with her father before his operation, 1952. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Situations*, 1976/1977, gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist

Orshi Drozdik: *Blink and Sigh*, 1977, gelatin silver print, montage of 7 test strips, 33 x 30 cm, 70 x 50 cm on mat. Courtesy of the artist

A drop of water broke loose on my back, and the little time it took to trickle down my back, a fraction of a minute perhaps, suddenly seemed very long. It gave me such a feeling of excitement that I thought about the sensation, and that was the first time that I thought I was a unique person and that was such an unusual feeling that I should devote my life to it. It was only much later that I was able to determine what it was. At that time, when I was in secondary school, we could not have sex openly, there was a lot of fuss about the whole thing. I lost my virginity at the age of seventeen perhaps, but I was only in love once. I didn't go out with boys, I didn't have a lot of sexual partners. Then I married relatively early, but only so we could sleep together, because the institution of marriage did not interest me then either, much as it has never interested me since. But that drop of water was the key to the feeling, and back then it preoccupied me a lot. Lacan and, before him, Freud describe this feeling of jouissance, pleasure and its possible cause very precisely. Perhaps it was this bodily feeling that led me deep into art. At the time, I didn't know how I was going to express it. I had to wait a long time for that moment to come. Perhaps it was animation that was my first attempt at this, but maybe I should look at my old drawings to see how I tried to approach this kind of corporality.

**TT:** Was this a conscious goal of yours all along? To keep the experience alive so that you could later capture it?

**OD:** There was a time when I didn't think about it, I forgot about it. I was a very good student, I wanted to learn everything. Learning is an exercise in which you learn what is written down, you don't express what you feel. I wanted to be all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-feeling – that was my ambition from the age of ten.

**TT:** When you graduated, did you already know where you wanted to go afterwards?

**OD:** Yes, I had prepared systematically for this career path ever since I had begun regularly attending drawing classes. For six years, I spent two or three afternoons a week there from 6:00 to 8:00. I met my first husband there, too. The other important thing was the theatre and the opera, which I could go to in Győr, because we didn't travel to Pest. And we read a lot. Not children's books, everyone looked down on storybooks, much as we looked down on children's games. At the age of ten, I read *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, only adult books. And at the age of twelve I read *Madame Bovary* – these female figures

became very important to me. But I also remember László Németh's *Égető Eszter* and the writings of Margit Kaffka. The whole family, incidentally, was a fan of Margit Kaffka, she was the first feminist appreciated by Ady. "Let us be glad that feminism has arrived in Hungary," he wrote in praise of Margit Kaffka in the journal *Nyugat*. We had a copy of this issue and a few issues from the journal *Woman and Society*. My mother considered this important. I really liked the short stories by Margit Kaffka. *Colours and Years* was too complicated for me back then, I didn't understand women's pains yet, but I saw what was happening to my mother. She could have been easy prey, and she longed for love as a young widow, but she promised my father at his grave that she would not encumber their children with a stepfather. She sewed us a raw silk dress with a black velvet stripe for the funeral. It was beautiful, and the touch of silk was so soothing. In any case, we were horrified by this vow. Many people courted my mother, and I also saw that she was in love many times, but whether she went so far as to have a sexual relationship with any of them, I don't know. And I didn't have a chance to ask later. In 1956, after the death of my father, György Borsodi, who was a high-ranking military officer before the war and a handsome man and who emigrated during the revolution,

asked for her hand. I really wanted him to be my second father, but my mother turned him down. She didn't go to the West with him. When the prison in Győr was opened, where half of our relatives had been held as political prisoners, everyone set off for the border. They just kissed their relatives goodbye and left the country through the swampy part of Lake Fertő (Neusiedler See). We watched as our acquaintances, our friends, who not long ago had sat at our table reciting Ady, left. I still cry when I think about it. We cried then too. Mother locked us in the apartment, only once did we manage to escape through the window to see what was happening in the world. She had to teach. In any case, Borsodi had wanted to go to England with her. He reached England and then Alaska, from where our first IKKA<sup>3</sup> packages arrived. Back then, those who had fled were able, after a while, to send packages to their families. We got clothes from him that could only be seen in Hollywood movies. At the time, we saw Mari Törőcsik in films, and she did not resemble Hollywood beauties. Thus, it was easy for me – because this gave me confidence. Teenage girls today, poor things, are forced to measure themselves against exquisite beauties, undoubtedly it is much harder for them. So, receiving these clothes was a miracle. It reminds me of a performance: in the winter of 1956 or 1957, in Abda, so in

the village, the children went from house to house performing the Nativity scene and in exchange they were given pastries, strudel, Christmas candy or money. I also wanted to go, and I arranged it so I could join them, but only so that I could play the part of the Virgin Mary and wear the beautiful, shiny silk robe that only someone like Katalin Karády could have worn. I pestered my mother to death to alter it for me. It was thick white silk. Only white silk is beautiful to me. Like light in baroque paintings. I remember it was tight around my slender waist, and I marched proudly in it because we did it with great solemnity. The boys carried the manger, which they had made at school, but I really only remember my own role and my clothes. Afterwards, I played theatre in this white silk dress for a long time, and they sat on the stairs and watched from there.

**TT:** We were talking about how you prepared systematically for your career. How did your university entrance exam go?

**OD:** At that time, people from the rural towns and villages were all called peasants by some of the people living Budapest. My mother raised me to have respect for peasants, and I found it offensive that someone would look down on them. As for someone

living in the countryside, it was difficult to get accepted to the Academy. By then, I was a married woman. László Szombathelyi, my husband, was two years older than me. We applied together, but they didn't accept us the first time around. Perhaps we may not have been able to prepare as effectively as fellow applicants living in Budapest who studied with Lajos Luzzicza in Fő Street.<sup>4</sup> I had nice but modest drawings, although I drew lines very purposefully, but the whole thing was not spectacular. My husband was facing having to enlist in the army, but just then the teacher training program of Szeged announced an additional opportunity for admission for people wanting to study Hungarian and drawing at a satellite location of the teachers' training program. We quickly applied and were admitted, and so we studied in Szolnok for two years. In the third year, we were sent to Fegyvernek to teach in a school with twelve grades. They offered us a service apartment in the building of the day care, but we had to borrow money to buy furniture. That's where we taught anyone in the village who was interested in learning how to paint and draw. Occasionally, we got party directives telling my husband to shave his beard and me not to wear miniskirts – the police sometimes looked through our curtainless windows to keep an eye on what was going on inside. I have a lot of stories from this time.



I looked very young as a teacher too, younger than my age, and the big failed teenage boys all sat in the back row. They ogled me. They wanted to embarrass me, but they themselves were also embarrassed. I taught drawing. There were objects which we could use as subjects for still lifes in the equipment room, including a skull. The boys said they had a better one at home and they would bring it in, and soon they showed up with two. I didn't think twice about it until one day women came menacingly towards me across the schoolyard. They called me out and held me accountable, asking what I was thinking by encouraging the boys to rob graves. It turned out that the skulls had indeed been taken from the cemetery and then cooked in a cauldron at home. That had been their affectionate gift to me. I was very unprepared for the whole experience, this strange slice of reality, because until then, even if I didn't necessarily live in a bubble, I still felt like I knew my place. In any event, at a certain moment we decided to lock up the apartment quickly, and we left all our belongings there, pocketed the key, and came to Budapest. All our belongings that we left were taken, our paintings, our furniture. But there was no other way of getting out of that situation. The following year was terrible, we moved from sublet to sublet, until we finally rented a room in Téglagyár Square 3. Sometimes I went home late at night, once I even had to exchange blows, because some men wanted to rape me, this neighbourhood of Csepel was not safe. I taught at the school in Lenhossék Street, László made a living by working in a plastic moulding shop on Baross Street, but in the meantime, we also attended the drawing course held by Lajos Luzsicza. It seemed that my teachers were in love with me and wanted to separate me from László, whom I considered much more talented than myself. But they saw the world from a phallic point of view, and I was absolutely aware of this and despised them for it. In Zebegény, the sculptor József Somogyi held a summer course, and he thought I was talented and beautiful (although he likened a woman's butt to a horse's ass). He said he would do everything to get me accepted to the Academy, but I stipulated that I would either go with my husband or not at all. He was very surprised by this, but in the end, László and I were both accepted that year. A nice circle of friends formed at Luzsicza's, that's where I met Péter Forgács, Tamás Eskulics, and Károly Kelemen. We went to parties together, to Kex concerts, also held in Fő utca. There was a lot

of joie de vivre in the air, and I felt good, as I had always longed for precisely this freedom.

**TT:** Whose class did you attend at the Academy? Who was your master teacher?

**OD:** Szilárd Iván. I was accepted to the painting department, I transferred to the graphic arts department in my third year because I was badgered to death in the painting department. I couldn't paint a Titian, I've been capricious, determined, and independent, since I was a child, but I also had more self-discipline, also due to my upbringing, than anyone around me. Few people were accepted, and the majority of my fellow students were from Budapest, and I was very hostile to the selection process. It was a privilege to attend the Academy, and from the very outset I was given a high scholarship because I almost always got straight A's. I had a good visual memory, I remembered everything professor Krocsák<sup>5</sup> drew on the board in geometry class too. It killed the boys, who actually understood geometry. They were so envious. I went to the blackboard, closed my eyes, and recalled how and where it was drawn on the board, where "a" had been, where the lines had run – I had memorized the whole thing as a fanciful composition (I didn't understand it, I wasn't really interested in it, only later did what I had learned there become important). I drew the lines, wrote the formulas, and didn't even have to say anything because I was already given the highest mark. So, I was a good student. I would be sitting on the stairs at 7:00 in the morning, going in with the cleaners, and I was one of the last people to leave the building in the evening. For seven years I lived in Herman Ottó Street, in the dormitory of the Academy of Applied Arts, first in a room with seven others and then with three other people, while my husband was put in the dormitory on Budafoki Road. Our marriage was ruined. Despite my best efforts, I wasn't able to get a simple apartment. Poverty mingled with extreme vulnerability. I was a restless, girly character, but with a great sense of responsibility. András Halász always said that you can fool around with all the girls, except Orshi, because she supports herself and knows what she wants (incidentally, he was not a macho man in a bad sense). I attended the Academy for seven years while also working for Interpress.<sup>6</sup> At night, I drew and transferred Letraset letters to photos – if I remember correctly, I was paid one forint for every word, I saved money to buy an apartment to see if I could keep my

life together. Meanwhile, the boys went off gallivanting and drinking – not that I never went along. Because I was also giddy and when I got paid at the end of the month and my pockets were full, I was my grandfather, the gentry, who generously threw money around – which the boys of course found attractive. I really liked spending money, so when I would go home, my mother immediately emptied my pockets and placed the money in a savings account in my name. She had remarried by then and had moved to Budapest while I had been living in a dormitory. There was a lot of rivalry at the Academy. I was the first to receive the Béla Kondor scholarship, which was a large sum at the time, 1,000 forints monthly – and my scholarship was also that much. (By comparison, my mother, after forty years of teaching, made about 3,000 forints a month.)

**TT:** Who were your classmates?

**OD:** András Halász, Károly Kelemen, and Mariann Kiss in the graphic arts department, András Koncz, Gyuri Fazekas, Zsiga Károlyi, Dénes Bogdány, and Ernő Tolvaly in the painting department, Zuzu (Lóránt Méhes) in the restoration department. I felt that I had an affinity with Zsiga, as a student, perhaps because his father was disabled. He was a fragile student, but he became a tough adult. Ákos Birkás was older, he had graduated and was already teaching somewhere else when we went there. Deep friendships were formed.

**TT:** This is the period of the Rose Café...

**OD:** Yes, but also the period before it. The Rose grew out of these friendships.<sup>7</sup> I have always felt, even in the case of the lodgings I was given at the dormitory, that someone was keeping an eye on me. This is discernible in my entire fate. I had enormous undertakings, some were even life-threatening, and somehow, I always managed to pull it off. I'm not afraid. As children, we were not allowed to be afraid, and we were not allowed to complain or cry either. "If you cry, no one will feel sorry for you, solve your own problem..." I didn't have very many friends as a child, just some imaginary foreign friends under the burdock leaf with whom I chatted in Chinese and English. My mother would tell me while cooking, "But there was no one there, don't you understand? Those are imaginary people... why, you speak Chinese?" I argued with her and pretended to speak in a language. My contemporaries did not befriend me, in part because I was much

more educated than them and in part because I had to behave like an adult from an early age. I did not play. And later, at the Academy, it was the same. I would get in with the boys and then fall back into my own role.

These relationships were very strange. Once, as I was going home alone at night, the boys followed me, and one of them grabbed me from behind, shook me and said, "you're neither pretty nor smart, so what do they like in you?" I countered by saying, "but you're also following me..." I think it was my determination that was appealing. Miklós Erdély also wanted to pick me up in Szép Ilonka, he was in love with me for a long time. I think (but maybe I'm wrong) it was with him that I first went to see Béla Kondor, of whom he was a big fan. It must have been around 1972, Kondor was considered a very avant-garde figure at the time. He committed suicide while I was still in college. He was drunk, but he spoke fluently and cleverly about literature, books, and mythology, just like people in my family. He could have been a father figure. This pitiful, drunken talent lived in an inner world that was infinitely interesting. His art has since declined in value because his drawings can be very strongly tied to a style that was revered under socialism, the etching. When Erdély first came to see me at the Academy and I was making etchings, he said of mine that it was like they had been drawn by Béla Kondor. Erdély always knew how to stab someone in the heart – something that I latter labeled an avant-garde technique because from then on, a dialogue would begin, because whoever is stabbed in the heart is forced to explain him or herself. I myself never thought that my drawings had anything to do with Kondor. There was a saying back then which I always just laughed at – that talented people didn't have to work. My mother had told me that if you want to be an artist, you have to be famous, look in the encyclopaedia, that's where the famous artists are. I was ten at the time. I looked in the art history book, which had been translated from German in the 1930s. It had beautiful pictures, but there were no women in it. Well, my mother said, then you have to work extra hard, because there's another factor: you're poor. That was a pretty good lesson. So that's where we were: Erdély likened my etchings to Kondor's – a comparison which stabbed me in the heart – but that's where our dialogue began. This really was everyone's method this was the avant-garde macho method. To say "give the chicks hell" – that was the basic slogan, and that talented people didn't have to work. I thought the opposite.

"I was convinced that the basis of feminism was free dance, and I based my own feminism on that as well."



Previous spread (left): Orshi Drozdik: *Blink and Sigh: Blink*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 3 pcs, 48.6 x 70.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Previous spread (right): Orshi Drozdik: *Blink and Sigh: Sigh*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 3 pcs, 48.2 x 70.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist

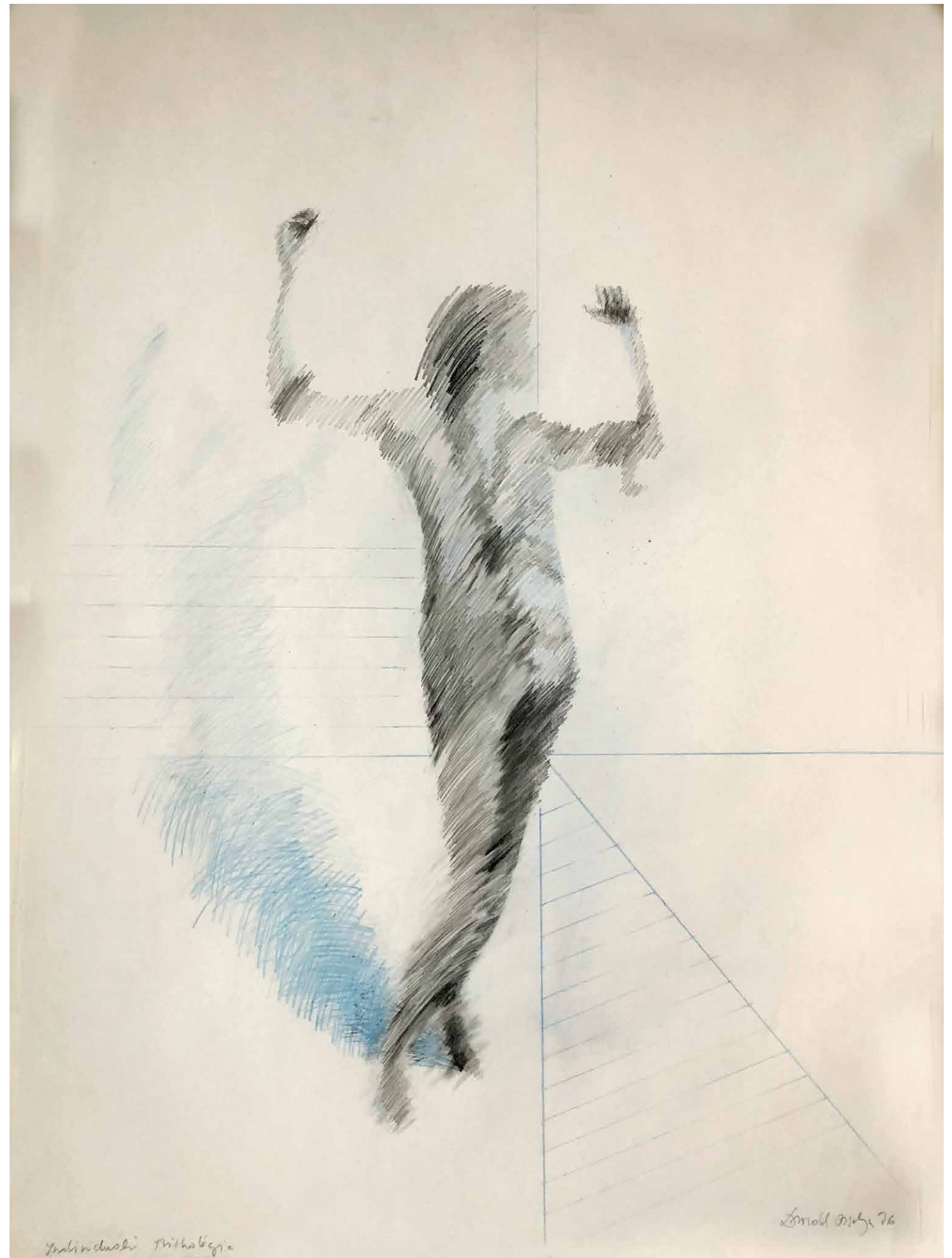
Left: *Water and Communication* event organised by the so-called Rózsa-kör (Rose Circle). Orshi Drozdik's performance: *Playing Cards in Water*, 11 April 1976, Rózsa Café, Budapest. Photo by András Zaránd (?). Courtesy of Artpool Art Research Center, Budapest

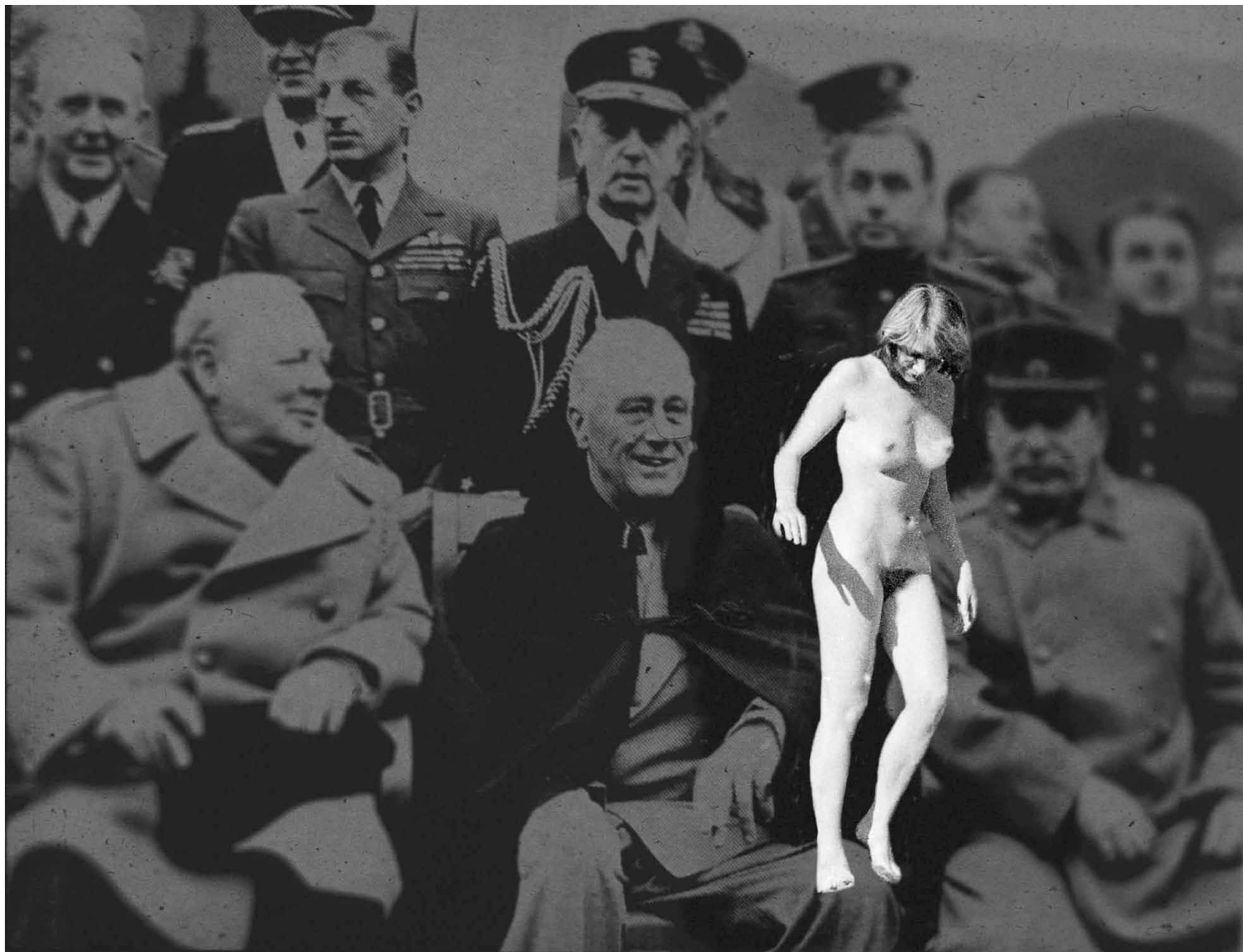
Below: *Water and Communication* event organised by the so-called Rózsa-kör (Rose Circle). Orshi Drozdik in the right bottom corner, 11 April 1976, Rózsa Café, Budapest. Courtesy of the artist

Next spread (left): Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology V: I Erase Myself*, 1976, erased drawing, pencil on paper, 84.2 x 59.6 cm, 100 x 70 cm on mat. Courtesy of the artist

Next spread (right): Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology V: I Erase Myself*, 1976, erased drawing, pencil on paper, 84.2 x 59.6 cm, 100 x 70 cm on mat. Courtesy of the artist







Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Yalta*, 1977/2013, gelatin silver print, 30 x 36 cm, and also other print sizes. Courtesy of the artist

Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: At the Lenin Statue*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm, and also other print sizes. Courtesy of the artist

Things were slowly changing, but at the beginning, when Gábor Bódy and Erdély visited me in the studio, this was the general view. This was something that was taking form there, in that political environment, a kind of sabotage, self-sabotage – my hand-drawn animation *The Line* grew out of this friendship with Bódy. These were loves, or infatuations on their part. I'm talking about the school years of 1974/1975/1976.

**TT:** Where was your studio at the time?

**OD:** Károly Raszler thought I was talented, and so, together with Aladár Almásy (who was a year ahead of me), we were given a large studio, a room which is now used by twenty people. Imre Szemethy also came and worked there occasionally, but then he graduated. It was a large room with high ceilings, and the windows looked onto the

Specialty Confectionary<sup>8</sup>. I loved working there. I made several hundred etchings there. My fingers were covered with acid, I smoked two cigarettes at once, not noticing that I hadn't even put out the first one. I was pretty giddy and probably extremely exhausted too, because for about ten years I just gutted myself. I slept for three or four hours a day, just so I could fit everything into my day. It must have been visible at the time.

**TT:** Tell me a little about Bódy. How did the two of you meet?

**OD:** He was a magical personality. He was the genius on duty, everyone looked at him that way. He was beautiful and ugly at the same time – like the devil. A beautiful devil. He was full of evil energy. Beauty, compassion, and judgment were in an eternal struggle inside him.

We went all over the place. When he started filming *American Anzix* in 1975, he came into the dormitory at night and fell asleep drunk in the bathroom, under the shower. He had waited for me to wake up, but the girls had closed the door in order to let me sleep for at least three hours after transferring letters. For fun, we went to the Budapest Hotel, the Circular Hotel, many times, which had a café at the top. And mainly to the Young Artists' Club, then to house parties, Kex concerts, performances, lectures on semiotics by János Zsilka, and the movies. At that time, nothing seemed expensive, and compared with the others, I always had money. I greatly admired Miklós Erdély, who lived in amazing luxury. He was smart, he had a nice garden, a beautiful house, and he could travel abroad – but that was an exception then. Bódy lived in poverty, almost like me, alternately moving in with his mother or with his father.

But Erdély was an old man, while Bódy and I were contemporaries and I was happy to hang out with him. I didn't think of the two of us as a couple, we were friends, but every moment was enjoyable with him. He was making his *Film Language* series for television at the time. He asked me too to do the drawing for one of them, but the etching technique I used interested and irritated him at the same time. The copper plate was covered with soot and the lines were etched into that. In his 1976 series on the language of film,<sup>9</sup> my animation *The Line*, which I drew in the style of an etching, similarly to a line etched into the film, appears in connection with the technique of photogram. It was my idea to turn the drawings from negative to positive. By then, I was already enlarging my photos at the Academy in the lab of the graphic designer students, and I was interested in the relationship between the negative film and positive image. No one understood what I was doing, but this has been the case since I was a child, I am used to keeping my

ideas to myself. People around me could only see the technique, they had no inkling of the meaning. They did not connect it with feminism or Valéria Dienes, Margit Kaffka, Madame Bovary, or Simone de Beauvoir – whose books I had read, as my mother had copies of them. Something was starting to stir a little again – but the proponents of the feminism that existed in Hungary between the two world wars were considered class enemies, and the feminism itself was seen as a middle-class, bourgeois thing at the time and thus was censored. At the same time, it was very good that there was a kind of political program of equality between the sexes, social equality that was taught, and that everyone knew, but it was not really built into practice. At the Academy, only the sports teacher and Russian language teacher were women. Most women at the time, who had aspirations for a career and had strong egos, cultivated a male ego within themselves. As far as I recall, more than anything, they looked down on feminism. Erzsébet

Schaár and Piroska Szántó were present and were politically supported as female artists. Erzsébet Schaár was important for me. But they were more like women artists and not "feminists," like Valéria Dienes in dance, who had emphasized the differences between the sexes, in the ways of thinking, producing and in the manners of expressing themselves.

**TT:** How did your relationship with moving and showing your body begin? How did the idea to use your body occur to you?

**OD:** After the water drop experience, through my acting performances in my childhood and then when drawing female nudes, I realized that everything I drew resembled me. Every woman I drew looked like me. My body looked like theirs. But I was prepared for this by my readings. If you read Margit Kaffka as a teenager, you know that women think and feel differently.

**TT:** But to start showing your own naked body, that was a big leap from this, to stand there naked yourself...

**OD:** Two things contributed to this. One was that in 1975 I started photographing, the photographs of the nude model studies in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, and I prepared them to exhibit. (I only partly succeeded in doing this because you weren't allowed to use photos in the graphics department.) I printed the photos myself and used them as my own photos. The other series I had prepared that year I also photographed at the library of the Academy, I photographed photos of free dancers, which I collected, researched, and also exhibited. I had the negatives developed and did the printing myself in the photo lab of the applied graphics department.

I studied semiotics in the Hungarian Department during my linguistic studies, more precisely, the instruction of Hungarian linguistic studies was based on semiotics. Gábor Bódy also adopted this approach. This was incorporated into my critical analytic feminist method, in my research on meaning, the relationship between the signifier and the signified was very important. That's why I started working with photos, and I discovered the same thing when drawing nudes, that they all looked like self-portraits, that every drawing looked more like me than the model. I drew myself as self-portraits of my psychological states in my etchings. Even if they resembled Kondor's drawings and etching techniques, compositions, my intention was very different, he created mythology, while I expressed my own emotional story in my etchings.

In 1975, Iván Vitányi did an interview with Valéria Dienes<sup>10</sup>, after the first conference on semiotics was held in Hungary, in Tihany, and Valeria Dienes participated as a lecturer on semiotic studies. For the first or second occasion, Umberto Eco was even invited, about whom I already knew that he connected philosophy with semiotics. I truly believed that the search for meaning and reading signs connected to a philosophy. In my feminism, I meant to raise emotions to a philosophical level, and semiotics was the key to this. But this wasn't just in my head. Now, when I watch the Bódy film again, in the section when he talks about media, the interoperability between media, it's as if I were listening to myself. Maybe we all heard these ideas together back then, we went to a lot of places together. He took me to György

Lukács's apartment too. Bódy was a magical figure. He was in a rivalry with everything, everyone, philosophers, artists. Once, after he had just returned from England, he howled in front of the dormitory, like a wolf. I instantly recognized his voice. He wanted to discuss how he wanted to be like Fassbinder, enthusiastically recounting what Fassbinder was doing. This was already in 1976, when I participated with my animated drawings, in his educational TV film. We read Heidegger in a Marxist critical edition, but we crossed out the critical dogma and read only the quotes from the original text. And we read Wittgenstein, too.

**TT:** Which of the people who were artists, strictly speaking, did you respect at the time?

**OD:** Valéria Tóth. You don't know who she is, do you? I don't know what happened to her. She was a wonderful painter. Like me, she also went to Iván Szilárd's class in the Painting Department. She had a strong sense of the personal, the female point of view like me. Her colours... but everything she did made me swoon. I stood behind her and thought how amazingly talented she was and that I was not like her. But I also thought that I was going to make it and she couldn't. There is fragility in every born talent (especially in women). My theory is that secondary talents pursue careers because they want to make up for something. Those whom I saw as being very talented when I was young have (almost) all disappeared. Even now, I have friends who I consider super talented, and I think what a shame that she's raising a child. "In order to have a career in art, one must work hard and in a focussed manner," my mother told me that when I was ten years old, "you have to be in the art history books." I haven't forgotten that.

**TT:** I would like to return to the question we have deviated from, that is, what was the push that made you turn to your own body as a medium after making etchings?

**OD:** Do you mean the performances? Yes, that's why I mentioned Valéria Dienes. I learned about her lectures on orchestics, choreography of dance movements from the aforementioned Vitányi interview. The fact that a philosopher-mathematician was both a semiotic linguist and a free dance choreographer and teacher and a movement-

school founder - that blew me away. I was so angry at the world that this genius was censored and only rediscovered in Hungary at the age of 94-96. How could she have been forgotten for so long? Will this be my fate too? I immediately went to see her so I could learn everything I could from her. Philosophers say that you can only learn what you already know. What she told me then I already knew at the level of intuitions, conjecture, but the way she was able to put it all together gave me incredible support. That was the moment when I was able to connect the feeling of the water drop running down my back to what she knew. That she connected philosophy with orchestics. Connecting feelings to intellect. Body to consciousness. Her husband had simply left her with the children for one of his students. I had a very strong compassion for women - but I am especially able to relate to self-fulfilling, talented women.

That year, I also saw a film about Isadora Duncan which made me realize that this was my destiny. In the film, there is a scene in which she dances half naked in front of Russian soldiers. One can imagine these poor Russian boys being locked up in an institution with all their sexual fantasies, banging their heads against a wall or I don't know what they were doing to lower their testosterone levels. And then there's this beautiful woman (who wasn't actually as beautiful as she was passionate), it was a sexual provocation in and of itself. But it wasn't the challenge that unfolded in this scene that caught my attention, but the self-awareness, the very deep bodily self-awareness that revealed itself in her body. I was convinced that the basis of feminism was free dance, and I based my own feminism on that as well. But it is not dance, or performance, but the liberation of the body that matters, and it is this level of body awareness from which art can be made. I knew this already, but in 1975 - I always say that I am an artist with a destiny - when I was just about to make all this into art, it was inspirational, and it gave me a strong boost. Examples, role models for performance. (Which was also called body art at the time.) My greatest inspiration, my ideal was my mother, but these women were brilliant, and I regret that my mother was not able to accomplish what she wanted to achieve. But that was a different time.

The present interview was first published on Artmagazin Online on 2 December 2020.



Orshi Drozdik: *Double*, 1979-1980, video stills, gelatin silver print, 21 x 29 cm. Courtesy of the artist

- 1 In August 1945, Benes issued a constitutional decree on the revision of Czechoslovak state citizenship for persons of German and Hungarian ethnicity, denying them citizenship. Their property was confiscated and they were forced to leave with nothing more than a suitcase weighing no more than 25 kilograms.
- 2 Antal Somogyi (Abda, 1892 - Győr, 1971), Catholic priest, art historian, private university teacher
- 3 IBUSZ Foreign Commercial Action, an institution in the People's Republic of Hungary through which people living in the West could send packages to friends and family living in Hungary.
- 4 Today: Ferenczy Visual Workshop
- 5 Emil Krocsák was head of the Academy's Geometry Department until 1975
- 6 Interpress Publishing and Printing Company
- 7 The name Rose Circle refers to a group of artists who attended the Academy of Fine Arts in the first half of the 1970s, as well as other youths with an avant-garde mindset who joined them and who were active participants in fluxus experimental? conceptual? exhibitions hosted at the nearby Rose Café and other similar venues in 1975 and 1976.
- 8 It went by this name at the time. Before and after this, it was called the Lukács Confectionary. Later it was purchased by a bank which doesn't run it anymore.
- 9 Film School 3/1: *On the Tools of Film and Photography*, Hungarian Television, 1976
- 10 Valóság [Reality], issue 1975/8



# Performances by Orshi Drozdik in the 1970s

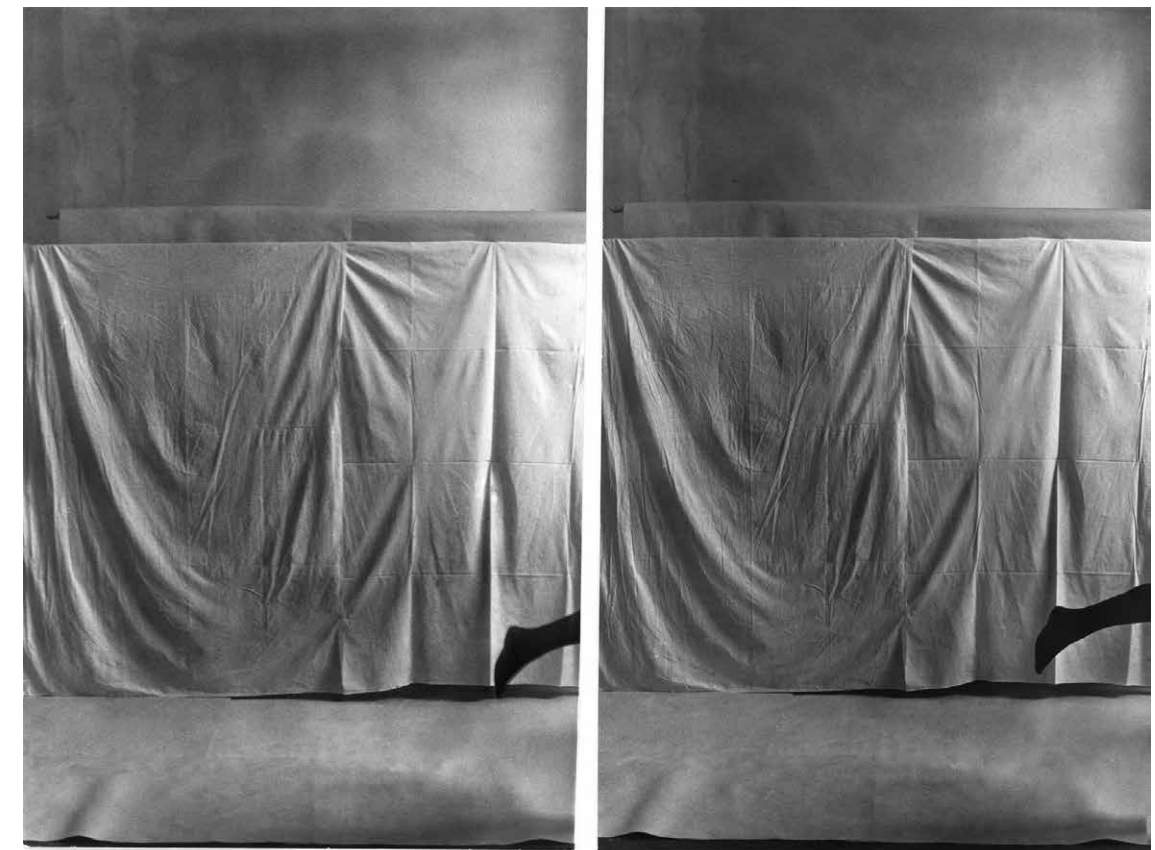
Individual Mythology  
(1975-1977)

Nude Model  
(1975-1977)

Pornography  
(1978-1979)

Supplement edited by Lilla Lipusz

The texts are from the book *Adventures in Technos Dystopium: Orshi Drozdik, The First Two Decades (1973-1993)*, edited by John C. Welchman, Distinguished Professor, University of California, and expected to be published by MER. B&L in 2023.





Previous spread (left): Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, performance, András Lengyel playing on harmonica and Péter Sarkadi playing on mouth harp, gelatin silver print, 14 x 9 cm, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest. Courtesy of the artist

Previous spread (right): Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, performance, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 2 pcs, each 14 x 9 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Left: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, gelatin silver print, 30.2 x 24 cm. Courtesy of the artist



## INDIVIDUAL MYTHOLOGY (1975-1977)

In 1975, I chose the title *Individual Mythology* for a new series of works I was planning. *Individual Mythology* was a complex series both in terms of the media and the techniques involved. I made performances that, in most cases, were meant to produce photography, then I enlarged black-and-white gelatin silver prints from the negatives, and later on, I selected a number of photos to have green, blue, red, and purple offset series printed in a Budapest printing house. In connecting individuality to mythology, I wished to express my point of view, the woman's point of view, to convey a criticism about patriarchal art history and introduce the female voice into the art-historical discourse. Excepting mythology from its universal patriarchal reminiscences

(especially in reference to Joseph Beuys's myth-making and Harald Szeemann's 1972 concept of *Individual Mythologies*, as well as Piero Manzoni's manifesto for his exhibition at the Galleria Pater in Milan in 1957, in which he discussed individual mythology versus universal mythology), I was shaping my own mythology through my thoughts and female-self-image. *Individual Mythology* was my *ars poetica*, which I continued reinterpreting as a definition of my artistic work for twenty years.

Orshi Drozdik, Postscript in *Sétáló agyak [Strolling Brains]* (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 1998); translation from the Hungarian, with a minor addition in 2020.



Orshi Drozdik:  
*Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976,  
 gelatin silver print,  
 25.4 x 20.3 cm.  
 Courtesy of the artist

## Individual Mythology: Free Dance (1975–1977)

/ Eight performances at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest, with slide and photo projections

/ Photographic series, comprised of:

- 1 Appropriated photography (rephotography)  
 Photographed photographs, mostly of well-known dancers, from books on the modern dance movement I found in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts
- 2 Photographs taken during my dance performances  
 In the performance I imitated the steps and free dance movements of dancers associated with the dance movement
- 3 Photographs taken during my performances with projected images  
 I projected the appropriated photographs and slides made during previous performances onto my dancing body
- 4 Photographs manipulated in the darkroom  
 In the photo lab of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, I manipulated my negatives by overlaying them – mixing images of my own dancing body with appropriated photo negatives of the dancers

I started to make performances for the purpose of creating photography. *Individual Mythology: Free Dance* was an attempt to connect my work to the modern free dance movement which I had discovered in books, with their photographs of female free dancers, in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts. I was intrigued by the connections between free dance and early Hungarian and Eastern European feminism. The only way I could conceive to unfold my interests was to imitate and restage the movements of the dancers I saw in the photographs. The first four performances took place in the fall semester, 1975, and were very casual and loosely mimetic. The black-and-white photos were taken during the performance and printed afterwards. The experience of making the very first performance helped me learn how to develop the work. For the fifth and the sixth performances in the spring semester, 1976, I used the photos of the dancers

I had appropriated. Performed in the large studio at the Graphics Department, with the assistance of fellow students and friends, these performances were better organized. The audience was mainly drawn from students in the Graphics Department, some from other departments at the Academy and a few students from other universities, including the Hungarian College of Applied Art, the Hungarian Theater and Film Collage, and Eötvös Loránd University, who showed up by word of mouth. Some photos were made using a release cord, others taken by fellow students and friends who had cameras (to whom I gave the film). Cameras were still uncommon and expensive at that time, so only a very few students or their families owned one. I offered what I view as an important declaration at this time: “all images made of my body and my performances are my images and my artworks.” It was a manifesto of sorts for all the work I made, and connected with the

feminist program I was developing. My friends and colleagues supported the declaration; I collected the films from their cameras and printed them in the darkroom. For the third performance, I used an old overhead projector which I had found, projecting onto my dancing body the photographs of dancers that I had already printed. A series of exhibition panels covered with white bed sheets formed the backdrop for the projections. The seventh and eighth performances in the fall semester, 1976 and spring semester, 1977 were accompanied by projected photos and color slides – which now included not only images of dancers, but also photographs of my own dancing body taken during previous performances. In these last two performances, I danced naked and wearing just a light fabric, emulating the earlier dancers.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (2021).



Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, black-and-white photographic print on celluloid, 57 x 43 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*, 1976, gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*. 1975–1976, gelatin silver print. 30.2 x 24 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Free Dance*. 1975–1976, gelatin silver print. 30.2 x 24 cm. Courtesy of the artist



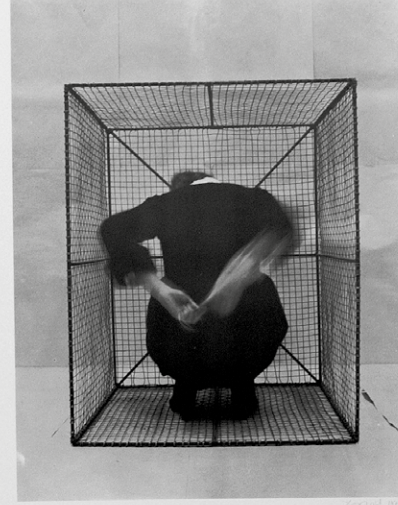
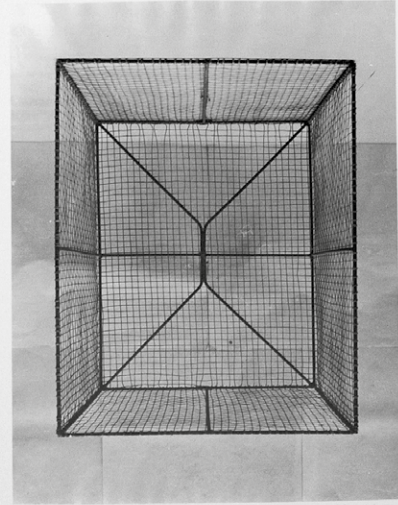
Individual Mythology: and Socialist Politics (1975–1977)

/ Performances, photographs, appropriated slides

Referring to the political, social and artistic context of my life in Budapest, for the series of performances and photos titled *Individual Mythology: and Socialist Politics*, I projected onto my performing body slides produced as political propaganda for history lessons in Hungarian elementary and high school education. The boxes of slides were titled *Hungary from the Liberation to Our Days, I-II* or *25 Years: History of Liberation*. In addition to performances at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, I also used these slides projected onto my skin, my dancing body, at the Rose Dance exhibition and dance party, Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center, Budapest (1977), *Individual Mythology: Disco, Dance, Slide Projection* (1977).

Boxes of 25 or 50 propaganda slides could be purchased from the Society for Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge (TIT), to be used for political history lectures. In 1976 and 1977, I not only projected the slides onto my performing and dancing body, but double-exposed the slides along with my body images, or sandwiched the negatives with slides in the darkroom in order to create photographs such as *Individual Mythology: At the Lenin Statue, Up*; *Individual Mythology: At the Lenin Statue, Down*; and *Individual Mythology: Demonstration with Tanks*.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (1977);  
edited in 2020.



Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology V: Free Dance*, 1976–1977, red offset print on paper, 9 pcs, 200 × 150 cm, each 66 × 48 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Right: Orshi Drozdik: *Individual Mythology: Demonstration with Tanks*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 30 × 36 cm. Courtesy of the artist



## Individual Mythology: Disco, Dance, Slide Projection (1977)

/ Performance with slide projection in group exhibition  
at Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center, Budapest (1977)

/ Rose Dance exhibitions, dance parties, events, actions and performances were organized by members of the Café Rose Circle: Dénes Bogdány, Orshi Drozdik, András Halász, Zsigmond Károlyi, Károly Kelemen, Péter Sarkadi, and Ernő Toluály at the Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center, Budapest, from 8 pm, 28 May to 10 am, 29 May 1977

Works by Orshi Drozdik at Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center included:

- 1 Individual Mythology, photo-offset print series
- 2 Individual Mythology, dance performance with slide projection in "Rose Disco"
- 3 Commonplace Symbols, photographs and offset prints
- 4 Be Happy Until 10, a boat excursion considered as a happening

In my performance *Individual Mythology*, I wore a white dress and while dancing, I projected a series of political propaganda slides, *Hungary from the Liberation to Our Times*, which was used in schools and for other official pedagogy in the 1970s, onto my dancing body.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (1977);  
edited in 2021.



Orshi Drozdik: *Be Happy Until 10*, 29 May 1977,  
boat excursion at dawn on the Danube, Budapest.  
Courtesy of the artist

## Disco, Dance, Slide Projection

(I do not form my individual mythology with traditional visual techniques,  
but with my bodily presence and with the movements of the self,  
using the ready-made framework of a genre.)

I use disco as a ready-made framework. Projecting slides in the disco is a medium  
by which to declare individual mythology.

Projection of slides:

(slide series officially created for the celebration of 30 years of freedom  
and the victory of the Communist regime\*)

marchers  
parade with banners  
gymnastics for celebration  
workers  
walkers  
shoppers  
landscape

Among the slides reflecting the Communist victory in the Socialist state I insert slides showing my dancing movements. The slides are projected onto a 10 × 5 meter screen, and meanwhile I, too, dance in the crowd among the disco dancers. The slides are projected onto me, onto the dancers and onto the wall.

(\* In 1977 it was important for me to manifest my individual experience and to address issues in Communist doctrine and the canon of the artistic tradition by questioning individualism.)

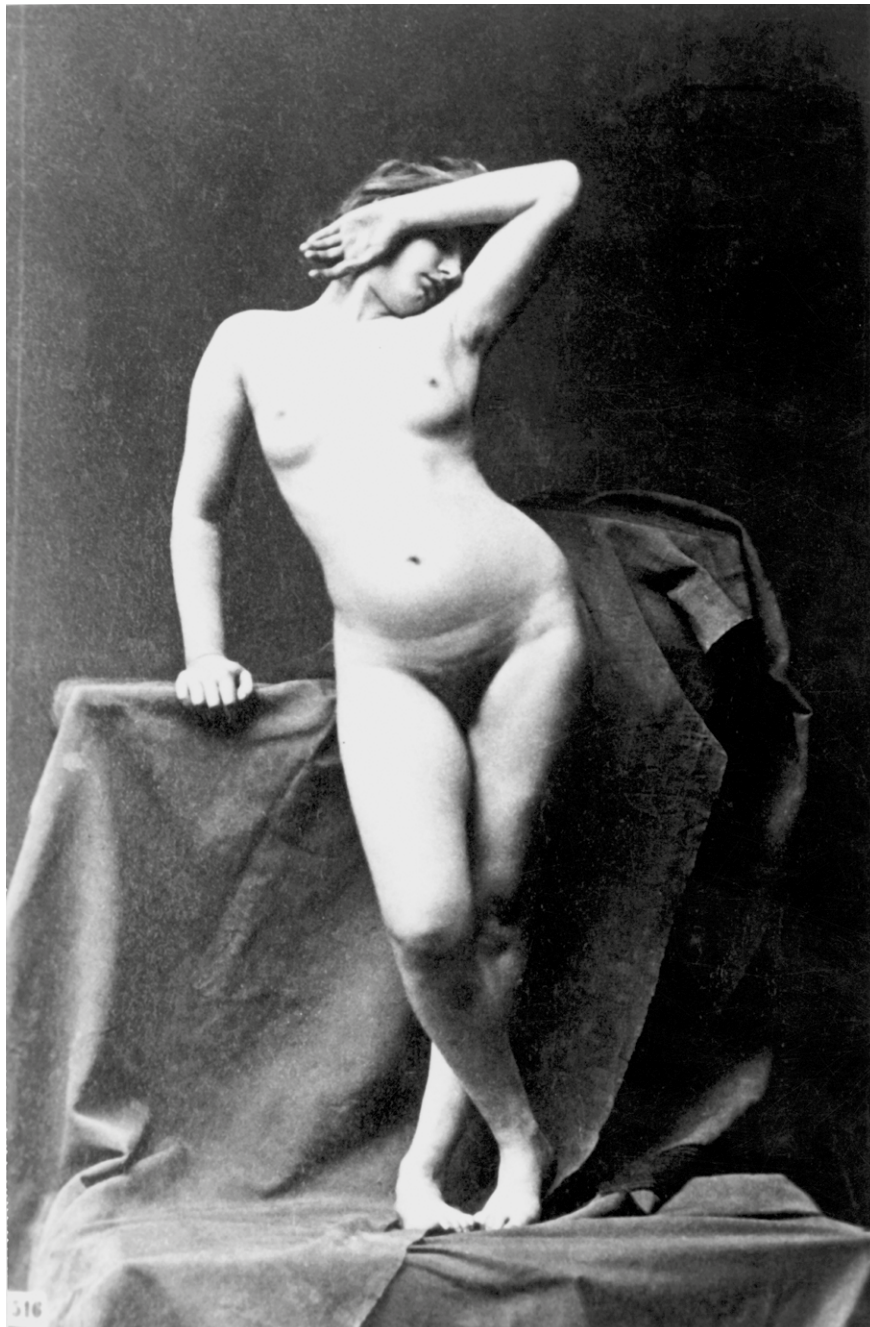
Orshi Drozdik (1977); published in "A Ganz-MÁVAG-beli kiállítás kapcsán írt szövegek" [Texts related to the Rose Dance exhibition at Ganz-MÁVAG], Balkon [Budapest], March-April 1999, p. 20; in English in Orshi Drozdik: *Adventure & Appropriation 1975-2001*, ed. Dora Hegyi (Budapest: Ludwig Museum Budapest - Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), pp. 30-34.

# NUDE MODEL (1975–1977)

## Nude Model (1975–1977)

/ Appropriated photographs of academic nude model settings  
from the library of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest

/ 36 photographs, exhibited at the end of the academic year of 1975–1976



For the photographic series associated with *Nude Model*, I researched the meaning of “visual representation” in the library of the Art Academy. I referred to researched images – the sample photos of nude model settings made for educational purposes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and stored in the archival collection of the library of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts – as found photos or ready-mades, which expressed the male point of view of their authors and the institution of education. I analyzed the method of representation (a “semiotic investigation,” as I termed it at that time), exploring how the models were used or presented, and the photographic techniques – all the normative settings of the nude model. I re-photographed and appropriated sample nude models and their settings in order to track down the male gaze, to catch it in the act, as it was present and presented. [...]

I used the process of re-photographing the settings as a starting point for the larger project of defining my woman’s point of view, considering the photos as my own artworks.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (1977); edited  
and rewritten in 2022.



Both on this spread:  
Orshi Drozdik:  
*Nude Model*:  
*Appropriated  
Photo*, 1975,  
appropriated photo  
from the library  
of the Hungarian  
Academy of Fine  
Arts, Budapest,  
gelatin silver print,  
each 61 x 50.8 cm.  
Courtesy of  
the artist

## A MODELL

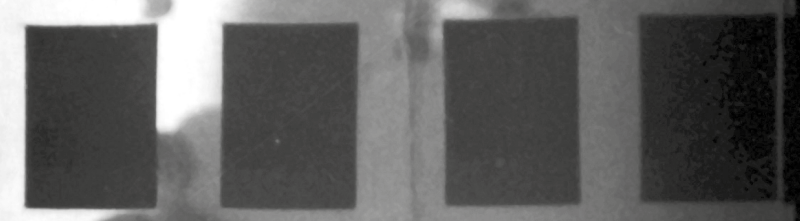
... "Fotó - a egyszerű a megjelölés és a dolgok? ... W. ...."

A "cigarettes" mozgó, "folyó" pont értelése és a "bolygó" rendszer képe között nincs semmilyen hasonlóság. "Frank" ... A modell az értékes körök. A modell köztudottan megjelölés értékes szemantikai funkciót teljesít. "A absztrakt nem intuitív formulákat, leg inkább a tárgyak modellét konstruálta. És ilyen irányú kísérlet történt. "Camap" A látható dolgok mozgásával való analógia útján akarták reprodukálni a láthatatlant. A lehetséges kell ami, hogy a modell akkor is legyen a lehető leginkább értékes, didaktikai vagy heurisztikus értéke van. "A kép, a hiányosság... modellje a valóság, ahogy azt "mi napunknak elgondoljuk". W.

(Modellek):  
 Kép - ikon  
 Schick, graf, képek, graf, képek  
 matematika m. -> mintaképek (modellek)  
 fizika m. -> (fizikai modellek)  
 matematika m.  
 struktúrák modellek, funkció modellek, modellje.

Kép	-
Minták	-
Valóság	-
Minták	-
Értékelés	-

ITÁS READU





## Nude Model (1977)

/ Performance and exhibition, 4-9 January 1977,  
Young Artists' Club, Budapest, Hungary

For my one-week exhibition titled *Nude Model*, I combined the mediums of performance and installation. The exhibition consisted of myself (as a performer), a woman artist drawing a female nude model. On the first day of the performance and installation, I also displayed some of my earlier rephotographed, appropriated and enlarged black-and-white, A4-size photo series, *Nude Model*.

My intention was to institutionalize the discovery that "universal" art must allow for both points of view living side by side, that of the man and that of the woman. Based on my experience, I strived to prove that as a woman, I was forced to conceive the world and its representations, i.e., art, as universal, even if I lived and perceived the world in a woman's body; even if I had a special viewpoint, owing to the fact that my gaze and perception belonged to a woman's body. The only question yet to be answered was what sort of representation a woman's point of view could generate.

Previous spread (left): Orshi Drozdik:  
*Nude Model: Performance, 1977*,  
invitation leaflet, back, 21 x 30 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

Previous spread (right): Orshi Drozdik:  
*Nude Model: Performance, 7 January 1977*,  
opening performance by Károly Kelemen  
with photos of the previous day's  
performance exhibited on a sheet of gauze  
that covered the gallery's entrance door,  
Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver  
print, 18 x 13 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model:  
Performance, 4 January 1977*, performance,  
Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver  
print, 25 x 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Right: Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model:  
Performance, 1977*, Young Artists's Club,  
Budapest. Courtesy of the artist





Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 4 January 1977, opening performance by András Halász, Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 14 x 9 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Above (top): Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 1977, the audience outside the gallery door, Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 9 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Above (middle): Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 9 January 1977, installation, the gallery space with the chair for the model and the drawing bench, Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 9 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Above (bottom): Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 5 January 1977, opening performance by Zsigmond Károlyi with photos of the previous day's performance exhibited on a sheet of gauze that covered the gallery's entrance door, Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 9 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist

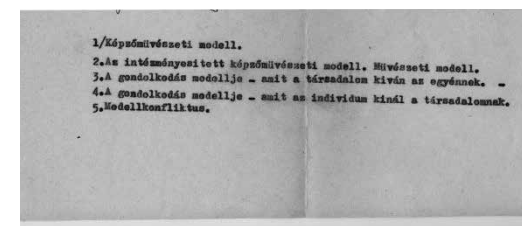


Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 9 January 1977, opening performance by Miklós Erdély, Young Artists's Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 18 x 13 cm. Courtesy of the artist

For the *Nude Model* performance, I invited male artists and an art historian to authenticate the "artwork": László Beke, art historian; Miklós Erdély, avant-garde artist, as well as three of my male classmates, Károly Kelemen, András Halász, and Zsigmond Károlyi. The reason for this – and the underlying concept – was to reenact, and thus call attention to the prevailing male perspective in art history and the artistic discourse, which meant that based on their own "universal" perspective, it was predominantly men who authenticated male, or, almost at random, female, artists. To express my woman's point of view, I employed the method of analyzing the meaning of representation and reusing the medium of the ready-made to reinterpret it from the female perspective, just as I had done in my series of photos and drawings. The five men – four artists and an art historian – were invited to realize performances in the form of vernissages.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (1977); edited in 2022.

Orshi Drozdik: *Nude Model: Performance*, 1977, visitors' club membership cards left with the receptionist, Young Artists' Club, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 24 x 18 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Notes for the *Nude Model* exhibition (1976)

1. Fine arts model
2. The institutionalized visual arts model. The model for art
3. The model of thinking – what society expects of the individual
4. The model of thinking – what the individual offers to society
5. Conflict between models

PORNOGRAPHY  
(1978-1979)



I started to work on the subject of pornography in 1978, soon after I arrived in Amsterdam. The series of performances and photographs titled *Pornography* offers a critical analysis of the patriarchal pornographic gaze onto women's bodies, on the production and consumption of pornography, on embedded sexism, and on gender inequality and the subordination of women.

At that time, the liberating power of the youth movements of the sixties and seventies still haunted the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Amsterdam. The youth and hippie movements were especially critical of bourgeois prudery and muzzled sexuality. The socialist regimes of Eastern Europe were also critical of bourgeois prudery, but they exercised strong control over pornography, as their political programs narrated only one path for the equality and emancipation of women. There was no engagement, however, in the Amsterdam art scene at the time with pornography. My work on pornography attracted no support from the city's well-developed art world. The commercial sex industry in Amsterdam had a startling effect on me. Seeing almost naked women's bodies in the shop windows, offering their

bodies to men for sex, was seriously shocking. I immediately decided to make a new art project on the subject of pornography. I collected cheap porno newspapers, rephotographed the images, and projected slides with a slide projector and photos with overhead projector onto my own performing body. I performed mainly for my camera, using an extended cable release, but also for an audience, a small group of friends in a borrowed studio. I titled this series *Pornography: I Project on Myself* (1979). Earlier I had produced another series of performances and photographs in which I photographed myself as a porno star (I tried to act like one) and manipulated (mainly by double-exposure or overlapping the negatives) these images in the dark room. In this series, *Pornography: I Embrace Myself* (1978-1979), I identified myself with the woman who has been abused by the porn industry, embracing her as my alter-self, my other self. Connecting my artist's body with the women caught up in the porn industry was a deeply felt and visceral experience.

Orshi Drozdik, notes (1978);  
edited in 2019.

Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 9 x 11 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Pornography: I Embrace Myself (1978-1979)

/ 4 performances, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

/ 154 gelatin silver photographic prints, double exposure

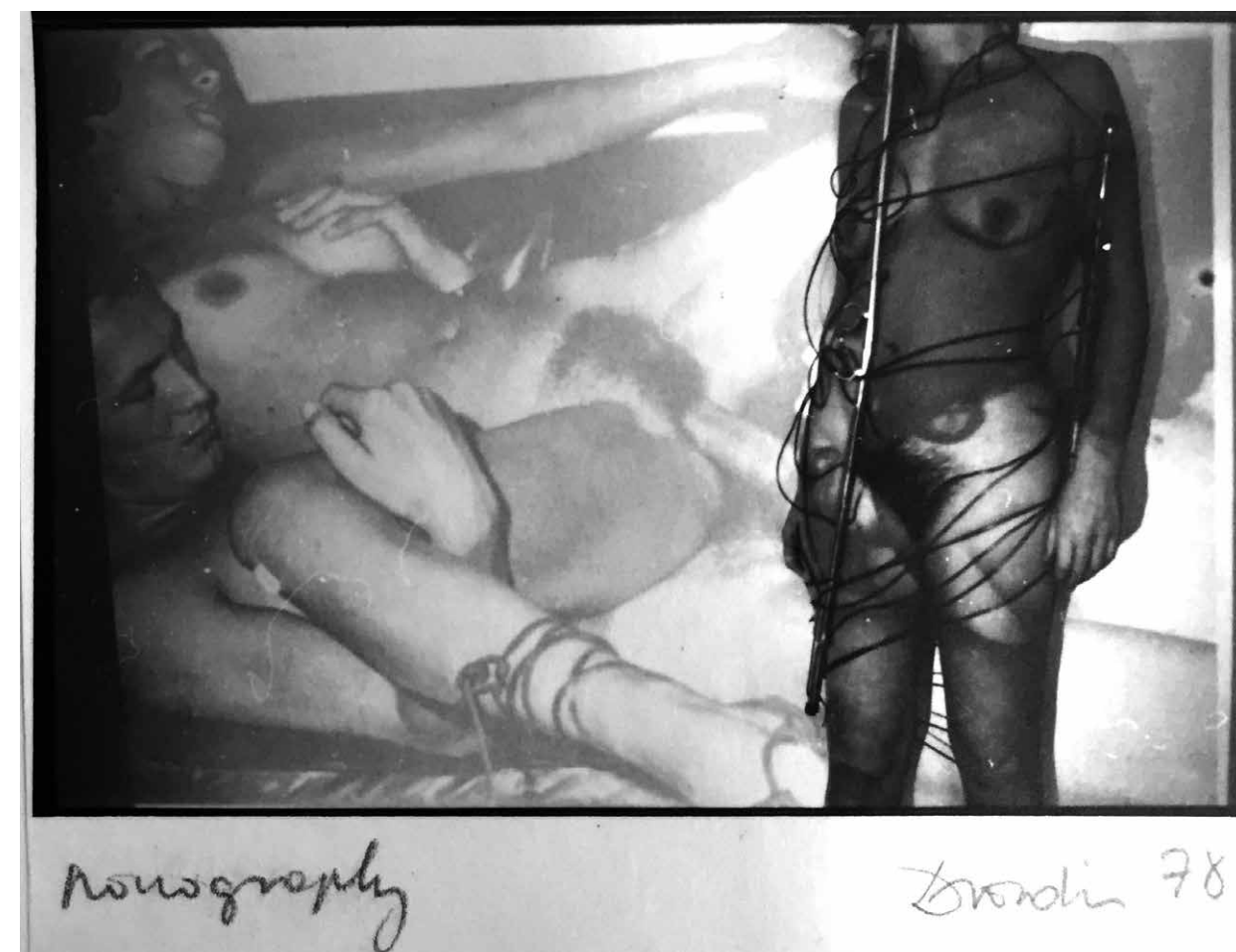
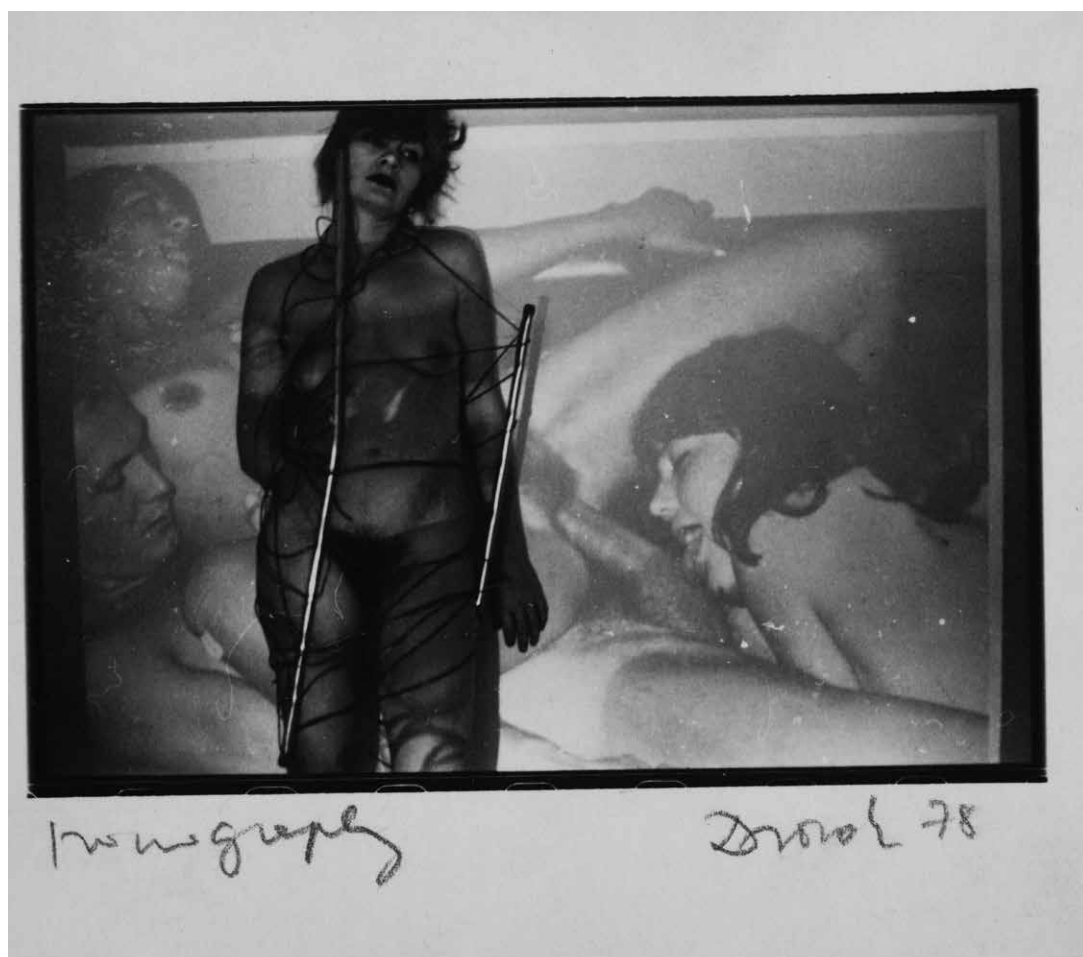
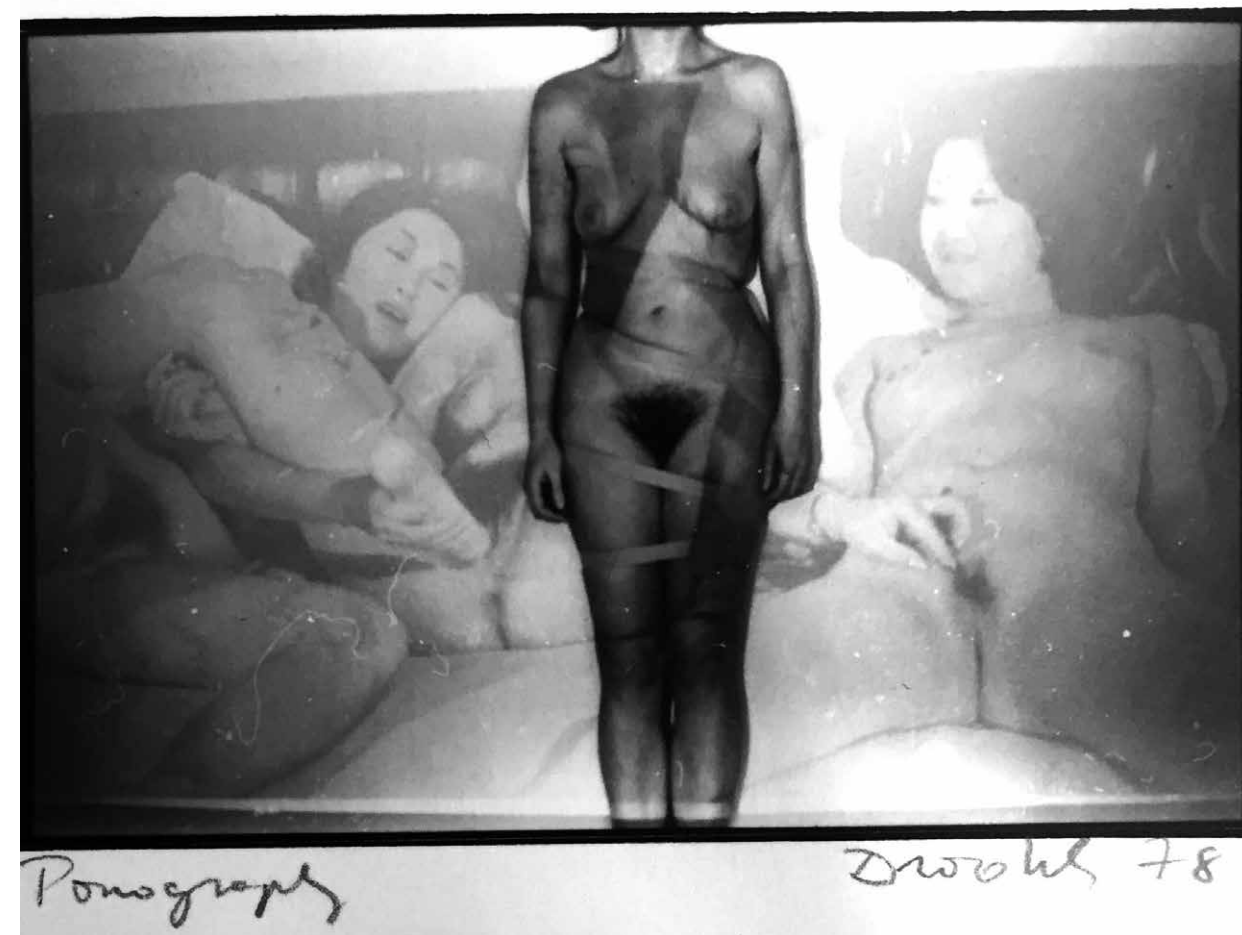


Above and opposite (detail): Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography: I Embrace Myself*, 1978, gelatin silver print, triptych, 42 x 102 cm, each 42 x 34 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Pornography:  
I Project on Myself  
(1979)

/ 3 performances,  
Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands

/ 52 black-and-white  
gelatin silver  
photographic prints



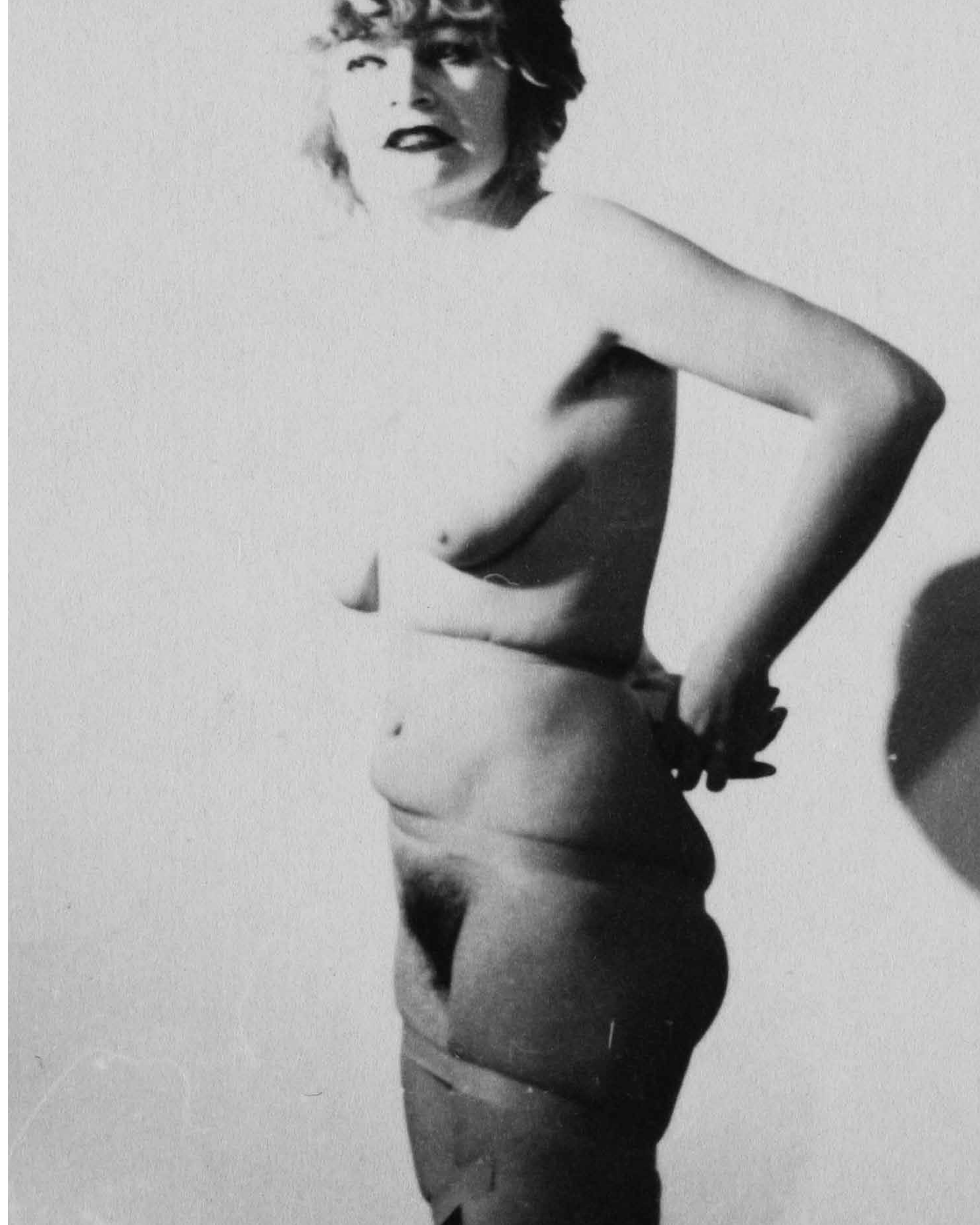
All photos on this spread:  
Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978,  
gelatin silver print, vintage, each 9 x 11 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

Further photographs from  
the *Pornography* (1978-1979) series



Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978.  
gelatin silver print, 10.6 x 9 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978  
(detail), gelatin silver print, 9 x 11 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist





Opposite (top): Orshi Drozdik:  
*Pornography*, 1978, gelatin silver print,  
7.7 x 10.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite (bottom): Orshi Drozdik:  
*Pornography*, 1978, gelatin silver print,  
7.8 x 10.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Right: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*,  
1978, gelatin silver print, 8.8 x 10 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

Bottom: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*,  
1978, gelatin silver print, 7.6 x 10.9 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

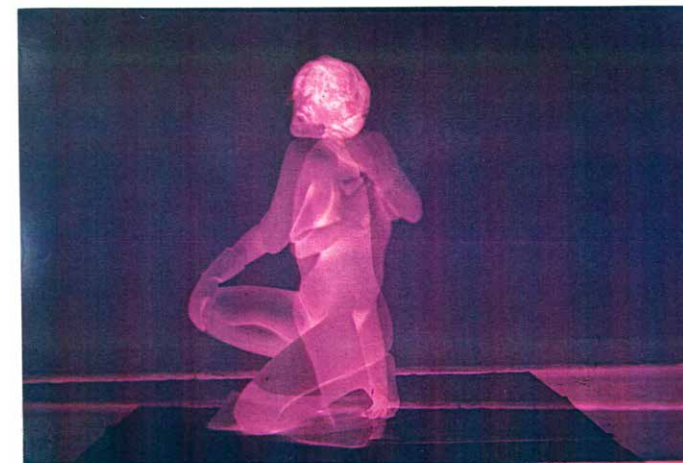
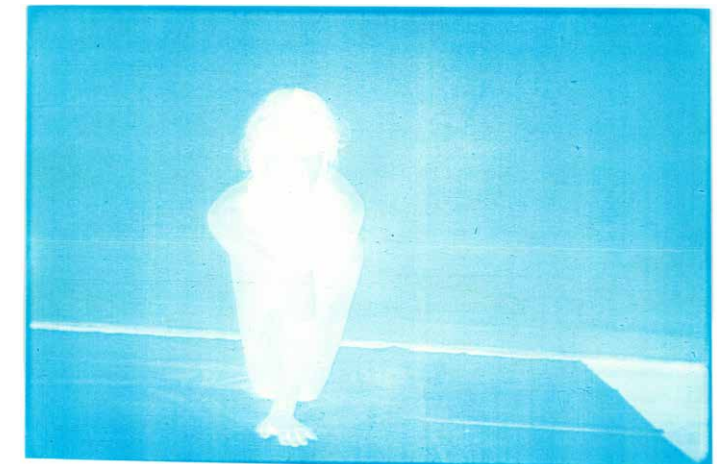
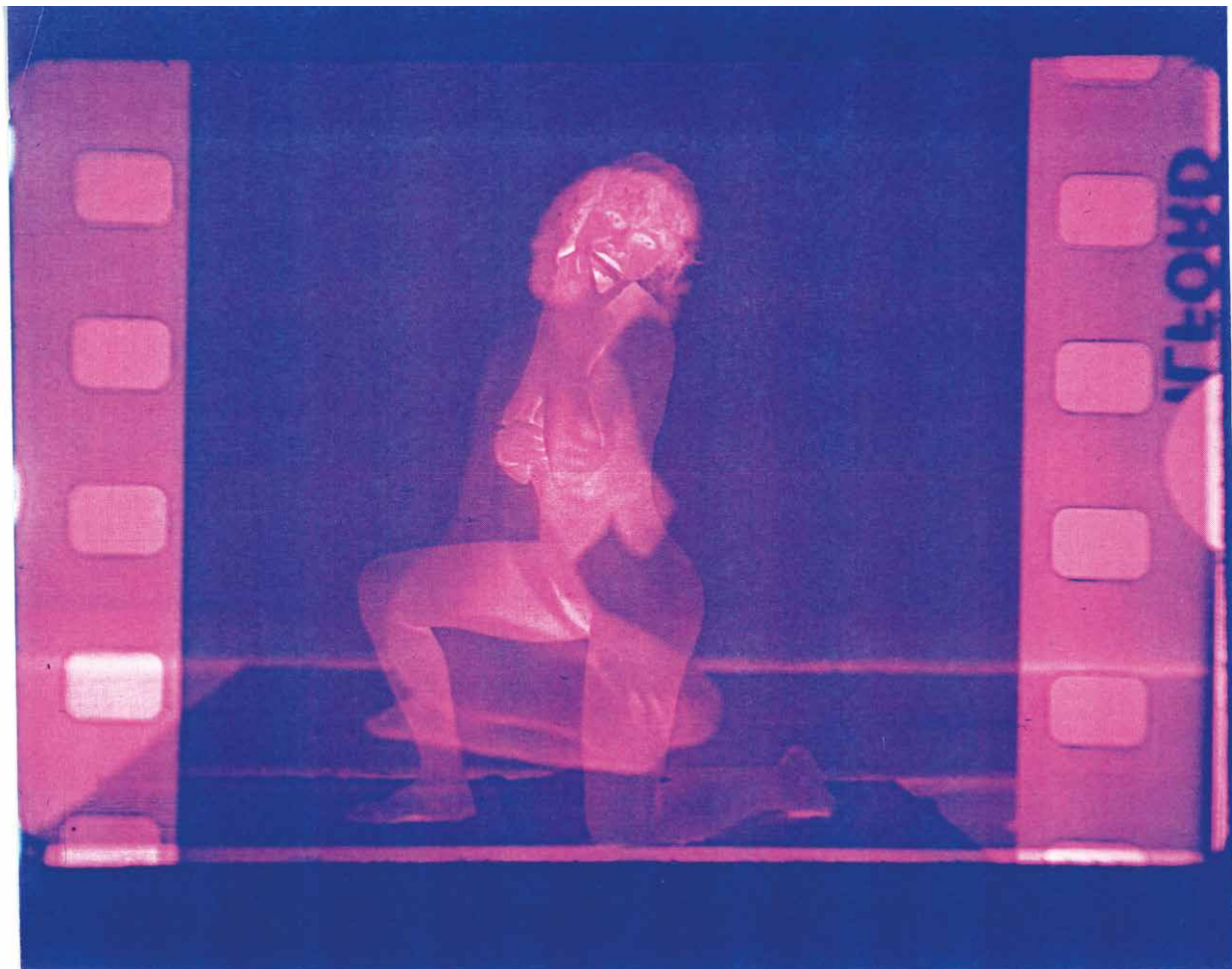




Opposite: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*,  
1978 (detail), gelatin silver print, 10.5 x 9 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist

Below: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*,  
1978, gelatin silver print, 8.8 x 12.6 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist





All works on this spread: Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978–1979, colour xerox print on paper, each 21.7 × 28 cm. Courtesy of the artist



10-13 November 2022  
booth D3

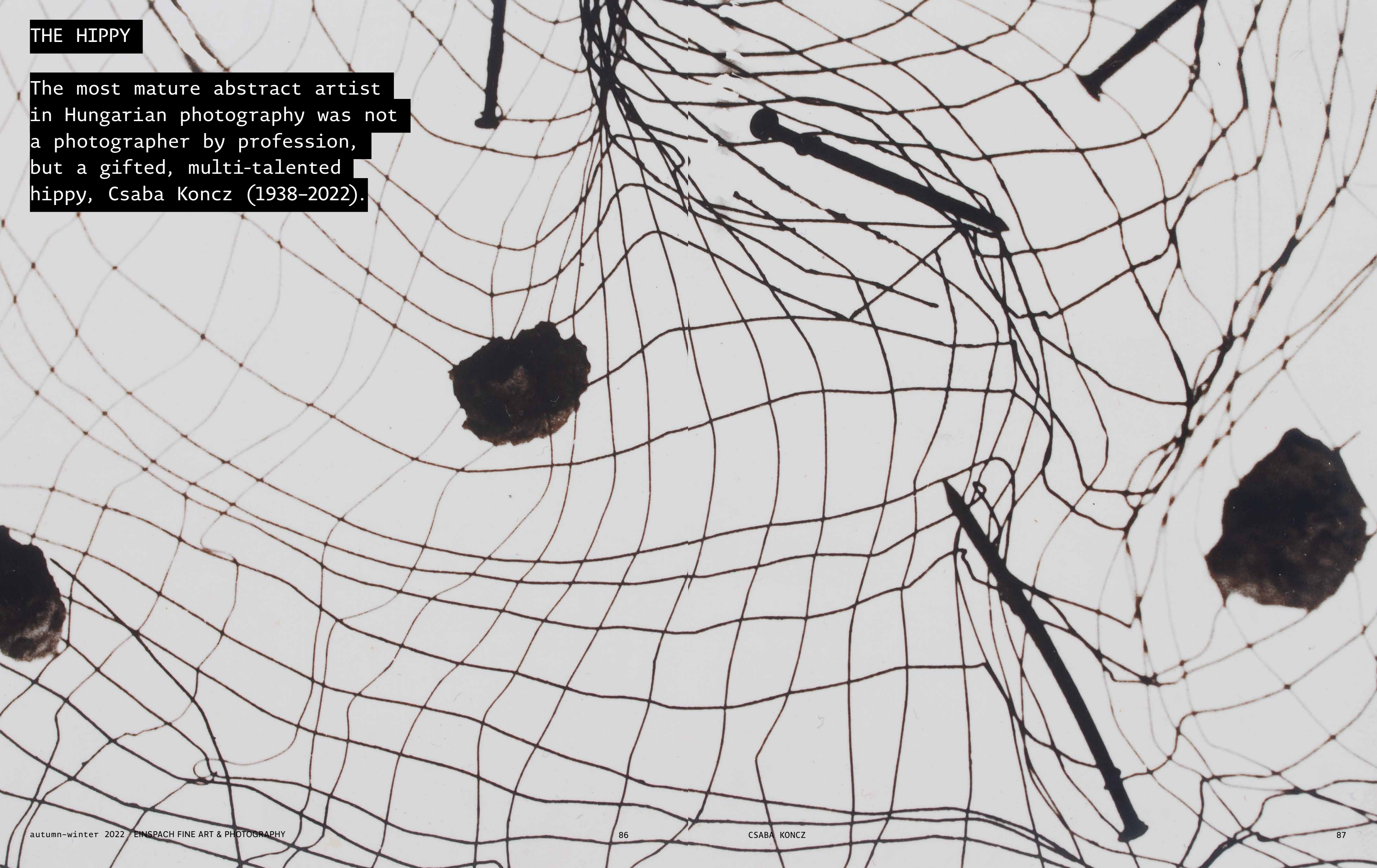
Grand Palais Éphémère, Paris

Orshi Drozdik was one of the first Eastern European women artists in the 1970s to embark on a practice in which photography, performance, and the body converged in a reexamination of social and sexual identities. Concentrating on early series such as *Individual Mythology* (1975-1977), *Blink and Sigh* (1977-1978), and *Pornography* (1978-1979), the selection for Paris Photo 2022 catches these issues in formation in a powerful and surprising range of works examining questions of self and community forms of representation; constructs of political mythology; and the representational stakes of erotized female bodies.

Orshi Drozdik: *Blink and Sigh*, 1977. Courtesy of the artist

## THE HIPPY

The most mature abstract artist in Hungarian photography was not a photographer by profession, but a gifted, multi-talented hippy, Csaba Koncz (1938-2022).





Previous spread:  
Csaba Koncz: *Untitled*, n.d.  
(detail), gelatin silver print,  
10.5 x 17.5 cm. Courtesy  
of Einspach Fine Art &  
Photography

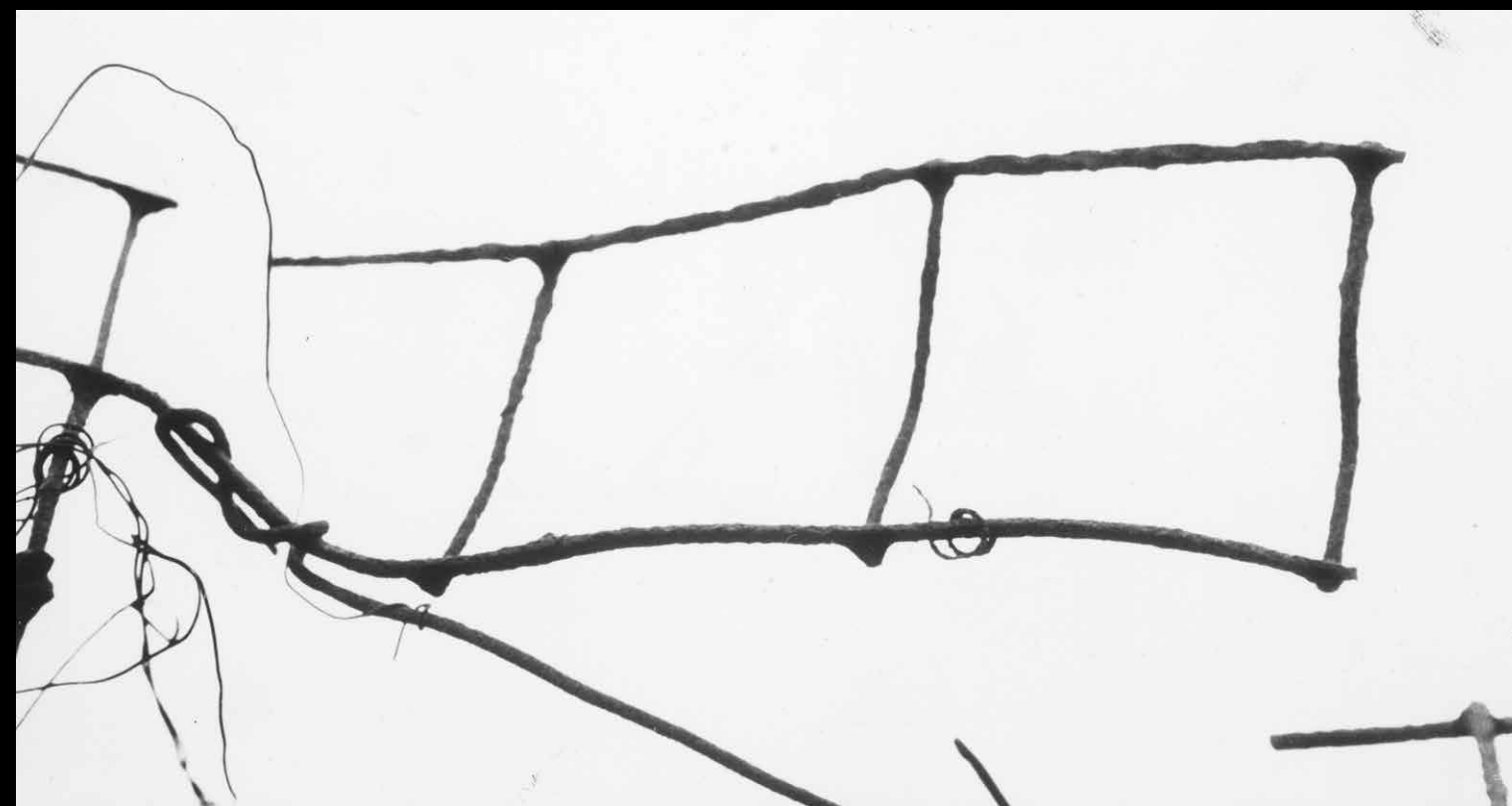
Csaba Koncz: *Untitled*, n.d.,  
gelatin silver print,  
17.5 x 11.5 cm. Courtesy  
of Einspach Fine Art &  
Photography

Opposite: Csaba Koncz:  
*Untitled*, n.d., gelatin silver  
print, 9.5 x 17.5 cm. Courtesy  
of Einspach Fine Art &  
Photography

## CSABA KONCZ. IRON PICTURES AHEAD AND BEHIND

With the mesmerising eyes of a guru, he promised to live for at least a hundred and twenty years, yet he left us. This spring, the eccentric champion of Hungarian organic abstract photography, the last Hungarian hippie, Csaba Koncz passed away on his organic apple farm near Lake Balaton. Csaba Koncz (1938–2022) occupies a special place in the history of Hungarian progressive photography, which took root under the hefty iron boot of socialist realist photography. A hippie who wandered the world, Koncz was as interested in film, music, poetry, and Eastern philosophy as he was in photography. He created his photographic oeuvre in a mere five years, between 1962 and 1967, before he emigrated from Hungary. Though very limited in quantity, this oeuvre is of high, essential quality, at once bound up with nonfigurativity and the aesthetics of *arte povera*. Instead of the false pathos of official socialist photography, Koncz was attracted by reduction and metaphysics: he avoided the self-serving bravura of crowded, densely populated visual scenes and preferred to photograph black and white images of simple iron fragments in front of a blue sky or set in the snow: backgrounds that are prone to “burn out”. His brief but essentially deep oeuvre led him from experiments in op art, touched by the influence of Vasarely, to abstract grid motifs and anthropomorphic idols cobbled together from iron scraps. Although it was of no interest to Koncz personally, his rediscovered photographs have been a great success in both the Hungarian and the international scene over the past decade and a half, finding their way into prestigious museum and private collections.

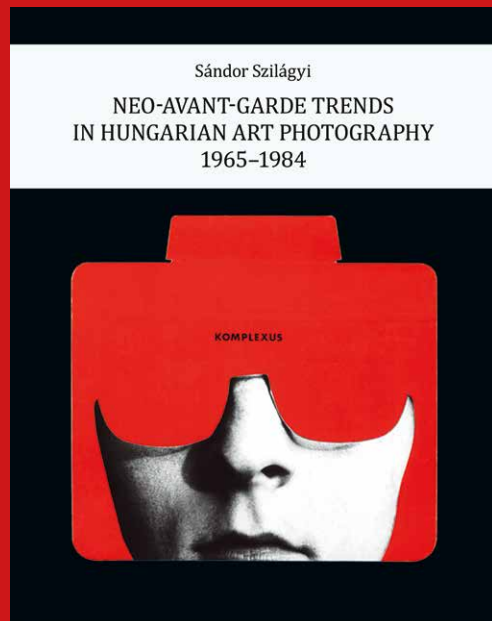
/ Gábor Rieder



Sándor Szilágyi:  
NEO-AVANT-GARDE TRENDS  
IN HUNGARIAN ART PHOTOGRAPHY  
1965-1984

In 2018, a book by Sándor Szilágyi, *Neo-avant-garde Trends in Hungarian Art Photography, 1965-1984* was published by Art+Text Budapest. The book, like its Hungarian version published in 2007, presents some 400 works of art by 32 Hungarian artists of the 1960s, 1970s and the early 1980s. It undertakes to collect the greatest photographers of this vibrant and fruitful era, from Géza Pernecky to Tibor Hajas and János Vető. Among the presented artists we can find photographers who refused the anachronistic aesthetics of official photography, and artists who used the camera accepting the conceptual approach of the period.

To order the book, send an email  
to [info@einspach.com](mailto:info@einspach.com)

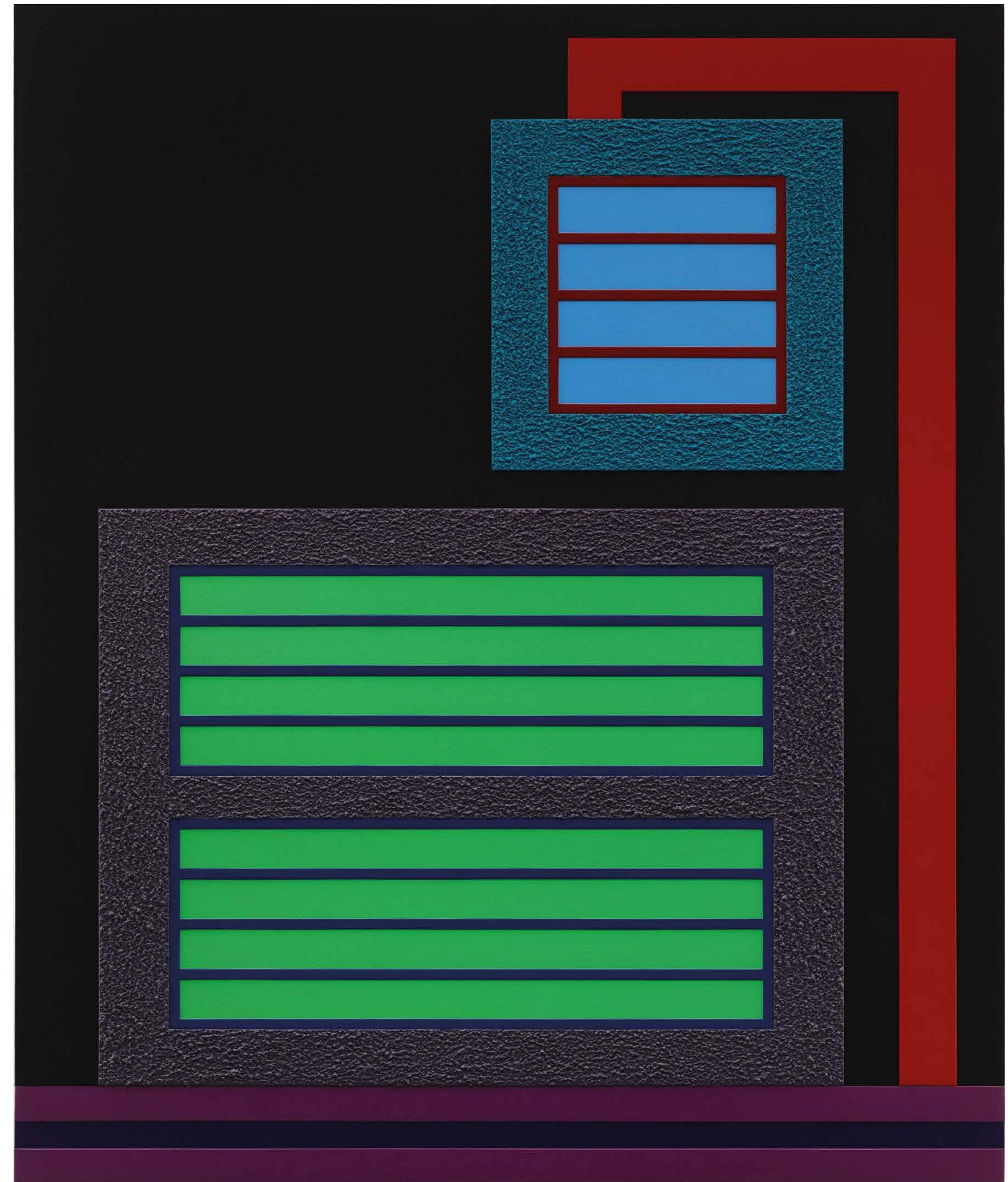


Above: István Szirányi: *Photo-Machine-Man / A Man Taking a Photograph*, 1976, gelatin silver print, vintage, 28 x 20 cm. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

PETER HALLEY:  
BLIND PASS,  
2014

During the short summer break between the first and second waves of COVID-19, we took a – masked – family walk through the entirely deserted Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest and were struck by the freshly acquired black painting by Peter Halley in the contemporary section. Metaphysical twilight in a geometric urban space. What a remarkable old acquaintance! *Blind Pass* (2014) was made in Halley's signature style: a duo of smooth acrylic surfaces, homogeneous fields of colour and the brutally dramatic plaster, the lumpy Roll-A-Tex, emerging strikingly from the canvas, all this in the grid of carefully masked rectangular surfaces, topped with fluorescent colour values. I knew the painting from its inclusion in the 2015 exhibition titled *Diagonal Histories* at Art+Text Budapest, Gábor Einspach's former gallery, where the American neo-geo star was joined by Imre Bak, the golden ager of Hungarian neo-avant-garde painting and a grandmaster of emotional geometry. They came from different generations: Bak, who started out in the late 1960s with hard-edge painting, came upon a chattering and symbolic expression of postmodern (new wave) motifs in the 1980s and closely followed the various trends of international new geometry, including the work of Halley – a consistently evolving figure of neo-geo – to whom he frequently referred in his catalogues. (They both write: they are thus last examples of the one-time theoretical painter, the *pictor doctus*.) The exhibition was curated by Italian editor Nicola Trezzi, who thinks of New York-based Halley as a paternal master and is also a great admirer of Budapest-based Imre Bak. "Post-neo-geo" and "emotional geometry" blended perfectly in the grand halls of Art+Text Budapest. This was Halley's debut in Budapest, and it was here that *Blind Pass* – one of the exhibition's central pieces – was presented as both a panel painting and a sketch, comprising everything that makes Halley both captivating and terrifying: on the one hand, the perfectionist obsession with surface and boldly flashing industrial colours, on the other, the notion of Foucauldian imprisonment and the anxiety of the modern individual isolated within high-tech geometry.

/Gábor Rieder



Opposite: *Diagonal Histories*, installation view, 10 October – 8 November 2015, Art+Text Budapest. Photo by Tamás Bende

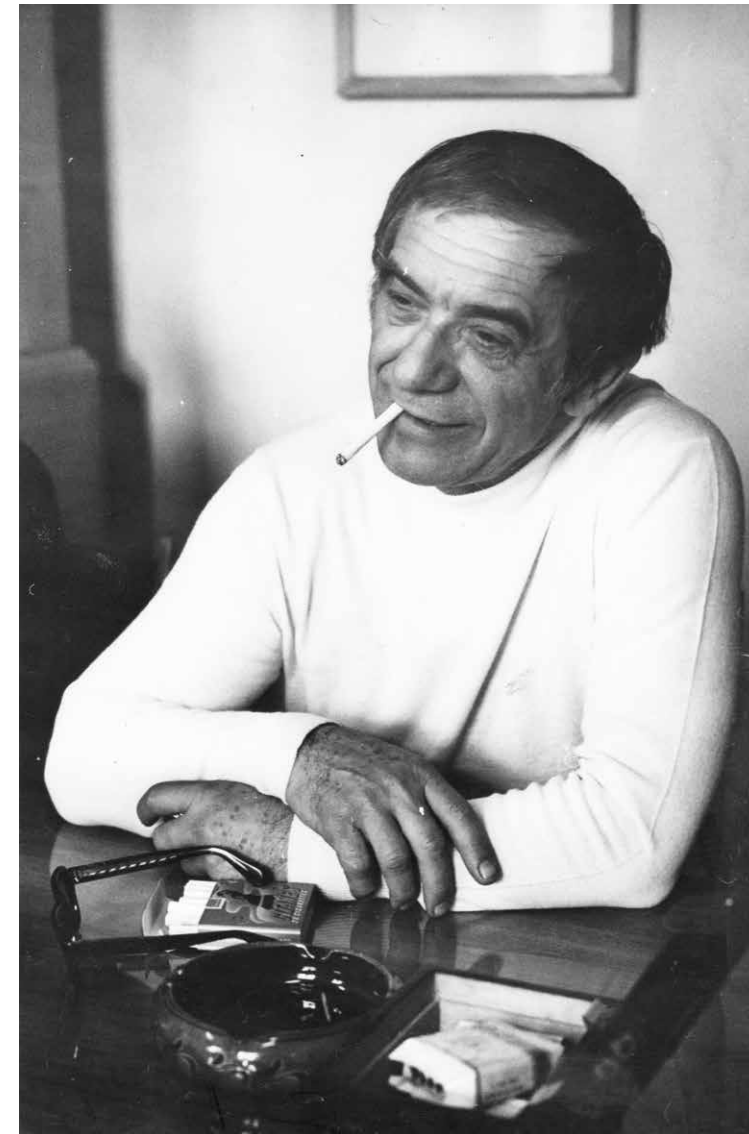
Peter Halley: *Blind Pass*, 2014, acrylic, fluorescent acrylic and Roll-A-Tex on canvas, 215.4 x 179 x 9.5 cm. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest © Peter Halley

# ARTMAGAZIN

Hungary's leading bimonthly art review  
featuring articles, reviews, and essays on the intriguing topics  
of art history, contemporary art, and beyond



# Amerigo



# Tot

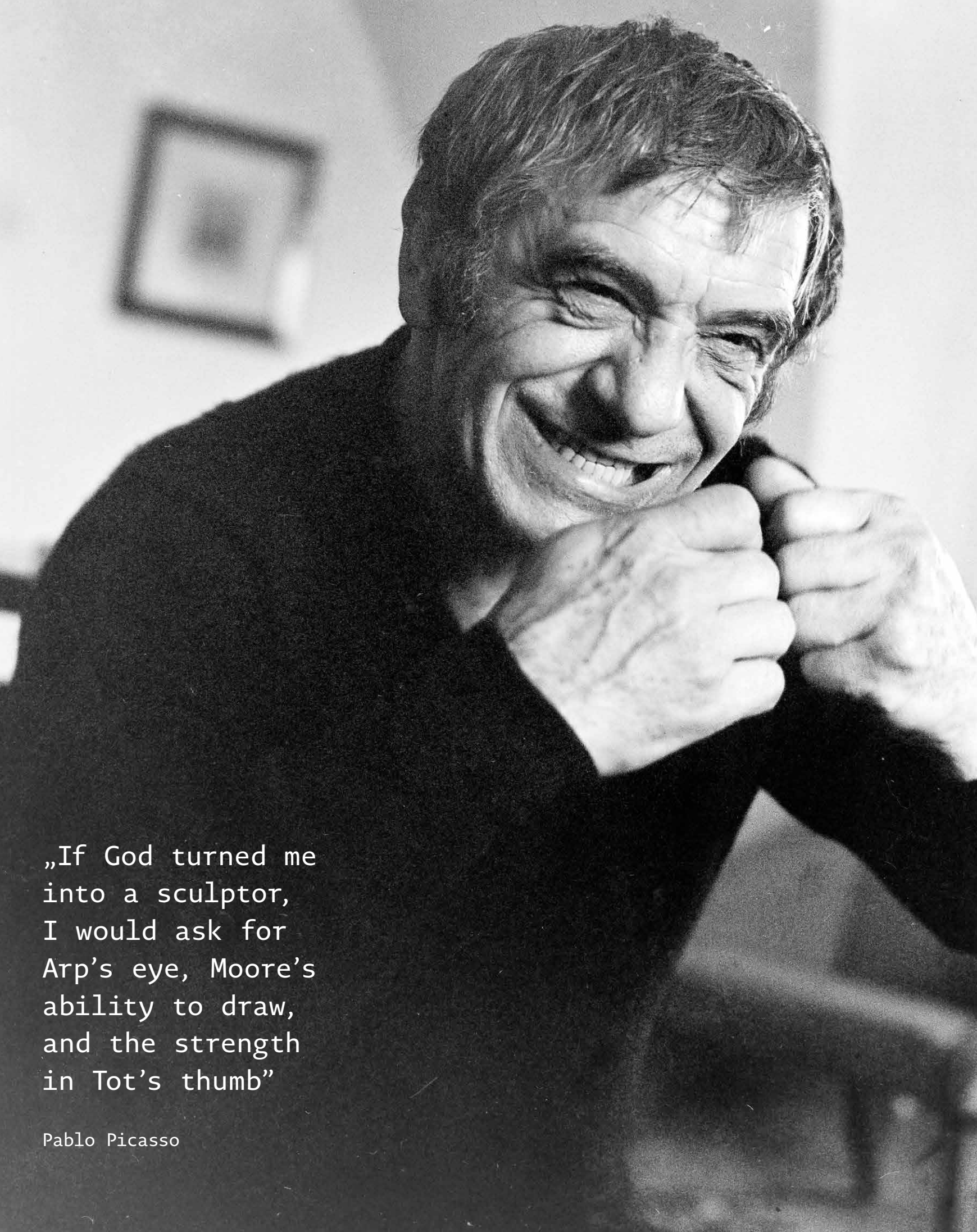
(1909–1984)

# Adventure with Geometry

"If God turned me into a sculptor, I would ask for Arp's eye, Moore's ability to draw, and the strength in Tot's thumb," said Picasso once. It is no wonder that as a sculptor, he would have asked for the robust fingers of Amerigo Tot, an artist of Hungarian origin living in Italy – as Tot could deploy them with devilish ingenuity. He modelled, drew, poured and sculpted, choosing at his will. He was a Picassoesque character, a lively hedonist, a roisterer and a bragger, yet a universally beloved figure who could speak in many styles over a half-century career. He understood the aesthetics of ancient art just as well as mid-century design. He was a sculptor but also created ceramics, working for the Italian state, the Hungarian Communist Party and the Pope. In the meantime, he even found time to play Don Corleone's bodyguard in *The Godfather*. An adventurous *Uomo universale* of the twentieth century.

Opposite: Amerigo Tot: *Panello astratto*, 1952 (detail), glazed ceramic, 80 x 180 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography





„If God turned me into a sculptor, I would ask for Arp’s eye, Moore’s ability to draw, and the strength in Tot’s thumb”

Pablo Picasso

Amerigo Tot – christened as Imre Tóth – was born in 1909 in a small Hungarian village and grew up in Budapest. His gendarme father wanted him to become a lawyer but he chose fine arts. He graduated from the Hungarian Royal Drawing School, and in the meantime, became involved with the Munka (Work) Circle, led by Lajos Kassák, the straight-talking, never-negotiating, core member of the Hungarian avant-garde. As a member of this left-wing society, he beat up far-right demonstrators in Budapest in 1930, for which he was imprisoned by the authorities. After his release, he headed for Germany, where he was accepted into the best school of modern art, the Bauhaus in Dessau. He travelled by foot to the Bauhaus – which was run by Hannes Meyer, an avid proponent of the institution’s left-wing years – and was taught by masters such as Josef Albers. After a brief but influential period of study in Dessau, he wandered the North Sea as a sailor before returning to the classroom, studying under the supervision of Otto Dix in Dresden. In 1933, he was arrested and interned by the Nazis, but made an adventurous escape and eventually fled to Italy. This would be his chosen homeland from then on. In Rome, he worked on sculptural commissions of a classical nature, mainly for the church, and then as a trained paratrooper partisan and a member of the National Liberation Front, he fought the Germans. His restless nature didn’t waver following the war: he tried himself at automobile racing and also appeared in films. His most successful creative period was in the 1950s when he created his monumental frieze for Termini Railway Station’s façade in Rome. Completed in 1953, the large-scale relief, comprising riveted aluminium sheets, consists of an organically fluttering yet geometric abstract pattern. Tot was at his peak during these years, regularly exhibiting at the Venice Biennale and winning numerous state commissions for the realisation of public works. It was during this period, in 1952, that the seven murals, each two metres wide and composed of glazed ceramic tiles, were made, all of which will be exhibited by Einspach Fine Art & Photography in the near future.

Opposite: Amerigo Tot at his exhibition in the gallery of the Benedictine Abbey of Tihany, Hungary, 1969. Fortepan / Zoltán Szalay

Below (top): Amerigo Tot: *Panello n.16 astratto*, 1952, glazed ceramic, 80 x 200 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

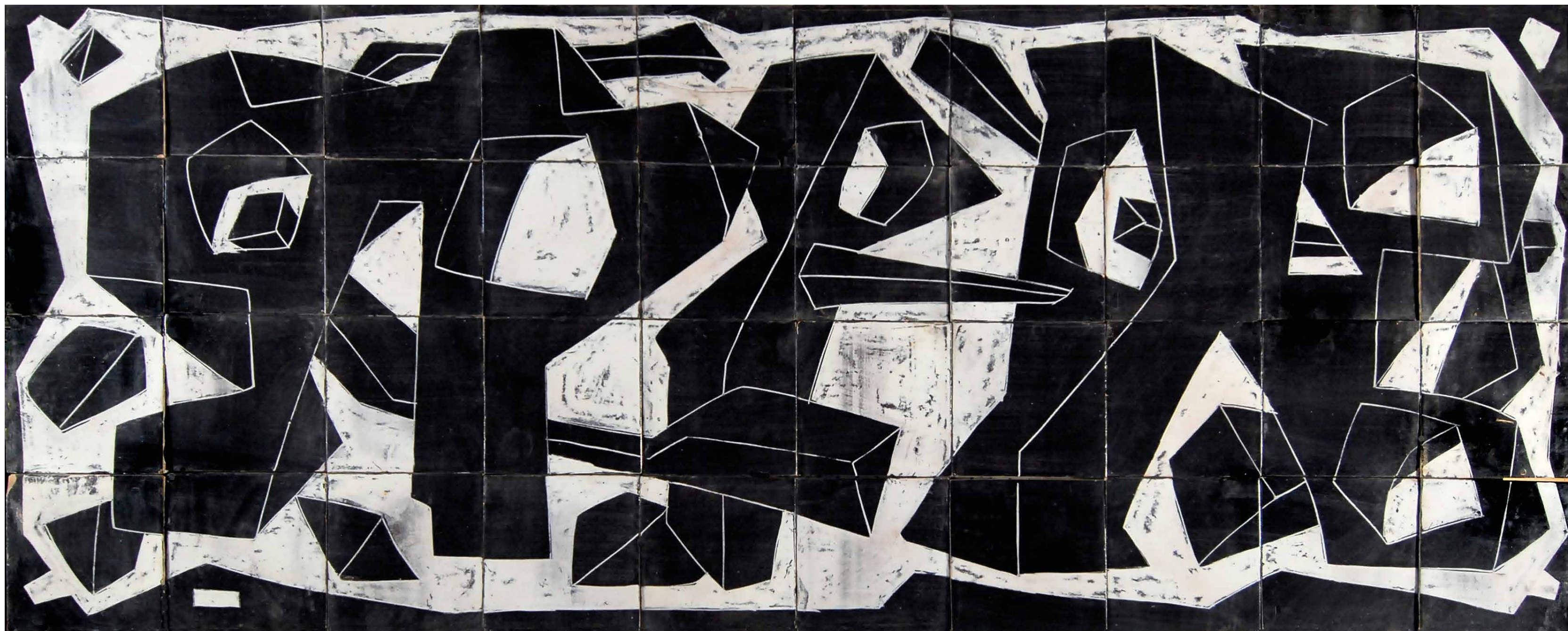
Below (bottom): Amerigo Tot: *Panello n.27 astratto*, 1952, glazed ceramic, 80 x 200 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



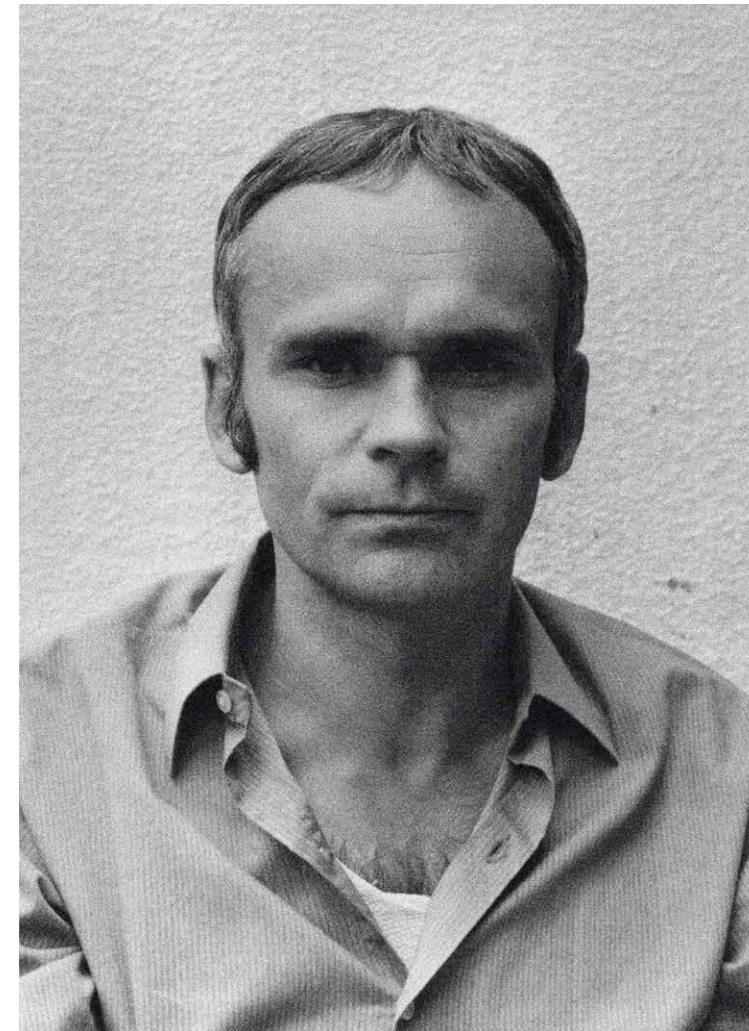
Tot, like Picasso, discovered the ceramic technique in the late 1940s, not in Vallauris, however, but in a workshop in Vietri, near Naples. Then, Tot, who had previously worked in an impeccably elegant neoclassical style, radically simplified his formal language. Following the venerable doctrine of analytic cubism, he abstracted the Greek human figures sweeping across the friezes until they became nonfigurative shapes, only partially evocative of spatiality – most akin to the formal universe of Abstraction-Création. In the meantime, he became acquainted with Giuseppe Ragazzini, the renowned dealer in majolica decoration who introduced many modern Italian artists to ceramics. Ragazzini asked Tot to take over the management of a ceramics factory in Vietri sul Mare in 1949. He produced countless pieces during the few, but productive years he spent there.

“The most beautiful works of art of the Vietri period,” wrote Péter Nemes, a dedicated researcher of Tot’s oeuvre, “are undoubtedly the ceramic panels, made up of several pieces with geometric decoration. Their technical and formal antecedents are found in the nonfigurative sgraffitos Amerigo Tot made in 1948–1949 to decorate the pavilions and exhibition spaces of major Italian fairs. First, the artist painted a white wall surface black, then, using a spatula, scratched in the contours of the forms and finally, using the same spatula, he scraped off the background to reveal the underlying layer. Tot followed the same procedure for the panels of 20 × 20 cm tiles but used a glaze instead of paint.” To this day, we are not aware of the exact location for which these works were initially made – it is a certainty, however, that they are tinglingly vivid reminders of mid-twentieth century modernity.

Amerigo Tot: *Pannello n.26 astratto*, 1952, glazed ceramic, 80 x 200 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



# Krisztián



# Frey

(1929–1997)



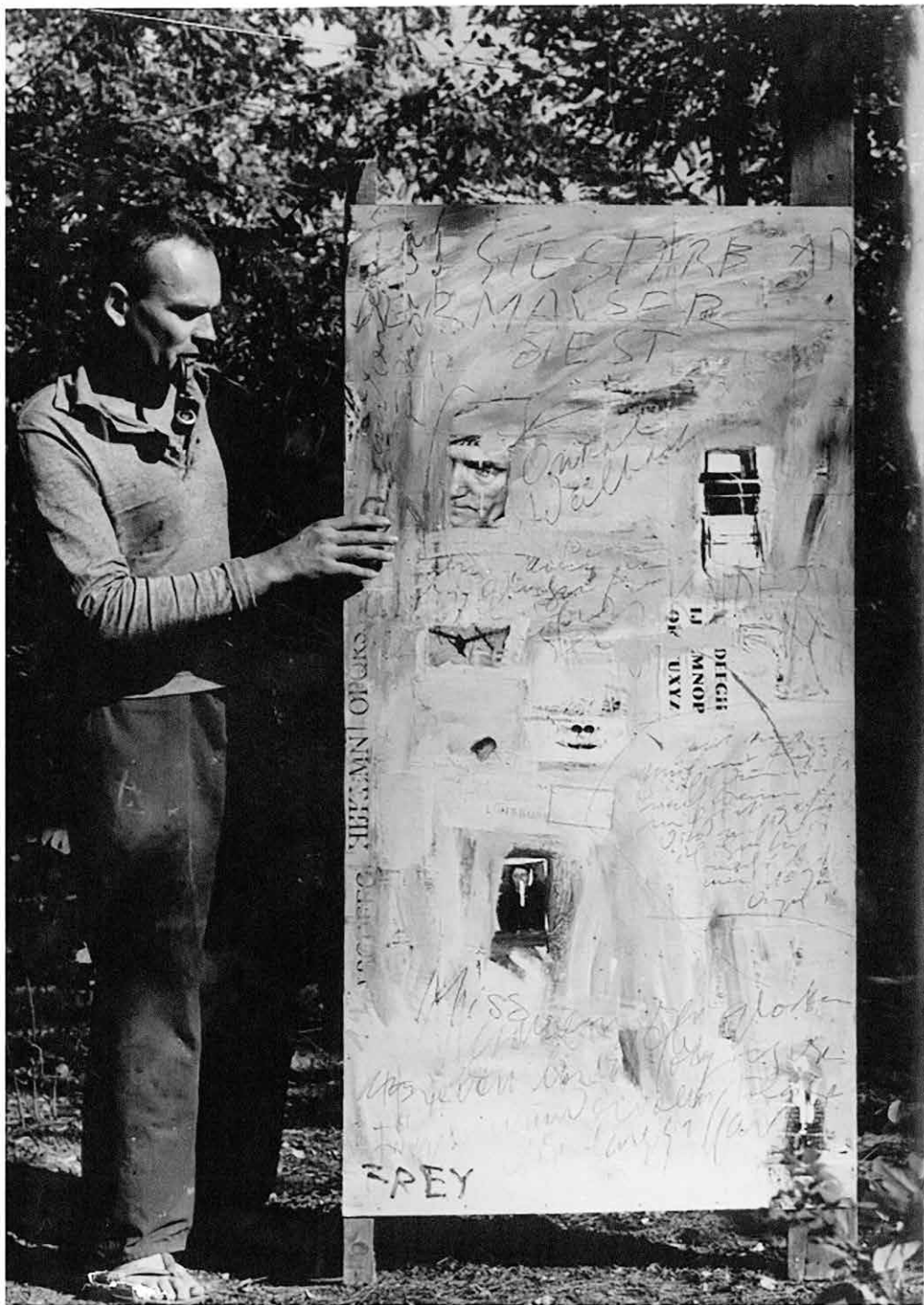
GÁBOR RIEDER:

KRISZTIÁN FREY'S OEUVRE

# A Man of Letters

Krisztián Frey, before he chose to defect, was one of the prominent members of the neo-avant-garde Iparterv generation, which was hallmarked by such artists as Imre Bak, Ilona Keserü, Dóra Maurer or Endre Tót, and which made its public debut in Hungary in the mid-1960s to make art history in 1968–1969 with a revolutionary double exhibition at a hidden culture hall of IPARTERV, a company owned by the socialist state. These were the few magical years when, after the devastation of Second World War and socialist realism, the youth of the Hungarian art scene once again picked up the rhythm of Western progressive art, which had been dominated by nonrepresentational painting. In centralised and state-controlled Hungarian art, abstraction was considered a strict taboo during the decades of socialism. The bipartite geopolitical system established by the Yalta Conference had also divided the art world: the East clung to the legacy of Stalinist socialist realism – often misrepresented as “humanist” – and made it compulsory for the entire Soviet hemisphere,

while the West, in deliberate opposition, promoted abstraction as a new form of expression for the free, liberal, Western man. In Budapest, artists were confronted only with the facts: the European School, which embraced both Western surrealism and abstraction, closed after a few short years of prosperity (1945–1948), socialist realism became compulsory for all artists, and abstract artists were forced underground, as Duchamp had predicted to be the fate of the avant-garde of tomorrow. “In Eastern Europe, abstraction has always stood for a human conduct, and probably will for some time to come,” as, somewhat rhyming with Duchamp’s thought, the marginalised philosopher Béla Hamvas (soon to be forced into forced retirement as a barely subsisting warehouseman) predicted in 1947,<sup>1</sup> and the “pope” of the Hungarian avant-garde, Lajos Kassák, who retreated into hermitage in Békásmegyér, agreed with him, as did the young Simon Hantai, who had left the country back in 1948 to pursue a great career in France.



Previous spread: Krisztián Frey: *Mari*, 1968 (detail), oil on woodboard, 70 x 57 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Above: Whitewashed shop windows in photographs from the bequest of Krisztián Frey, late 1950s, early 1960s. Photo by Krisztián Frey (?)

Left: Frey with his unfinished work titled *ABC*, ca. 1967. Photo by unknown

Opposite (top): Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi VI*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 130 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite (bottom): Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi VII*, 1963, oil on paper, 36 x 129.5 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Frey came from a wealthy bourgeois family, which the communist regime branded as “class-alien”.<sup>2</sup> His father, a dentist with a praxis in the countryside and a serious erudition in the humanities, was nevertheless able to provide a secure livelihood for the family and support his son, who chose a career in painting. Krisztián Frey, who luckily survived the devastation of the Second World War, also applied to the University of Medicine, the Academy of Fine Arts and then even to the Department of Mathematics, but was rejected in each case as a “class-alien”. He read art history books, made sketches, painted portraits and drew copies from American picture magazines. According to László Lakner, his most important friend

from his youth, this was more to his benefit, as he was free from the restrictive approach of the obligatory Soviet doctrine and realistic “academism”: “He was a bit older than us, had just finished his military service and wanted to reapply. Bernáth talked him out of it. Luckily for him, because he then shed all his complexes and started painting from a position the rest of us would only years later.”<sup>3</sup> Lakner referred in his recollection to the scriptural characteristics – the written, calligraphic gestures embedded in the surface of the image – that Frey was experimenting with at this time, in the 1950s. His early sketches and studies also include inscriptions in German, Italian, ancient Greek and even Hebrew.

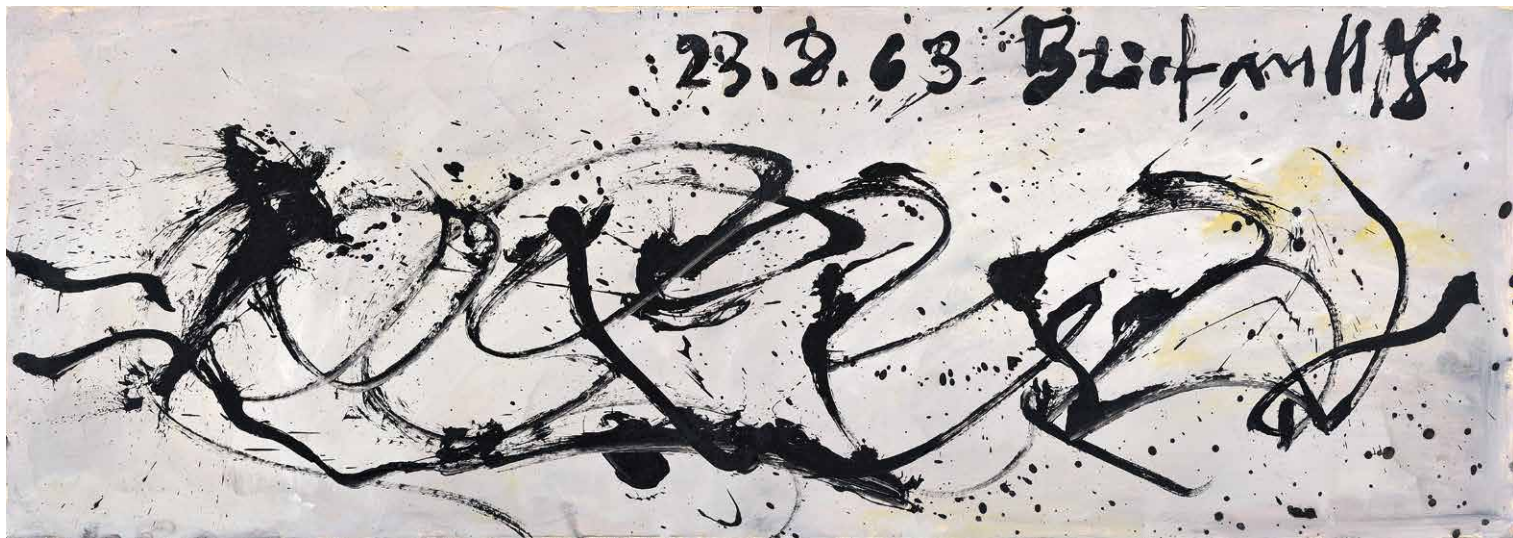


In the late 1950s, Frey lived and worked in Alsóbételep on the shore of Lake Balaton. It was also during these years that Frey met some young Hungarian artists of key importance in the period, Tibor Csernus, a virtuoso of (sur)naturalist painting after socialist realism, and László Lakner, a leading figure in neo-avant-garde circles. This was a special transitional period in the history of Hungarian art. The grip of orthodox Stalinism was relieved for a moment by the 1956 revolution, but the retaliations after the war of independence meant that Western influences could only seep into Hungary through a strong filter, and only after a long delay. Abstract art was considered a forbidden category, its practitioners were mocked by the press, and the authorities used administrative means to harass them, prevented them from exhibiting and made it impossible for them to earn a living. The old nonfigurative masters worked in almost completely airtight isolation. Thus the maverick Frey, who enjoyed complete aesthetic freedom because of his family support, was able to experiment with abstract expression without being aware of the gnostic “pointillist” abstraction of Béla Veszelszky, who worked as a hermit in isolation from the artistic community, or the enamel calligraphies of Dezső Korniss, who chose “internal emigration” and retired to Szentendre between 1956 and 1962, nor did he know much about the triumph of American abstract expressionism or French informel. From Lakner’s recollection we know that Frey had already been experimenting a lot with abstraction conceived in the rapture of spontaneity, and that

he was in possession of “the devices of Informel, the devices of contemporaneous European scriptural painting.”<sup>4</sup>

From 1963, a slackening of the strict cultural policy of banning was heralded by the cautious opening of the socialist system and János Kádár’s politics of consolidation and amnesty. This was the first time that it was possible to apply for a Western passport, which Frey did, allowing him to visit relatives living near Stuttgart. Having met the director of the Staatsgalerie and the owner of the Galerie Müller, he held his first solo exhibition in 1963 at the Galerie am Bohlweg in Braunschweig, Saxony, sending the material from home. It was at this time that he first saw abstract expressionist paintings and calligraphic paintings – including works by Cy Twombly – in person.

The liberating trip to Germany in 1963 marked Frey’s first real period as a painter. His first early series of paintings, *Brief an Uschi* [Letter to Orsi] (1963, private collection), a series of passionate abstract calligraphies on wide strips of paper, believed lost for a long time, could be interpreted as a love confession. These already show his later signature motifs: the whitish glaze-grey colour, the large inscriptions resembling handwriting and the spontaneous, explosive brushstrokes. In addition to his calligraphically rooted expression, Frey also returned to the scriptural image construction. The allusion to sexuality and vulgarity with the immediacy of toilet graffiti became one of Frey’s most important artistic devices from then on. Another defining characteristic of his work is the strong visuality of the written word balancing on the border of legibility.



Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi II*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi V*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi VIII*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi I*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi III*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: *Brief an Uschi IV*, 1963, oil on paper, 35 x 100 cm. Photo by József Rosta. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Artists of Iparterv Group and the curator on the terrace of László Lakner's studio in Kmetty Street in 1969.  
Photo by András Baranyai.  
Courtesy of Missionart Gallery





Krisztián Frey: *White Picture No. 3*, ca. 1965, oil and pencil on canvas, 58.5 × 179.5 cm.  
Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

In the early 1960s, Frey moved back to Budapest, where he met a group of young progressive painters, including Endre Tót, Imre Bak and István Nádler besides Lakner. On a few occasions he attended meetings of the Zugló Circle, who would gather in Sándor Molnár's apartment, where the philosophy of Béla Hamvas, imbued with oriental philosophy, along with the French abstraction of the 1950s (Bazaine, Soulages, Manessier, Riopelle, etc.) were the main points of reference. Frey's painting was already mature by 1963. Artists a few years younger than Frey looked to his paintings as a source of inspiration.

Reaching maturity in the 1960s, Frey's style took in other inspirations and motifs in addition to the abstract expressionism inspired by oriental calligraphy and epistolary literacy. Above all, the manic, vulgar, pornographic depiction of female sexuality is a dominant feature. The female figures in his paintings usually appear as elusive silhouettes, shadow figures, often with accentuated pubic triangles, half-entangled in a jumble of topsy-turvy, excited abstract gestures. The symbol of femininity, stylized as a simple rhomboid form surrounded by rays, also recurs in many of his works, evoking the art brut-like earnestness of graffiti. Several of Frey's works from the late 1960s feature female figures in high heels and short skirts, painted over with wild gestures, even surrounded by an appliqué of nude photographs in erotic settings (66 July, 1966, private collection).

A similar female figure's shod feet can be seen in the third of the paintings from Rákosliget (*Images from Rákosliget III*, 1965–1967, Hungarian National Gallery), accompanied by fish and astrological symbols.

Having already found his voice, Krisztián Frey had the opportunity to organise his first solo exhibition in Hungary in 1967. He was invited to exhibit by the head of the Ferenc Vigyázó Cultural Society in Rákosliget, another remote suburban cultural centre that organised progressive exhibitions. Frey decided to paint over some of his earlier large format paintings for the occasion because he found them too personal. The result was a cycle of paintings in whitish grey hues, consisting of emptied gestures, three of which were acquired by the Hungarian National Gallery after the regime change as one of the greatest achievements of 1960s abstraction (*Images from Rákosliget I–III*, 1965–1967, Hungarian National Gallery). With the radical gesture of painting over figurative canvases in several layers, Frey created pioneering masterworks of monochrome painting in Hungary. It is no coincidence that they were included in the exhibition *Reduktivismus. Abstraktion in Polen, Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn 1950–1980* at the Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna after the fall of the Berlin Wall. One of the inspirations for the radical artistic solution – according to photographs preserved in the estate may have been the temporarily whitewashed window of a shop in Budapest that had moved out.<sup>5</sup>

Although five paintings from the “Rákosliget series” are currently known as per the reference literature, a number of special white works on wood panels have since been recovered from the estate, with plaster or gypsum applied to them, which definitely belong in this category of artworks. *White Image I* (ca. 1967, private collection), with its clear, panel opening onto swirling nothingness and its indentations interrupting the surface, is not only akin to the erasing and nullifying radicalism of the Rákosliget pictures, but also to the tortured, punctured (*buchi*) canvases of Lucio Fontana. Frey's whitewashing gesture and use of materials characteristic of the “Rákosliget period”, recalls the strategies of radical abstract artists striving for minimalism, such as Piero Manzoni, who formulated the whiteness of nothingness, Shozo Shimamoto, who painted on newsprint, or Bram Bogart, who worked on splattered cement. Yet Frey took an approach of his own, in which emphasising the stratification of layers played a key role.

By 1967, the set of reduced, abstract devices of the “Rákosliget series” started to regain complexity, giving rise to a special kind of scriptural action painting, which, according to the artist's self-definition, could be called “variable tempo gesture painting”. Radiating raw, brutal spontaneity, the paintings are made up of several overlapping layers: multi-layered abstract gestures of cold grey (interspersed with black maskings), inscriptions of various languages, types and kinds (sign

lettering, lines in italics from letters, graffiti, rows of numbers, dates), zodiac symbols, half-masked eroticised female figures, as well as applied photographs, book illustrations and typographic alphabets of fonts. In many cases, the substrate was not even the classic plain canvas, but used boards or veneer sheets, sometimes joined with deliberate sloppiness.

Iparterv was the double exhibition and audience-generating event for a soon-to-become legendary group of young artists from the generation that had emerged in the mid-1960s, and who are now known – not in a negative sense – as the neo-avant-garde. Frey took part in these exhibitions with a self-explanatory naturalness, as one of the core members of the loosely forming “group”. The first Iparterv exhibition, an ad-hoc show in the cultural hall of a large state-owned construction company, was imbued with the intellectual modernity, optimism and Western commitment of 1968. The Iparterv exhibitions were followed by further exhibitions of neo-avant-garde artists in the capital (Frey had three solo club shows in 1968) and then a prestigious series of exhibitions were organised in Poland in collaboration with the Szüenon Group. Subsequently, artists representing the second publicity set up a temporary art centre inside a chapel in Balatonboglár (1970–1973); eventually, the state suppressed independent, Westernised initiatives in the early 1970s through a press campaign and by administrative means.<sup>6</sup>

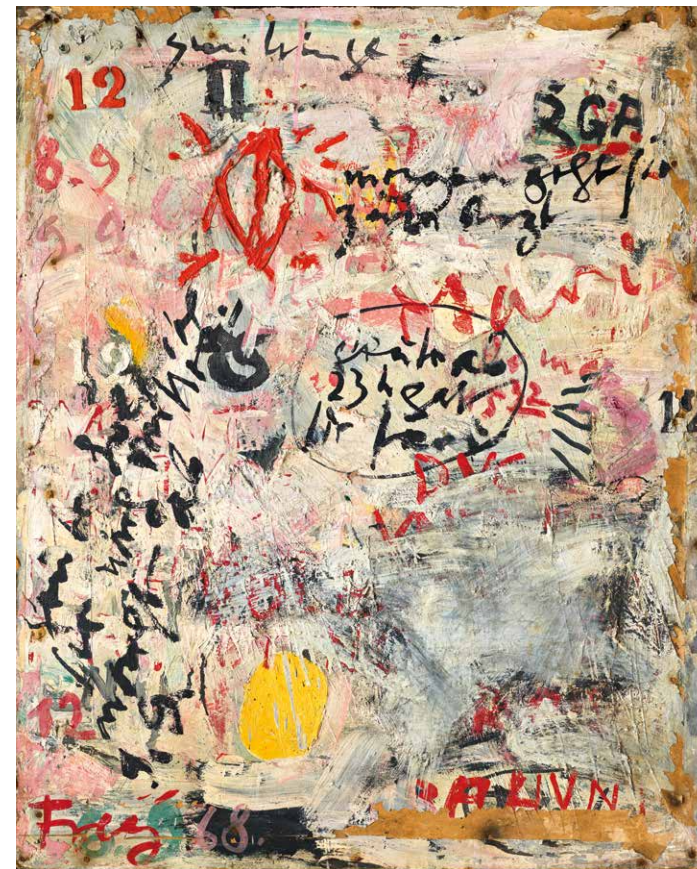
“... with its clear, panel opening onto swirling nothingness and its indentations interrupting the surface, is not only akin to the erasing and nullifying radicalism of the Rákosliget pictures, but also to the tortured, punctured (*buchi*) canvases of Lucio Fontana.”



Krisztián Frey: *White Picture No. 1*, ca. 1965.  
oil and gypsum on woodboard, 63 x 83 cm.  
Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of  
Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Krisztián Frey: *House* [formerly: *In memoriam András Cseh*], 1969, oil on canvas, 134 x 109 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Jáky Collection



Krisztián Frey as a taxi driver in Zurich, ca. 1972. Photo by unknown

Left and next spread (detail):  
Krisztián Frey: *Mari*, 1968, oil on woodboard,  
70 x 57 cm. Photo by György Darabos.  
Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Frey did not wait for progressive artists to go underground, and emigrated from Hungary to Switzerland in the summer of 1970. "To paint 'freely' in the West was my desire from the start, but there was always something that kept me at home. In 1970, I had to leave because my father retired and could no longer support me. The art historian Dr. Fritz Billeter prepared me for my new life in Zurich, where he was a critic for *Tages-Anzeiger*," he recalls the decisive moment.<sup>7</sup> Billeter happened to see his 1967 exhibition in Rákosliget and from then on kept inviting the Hungarian artist to Zurich. After the oxygen-deprived atmosphere of the Eastern European underground, the thriving atmosphere of modern art in Zurich in the 1970s proved to be an ideal creative environment for Frey. His broader environment was defined as the informel or tachism, tendencies with a sensitivity for calligraphy (Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu, Mark Tobey), and his closer aesthetic points of reference were the scriptural abstracts (*Skripturaler Malerei*), such as Antoni Tàpies.<sup>8</sup> Between 1972 and 1975, he was a regular exhibitor at Galerie Schlégl, an important gallery of the Swiss contemporary scene, run by a Hungarian-born art dealer. It was here that he met the art collector Dr René Moser, who became his key collector and a supportive friend.

Frey worked obsessively in his first years in Switzerland. He continued along the lines of his earlier paintings that evoked handwritten letters, working, instead of a scriptural kind of abstract expressionism, on a certain way to transpose concrete poetry into painting. The process of creation was accelerated, instead of developing his

paintings gradually, layer by layer, in many cases Frey completed them in a few hours, *alla prima*. He retained the peculiar, opalescent, translucent grey tone resulting from the duality of the white and black layers, while scratching and erasing the written letters into the still wet surface with his finger or the handle of a brush. The positive air around the Hungarian émigré painter changed within a few years. The artist, who did not strive for the milieu of wealthy art connoisseurs, did not develop a large clientele around himself, and when his collector-artist friend moved abroad, Frey ended up working as a taxi driver (as the stamp on many of his 1970s works on paper reads: "Christian Frey – Taxishauffeur") and then as a bus driver.

A restless seeker of new impulses, Frey – whose outstanding mathematical and musical talents had been evident from an early age – became intrigued by early computer technology in the mid-1970s. Computer art gave Frey the opportunity to model the universe at the abstract level of mathematics. For nearly 20 years, he stopped making paintings and etchings and immersed himself in the technicised world of logic, music and poetry. His work was exhibited at the Städtische Galerie zum Strahhof in Zurich in 1981. At the exhibition entitled *Stochastic Suprematism*, he put hundreds of computer drawings of curved black lines on display, all created on the computer screen using programs he had created. After stochastic suprematism, symbolic time structures, and stochastic language, Frey experimented with block-like image units printed from numbers and symbols between 1982 and 1984.





Above: Krisztián Frey: *White Picture No. 2*, ca. 1965, oil and gypsum on woodboard, 45.5 x 125 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Left: Krisztián Frey: *Western Wall*, 1950s, oil on canvas, 82 x 137 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

The 1980s brought an exciting turn in the Hungarian art scene. Alongside the discovery of new generations, the oeuvres of progressive abstract painters from the 1960s came to the fore, in many cases – such as Imre Bak or István Nádler, who had stayed in Hungary – joining in with the new painting program. The memory of Krisztián Frey, who had worked as a bus driver in Zurich, was also rekindled. It was owing to a jubilee group exhibition rediscovering the achievements of the Iparterv generation in 1980 that Frey – as one of the émigré heroes of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde – was brought back into the Hungarian art scene’s public consciousness. He was assigned a special position in the new canon that was formed after the regime change, museums bought his early works, and the Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle) regularly took his works to international exhibitions. He first visited Hungary in person in 1990 and spent increasing amounts of time in Budapest until his death in 1997.

In 1990, he started doing manual work again, because on the one hand, he missed “the physical labour” he was used to “in stretching and moving the canvas and in the action of painting”, and, on the other hand, he grew bored of computer art as it was becoming popular.<sup>9</sup> He returned to the diary-like scriptural practice of hastily written lines from his early Zurich period, but in many cases he no longer scrawled his texts in dilute paint, but scribbled them on white paper or tracing paper in graphite pencil or charcoal, showing an impatience that shone through the lines. The late paintings are more “translucent” and less dense than those of the 1960s, with less sign characters, less zodiac signs and less black silhouette figures. The most original works of Frey’s late period are the pictures on folded paper, whose square grid structure recalls the logic of Hantai’s *Tabulae*. Frey folded the portrait format white sheets of drawing paper several times to form twelve, sixteen or even thirty-two rectangles.



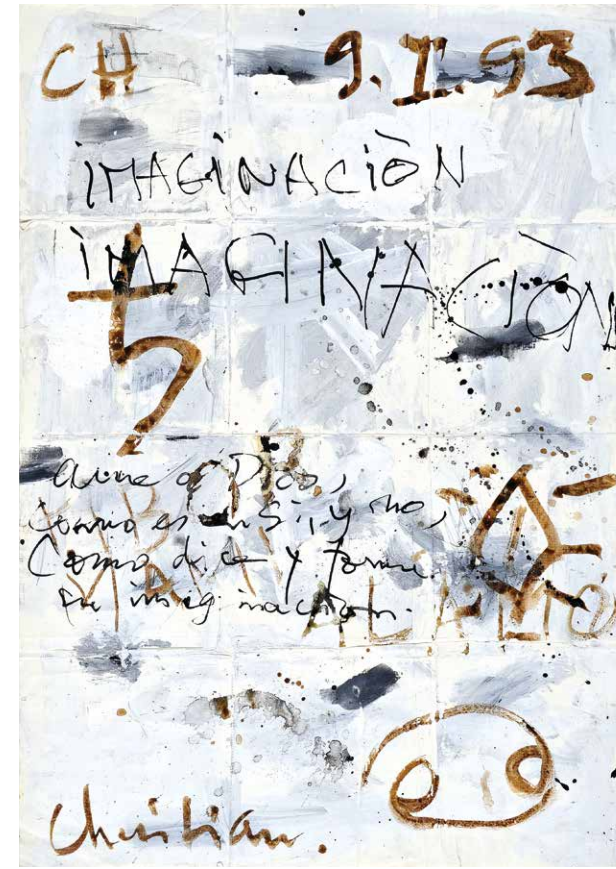
Krisztián Frey: 1992. VI. 14., 1992, mixed media on folded paper, 69.5 x 49.5 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: U G, 1992, mixed media on folded paper, 69.5 x 50 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Krisztián Frey: Untitled, 1992, mixed media on folded paper, 69 x 49.5 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: Untitled, 1992, ink on folded paper, 69.5 x 50 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Krisztián Frey: IMAGINACIÓN, 1993, oil and ink on folded paper, 69 x 49 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: Untitled, ca. 1991, ink on folded paper, 69.5 x 50 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Krisztián Frey: BP XV, 1992, mixed media on folded paper, 69 x 49.5 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Krisztián Frey: Untitled, 1991, oil on paper, 69 x 49.5 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

On the surface, which was eventually spread out but retained the lines of the folding, he treated each field as both a separate image and part of a larger work, working on them in parallel.

In one of his last paintings, the grey composition *September* (1994, private collection), the inscription “Sir Frey the writer” is written in large letters in the lower left-hand corner. The basic motif (“Sir Frey the writer”), which runs through his entire oeuvre, comes from a paragraph in an old first-grade reading book, where the word “Sir” was followed by “writer”. This insignificant word pair is now, since Péter Esterházy, seen as a relic of a bourgeois world where literacy was the privilege of the gentry,<sup>10</sup> and when painters were still referred to as “picture writers” for lack of a proper Hungarian word. Frey, as an unconstrained, free citizen, was an heir to this world: as a 20th century “pictoriographer” he spent a lifetime scribbling letters with compulsive consistency, and he turned writing into a system of scriptural gestures that made him one of the most important figures in Hungarian abstract painting after the Second World War.

Translated by Dániel Sipos

This text is a shorter, edited version of a study that was first published in 2022 in the exhibition catalogue {Script:Abstract}: Herr Frey Frei, edited by Gábor Rieder and published by Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest.



Krisztián Frey: 92. III. 11, 1992, mixed media on folded paper, 70 x 50 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite: Krisztián Frey: *It's Getting Too Damn Hot*, 1993, mixed media on folded paper, 69.5 x 50 cm. Photo by György Darabos. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



1 Cited by Beke: László Beke, “Magyar nem-ábrázoló művészet I. – Az absztrakció továbbfejlődése: konstruktív és organikus tendenciák” [Hungarian Non-representational Art I – Further Development of Abstraction: Constructive and Organic Tendencies], *Kritika* (1971/1): 16.

2 For biographical information see Frey’s monograph in Hungarian and German: Éva Gelencsér Rothman, *Christian Frey Krisztián* (Budapest: Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle, 2002); and the most complete biographical interview published in print: Péter Sinkovits, “Milyen a sztochasztikus kép? Beszélgetés Frey Krisztiánnal” [What is the Stochastic Image? Conversation with Krisztián Frey], *Új Művészet* (1991/1): 32-37.

3 “Conversation with László Lakner”, in Ildikó Nagy ed., *Hatvanas évek. Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben* [The Sixties. New Endeavours in Hungarian Art] (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó – Magyar Nemzeti Galéria – Ludwig Museum, 1991), 137.

4 Opening speech by László Lakner at Krisztián Frey’s exhibition opening at the Art+Text Budapest Gallery on 10 September 2015.

5 The shop windows Frey photographed, which functioned as offices for the Gas Works, were not an uncommon element of street scenes in the 1950s and early 1960s; that he considered this banal sight worth photographing and preserving can be explained only by the subject’s clear visual similarity to his own painting.

6 Júlia Klaniczay – Edit Sasvári eds., *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme. 1970–1973* [Illegal Avant-garde. The Chapel Studio of György Galántai in Balatonboglár. 1970–1973] (Budapest: Artpool – Balassi, 2003).

7 Cited by Gelencsér, *Frey Krisztián*, 7.

8 Fritz Billeter, *Möglichkeiten Skripturaler Malerei*. Introduction to Krisztián Frey’s 1971 Exhibition at the Kunsthau Zürich, manuscript, Bibliothek, Kunsthau Zürich.

9 Sinkovits, “Milyen a sztochasztikus kép”, 37.

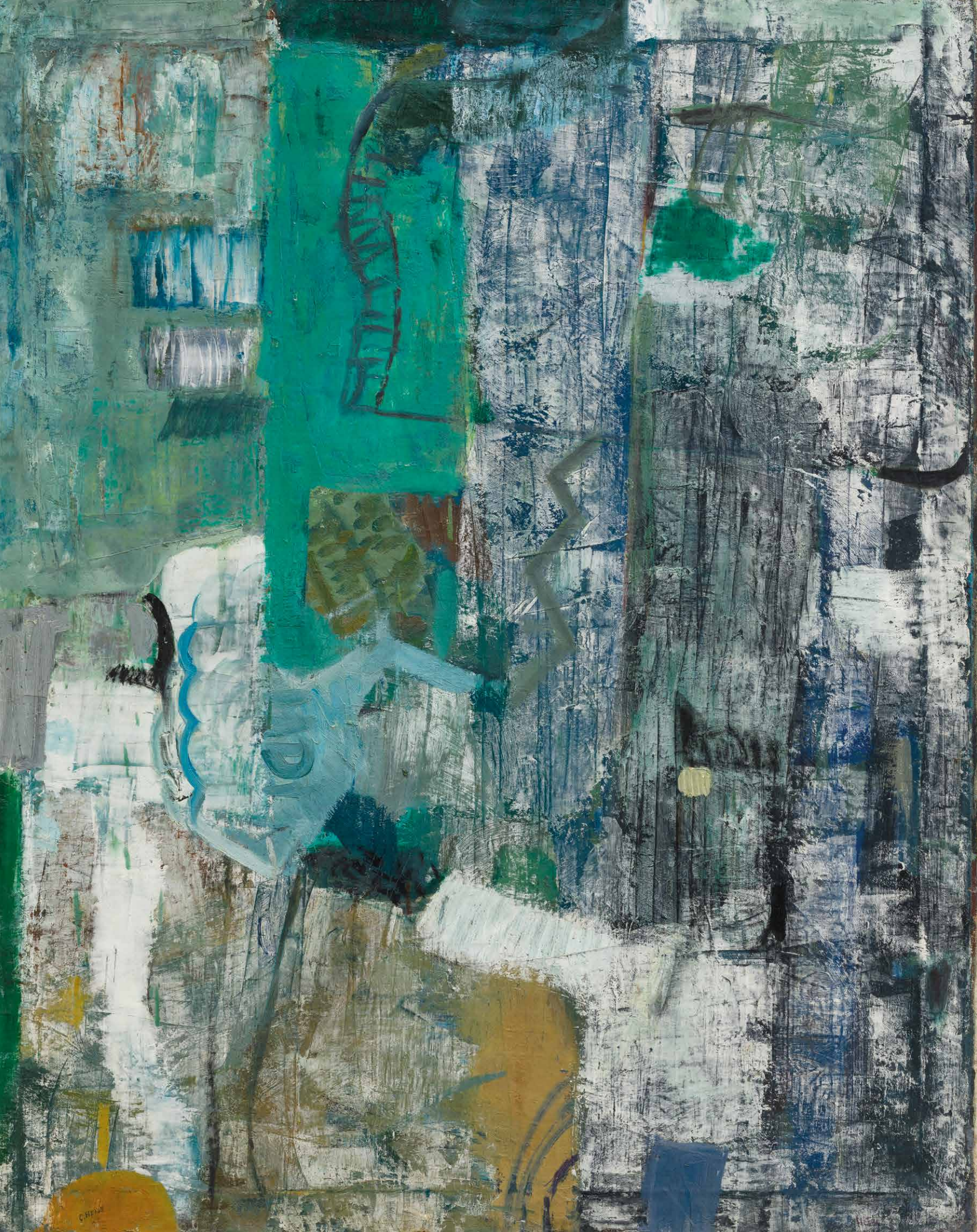
10 The Hungarian scholastic phrase “úr ír” [- “sir writer”, lit. “gentleman writes”], ingrained into generations through old alphabet books, was rendered into an immortal, frivolous-philosophical thesis statement or ars poetica of sorts by the novelist Péter Esterházy, but it had already appeared metaphorically in a novel by Mihály Babits, *The Nightmare* [orig.: *The Stork Caliph*], 1916: “I wanted to be a sir, a sir who writes, a sir who reads. / Sir writer – this phrase, which I remembered from my first grade reading book in elementary school, became an inner song for my soul.” Mihály Babits, *The Nightmare*, trans. Éva Rác (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1966).

# Katalin

# Hetey

(1924–2010)





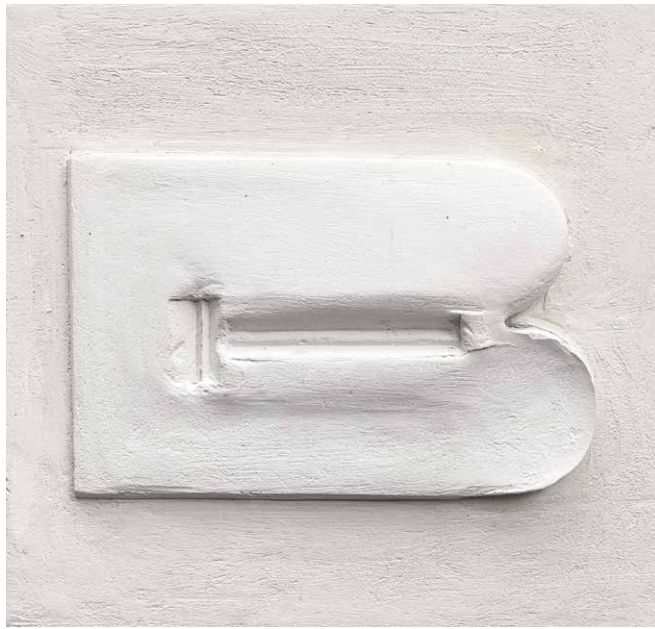
# From Eastern Hungary to France

In the life and oeuvre of an artist, there is often little of consistency to allow general conclusions to be drawn. The majority of artists, writers, thinkers and even scientists ebb and flow through better and worse periods. What is almost certain, however, is that the human characteristics and stages of individual artists cannot be explained with anything other than the undeniable differences in their personalities, their convictions, and their private lives.

No one genuinely believes that a person can become a great painter, poet, researcher, or musician simply by virtue of being talented or meritorious. According to Antoni Tàpies, one of Katalin Hetey's favourite painters, even the reverse is true: the essential requirement for significant artistic creation is none other than outstanding *human* qualities. All too often, one only realises this after a life's work has come to a close.

The brilliant sculptor and graphic artist Katalin Hetey took an important step when she made the journey from the city of Miskolc in Eastern Hungary, where she and I were both born, to the metropolis of Paris, France. She later returned to Budapest, having acquired knowledge and pursued studies in Switzerland and America. She travelled widely. Always with her eyes wide open, critically, yet reservedly. She was, however, always willing to divulge to a young person, a historian, a worthy artist, her thoughts on sculpture: from the dragon-slayer of George and Martin of Kolozsvár through the carvings of Miklós Borsos to the statues of Tinguely or Henry Moore.

Katalin Hetey: *Ischia*, 1967, oil on canvas.  
100 x 80 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy.  
Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Katalin Hetey's works clearly reveal how she investigated space, its structure and layers, its responses to light. The space that is occupied, enclosed or excised out of nothingness by an artwork. In her works, the indentations, the rounded or angular figures, and the negative forms maintain the balance of forces. Metals are usually very submissive materials: they can be shaped to give form to a sculptor's every thought. From prehistoric sculpture till the start of the twentieth century, statues always depicted mass and filled space. Then came the birth of linear sculpture, open in form, dynamic in intent. Works of this kind are mostly forms or figures drawn in air.

What Hetey made were therefore sculptures, not carvings. Sadly, I never asked her why, although I had ample opportunity to do so. In her once tiny, now sprawling house on Budenz Road in Budapest, and sometimes in her little atelier apartment in Paris, we had countless conversations. In 1981, the first exhibition of contemporary art held after 1956 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, presented works by Hetey and her husband, Tamás Konok. It was while arranging their works that I learned how to interpret objects and to organise an exhibition. We proceeded according to the principle that less is more, and under the watchful eyes of the few great scholars who were still working there at the time, I became convinced that our decision was correct.

Hetey was a natural-born teacher. I was in my twenties when she first told me about the art of Chillida, and to this day, the great Basque master and Hetey belong together in my mind's picture of history. For me, the highlight of her work are the white reliefs. Those works have lost none of their beauty since I last saw them forty years ago in the cellar of Hetey and Konok's home. They bring to mind the relief by Ben Nicholson that hung on the closing wall of the recently closed *Cézanne to Malevich* exhibition in Budapest.<sup>1</sup> Hetey's reliefs are understated reflections on the works of Henri Laurens and Ben Nicholson.

She did not produce large-sized sculptures, for she wanted to keep her material under her control, and she was capable of appraising its strength. She could hold mass in the palm of her hand, her feelings never deceived her, and she even regarded foundries as workshops of the spirit. She was on good terms with all the workers, something she had in common with the other master of this generation, Marta Pan. The people who cast her thoughts and her drawn forms into bronze, chromium steel or aluminium were seen by Hetey as her equals. This was the same immense respect with which Picasso treated the engravers and lithographers in the printing workshops, when he was not the one leaning over the copperplate or stone.

Above (left): Katalin Hetey: *Relief III*, 1987, plaster and acrylic on canvas, 28 x 28 x 3.5 cm. Photo by Konok-Hetey Art Foundation. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Above (right): Katalin Hetey: *Relief VII*, 1988, plaster on fibreboard, 9.5 x 23.5 x 5.6 cm. Photo by Konok-Hetey Art Foundation. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite: Katalin Hetey: *White Relief I*, 1970, plaster on canvas, 35.5 x 28.8 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

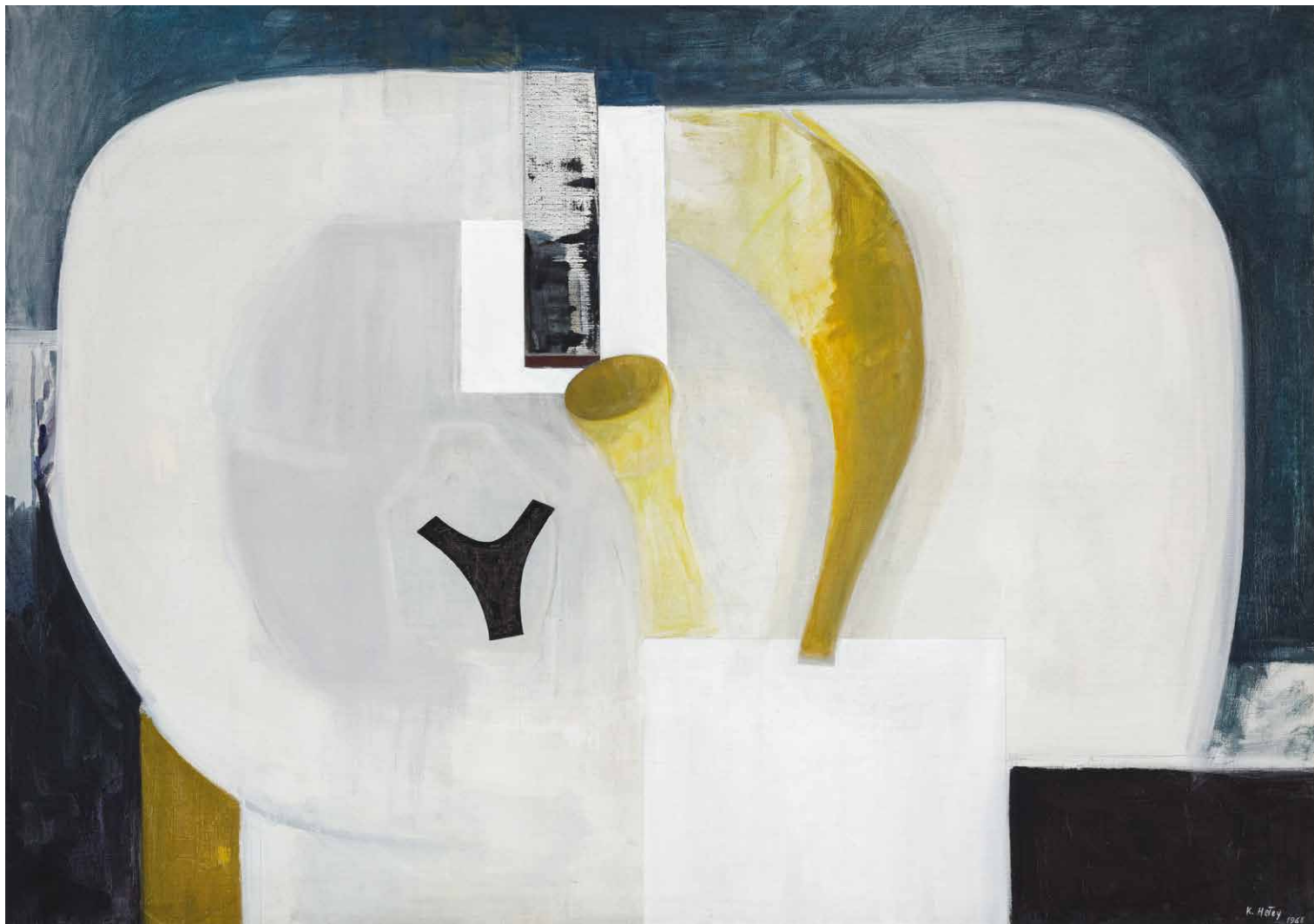




Left: Hetey Katalin and her husband Tamás Konok. Courtesy of Konok-Hetey Art Foundation

Above: Katalin Hetey: *Untitled*, 1968, oil and collage on fibreboard, 50 x 61 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Graphic designer, painter, and sculptor Katalin Hetey (1924–2010) studied at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest in the same year group as artists Simon Hantái, Judit Reigl, and Vera Molnár, all of whom subsequently entered the Parisian art scene, just like Hetey did. She left Hungary in 1956 and, following a short but inspiring stay in Italy where she met key figures of Arte Povera, such as Afro, Alberto Burri and Marino Marini, she ended up in Paris. There, Hetey's artistic vocabulary matured in the proximity of the École de Paris, French informel, and L'Art Brut. She had solo presentations at such galleries and institutions as Galerie Lambert in Paris (1962), the Stedelijk Museum in the Netherlands (1964, 1971), Musée des Beaux-Arts in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (1979) or the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest (1981). In 2008, she was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit, and in 2009 the Kossuth Prize. Hetey's works can be found in a number of private and public collections, including the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Stadtische Sammlung, Hamburg; Musée des Beaux-Arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Katalin Hetey: *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 114 x 162 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite: Katalin Hetey: *Untitled*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Hetey created objects whose essence gained significance after her death in 2010. The provincial environment, the geological relics of Miskolc-Tapolca, the memory of her walks in the Bükk Hills, all lurked behind her creative power and the wide European expanses. The natural forces opened up and held hands with the pulsating Western European art scene, giving birth to sovereign artistic decisions. The boldness of Barbara Hepworth and the universalism of Chillida grew hushed in Hetey's works. Her gracefully coloured paintings and her larger, more full-blooded pictures drew from both trends of French "abstraction": from the expressive tendency, when she engaged in dialogue with Vieira da Silva, but also from the work of the masters of Abstraction-Création.

Here at the foot of Montagne Saint Victoire, where I am currently working, it is easy to understand how the Hungarians who matured into artists on French soil – Simon Hantaï, Marta Pan, Alexandre Hollán, Hetey, Konok, Judit Reigl, and Vera Molnár – came to realise that everything is a question of degree, of moderation, taste and independence, firmly embedded in a European tradition that differs for every artist.

Almost all of these great artists I could count among my friends. Hetey stood out amongst them for her modesty. But now her time has come. Look at her self-repeating forms; hear in them the voice of nature, perhaps even the sound of the spirit of history. Katalin was strong, she kept her art in equilibrium, and she strove to ensure that others, near and far, would understand this. She always expressed herself with utmost clarity and precision. Her works reveal the thoughts that occupied her mind.

Translated by Steve Kane



Next spread (left): Katalin Hetey: *Part and Whole*, installation view, 27 May – 24 June 2022, Einspach Fine Art & Photography, Budapest. Photo by Dávid Biró

Next spread (right): Katalin Hetey: *Untitled*, 1968 (detail), oil and collage on fibreboard, 50 x 61 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

1 Editor's note: The exhibition *Cezanne to Malevich. Arcadia to Abstraction* was curated by Judit Geskó at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. It was on view between 29 October 2021 and 13 February 2022.





## GYÖRGY Z. GÁCS, THE HOMO LUDENS

“There is nothing I hate more than indifference,” he said in an interview when asked about his *ars poetica*. Given his 1968 ceramic sculpture *Spatial Grid*, this is not surprising. Far from the Camus-type nihilist attitude of existentialism (the Hungarian translation of *L'Étranger* is “Közöny” (Indifference), not “The Stranger”), György Z. Gács (1914–1978) served the modern man with his diverse and creative artistic experiments – whether it was Le Corbusier’s loop-bodied, schematised male figure from the realm of international modernism or his soc-modern counterpart from behind the Iron Curtain. Either would have been thrilled to turn up in the 1960s in an architectural environment where spaces are separated by a break-through arabesque of wittily variable, colour-glazed ceramic cylinders. Z. Gács’s work is a sculptural experiment, a fantasy that has remained a prototype, i. e. nowhere near production – all the more reason for it to be understood in the context of autonomous kinetic sculpture.

Z. Gács was born under a threatening star at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During his long and prosperous career, he became a successful representative of twentieth-century Hungarian art and the tremendous wave of mid-century modernism that abolished and connected genres. Growing up in a well-educated family of intellectuals in Budapest, the artist spent his childhood surrounded by urban planning drafts, playing Indian in the cap of the legendary architect of national art nouveau, Ödön Lechner. A fertile intellectual environment. Although he studied painting with the renowned

masters of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in the 1930s, he was interested from the outset in more monumental spatial-visual programmes than studio-based easel painting. (This is not unconnected with his role in the semi-underground society of the Socialist Artists’ Group, a left-wing, socially engaged formation.) In the early 1950s, during the darkest years of communist dictatorship, he began using reinforced concrete in his artistic practice, then glass, and from 1960 onwards, kinetic art – as both a creator and a highly influential teacher.

As an experimental spirit, he was the first in Hungary to reformulate the genre of glass sculpture in the 1960s. He fabricated space dividers with prismatic surfaces and mobile glass-metal structures, orienting his practice towards public spaces. With his mobile sculptures deploying chrome steel, glass, and mirrors, he joined the significant international current of kinetic and op art sculpture, which has been shaped by such distinguished Hungarian émigrés as Victor Vasarely and Nicolas Schöffer in France and György Kepes in the United States. But in his case, the scientific, high-tech, and utopian perspective was replaced by mystical wonder: shimmering in the colours of a rainbow, an otherworldly, alien reality. Kinetic works filled the man of the mid-century design era with both a sense of longing and angst. This ambivalent anxiety was resolved by Z. Gács with his playful wit and the psychology of the *Homo ludens*, animating his kinetic art.

/ Gábor Rieder



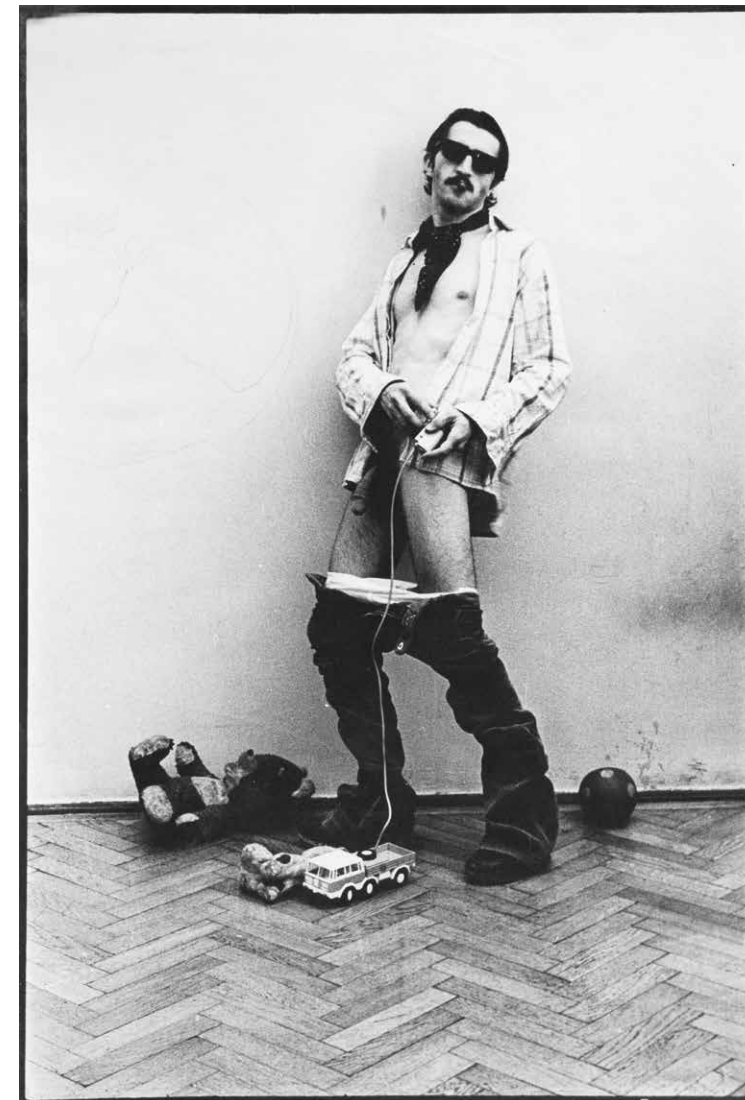
Left: Charlotte Perriand: “Tunisie” bookcase, ca. 1952, oak and lacquered metal, 158.7 × 353.1 × 52.7 cm. Manufactured by Les Ateliers Jean Prouvé, Nancy, France

Right: György Z. Gács: *Spatial Grid*, 1967, glazed ceramic and stained pine structure, 61.5 × 6.5 × 21.5 cm. Photo by Dániel Kristófy. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



GYÖRGY Z. GÁCS

# Tibor



# Hajas

(1946–1980)



JÓZSEF HAVASRÉTI:

# Tibor Hajas and Viennese Actionism

We are grateful to Galerie Konzett and Wienerroither & Kohlbacher for their help in the realisation of this article.

Tibor Hajas: *Chöd*, 18 December 1979, performance, Bercsényi Kollégium, Budapest, gelatin silver print, 24 x 18 cm. Photo by György Makky. Courtesy of Tibor Hajas Estate

**1.**

Analogies between the art of Tibor Hajas (1946–1980) and the Viennese Actionists (Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler) are a critical comparative commonplace in studies on Hajas's work. To quote just one example: "... blinding, castration, dissection, death, dismemberment, etc. Who wouldn't think immediately of Tibor Hajas, some of whose performance art is eerily reminiscent of Schwarzkogler's actions?"<sup>1</sup> The similarities – primarily with the works of Rudolf Schwarzkogler – are indeed striking. There are a number of possible explanations, including their apportioned share in contemporary international discourse, the quest for typological/comparative correlations, and perhaps the question of epigonism and "belated" trends. One might also argue that similar circumstances (the trauma of isolation, the oppressiveness of a petty bourgeois environment, a constitutional attraction to certain deep psychological and philosophical models) can potentially evoke similar reactions – in this context, similar works of art.

By way of introduction, I examine the most important points of connection that suggest something more than chance similarity. The most immediate of these is the interpretation of happening and performance as the evocation or revival of ritual practices. What is important here is the emergence of similar themes and practices that are almost the trademark of works by both Schwarzkogler and Tibor Hajas. These include the expansion of the pictorial plane, the integration of the environment into the medium of the image, and a predilection for applying makeup. One also encounters a common use of instruments to mutilate or modify the body: needles, pins, hypodermic syringes, razors. Another important shared feature is a distancing from actions performed in the presence of spectators: instead, photographs are used to document the meticulously planned sequences. Lastly, mention might be made of their shared interest in Eastern asceticism: in Hajas's case, this meant the influence of the Tibetan mysteries, and in Schwarzkogler's the mysticism of the Far East and Christianity, as well as Indian yoga.

Although not fully substantiated, Tibor Hajas's familiarity with the aspirations of the Viennese Actionists can be regarded as certain. He belonged to a circle of Hungarian avant-garde artists who were keen to identify points of connection with contemporary international processes. The volume *Szövegek* [Texts], a compilation of Hajas's collected writings, even contains several concrete references

to the Actionists' work. One of these references is clearly to the work of Günter Brus, although his name is not actually mentioned, while on another occasion Hajas refers directly to Schwarzkogler.<sup>2</sup> All these references are paradigmatic: in the case of Brus, he discusses self-painting (*Selbstbemalung*), while in Schwarzkogler's case the reference is to self-mutilation – these practices are typical of all of them.

The question arises as to the sources from which Hajas obtained his information about the Actionists' work. One source may have been a lecture by the literary critic and media artist Gergely Molnár, which he gave on 11 March 1977 in the Young Artists' Club (Fiatal Művészek Klubja, or FMK). Although the subject of the lecture was ostensibly Hermann Nitsch, Molnár endeavoured to provide as comprehensive an overview as possible of Viennese Actionism. We can be fairly certain that Hajas attended this lecture, since he was a regular visitor to the FMK; on the other hand, he may even have read the text of the lecture. It is unlikely that such a lengthy document would not have been accessible to one of Molnár's closest friends. Mention might also be made of Hajas's 1979 text *Szövegkép* (*Text mirage*, known earlier by the title *Sidpa Bardo*). Certain expressions and episodes in this text are not only strikingly similar to the methods used by the Actionists for the destructive reshaping and "swamping" (*Versumpfung*) of the space around them (room, cellar, studio, exhibition space), but they also appear in Molnár's writing.



2.

One link in the typological chain that connects Hajas with the Viennese Actionists is the ritual character of their work: in this respect, they are naturally aligned with the almost inevitably ritual quality of all action art. At the same time, the Actionists', and in particular Hermann Nitsch's, systematic references to the cult of Dionysus highlight even more explicitly the ritual connections that appear in their works and that lend them meaning. Two additional comments are required here. On the one hand, Hajas's aspirations in the context of actionist art refer primarily to the ritual practices of the Tibetan Mysteries rather than Greek (Dionysian) rites; references to the latter are rather to be found in the pages of his *Text mirage*, written in 1979. On the other hand, the work of Rudolf Schwarzkogler, which bears the greatest resemblance to Hajas's endeavours, was regarded by his friend and fellow artist Hermann Nitsch as being Apollonian rather than Dionysian in character. There is no denying that Schwarzkogler and Hajas appear far more puritan and ascetic, and more precise in their use of instruments, compared to Brus, Muehl, and Nitsch. Furthermore, Nitsch's action art blatantly imitates aspects of the cult of Dionysus and Christian liturgy with almost mechanical accuracy – the Passion, crucifixion, music, wine, and animal sacrifice – while in contrast Schwarzkogler and Hajas employed far more abstract ritual paradigms. Collective, community participation in the ritual process played a far more negligible role in the works of the latter two artists. In the case of both artists, photography allowed for the absence of disruption and offered the possibility for "complete concentration" on the action.



Above: Tibor Hajas: *Chöd (Film) III*, 1979, gelatin silver print, vintage, 19.5 x 29 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Opposite: Hermann Nitsch: *5. Aktion*, 3 March 1964, Otto Muehl's studio, Vienna. Photo by Ludwig Hoffenreich, Siegfried Klein (Khasaq), Peter Jurkowsch. Courtesy of Galerie Konzett



Despite their bloody external appearance, Nitsch's works are strongly characterised by the pursuit of attractiveness and by intense, spectacular, almost "operatic" gestures. By contrast, Schwarzkogler and Hajas relied to a far greater extent on self-destruction, on attributes where the impact was not so much organic as technological and alienating: packing needles, razor blades, hypodermic syringes, hosepipes, expanders, UV lamps, light bulbs, wires, nails, drills, cramp irons, and the like. Another difference lay in the manner in which the artists participated in the action. Nitsch initially performed the blood-drenched role of the sacrificed divinity (e.g., in 1. Aktion, 1962; 5. Aktion, 1964). Later, however, he appeared in the role of high priest or master of ceremonies, controlling, staging, and directing. Tibor Hajas placed his own body, and the operations performed on it, at the centre of his actions, without shrinking from the resulting vulnerability or from the physical risks (intoxication, suffocation, electrocution, burns, unconsciousness, physical collapse). He insisted that true art exposes the self to risk. It was only in his first action (*Hochzeit*, 1965) that Schwarzkogler appeared publicly before a restricted audience of selected invitees, while from his second action onwards, he used a model, in the person of photographer Heinz Cibulka. Thus, in his most famous works, the notorious simulated castrations in 2. Aktion (1964) and 3. Aktion (1966), it is Cibulka rather than Schwarzkogler who appears.

In many respects, Schwarzkogler distanced himself, or rather differentiated himself, from the rest of the group. Compared to the bloody, or even vegetative chaos and orgiastic riot that appears in the works of Nitsch, Brus, and Muehl, some of Schwarzkogler's works do indeed convey an "Apollonian" transparency, acuity, and articulation, while the theme of castration that is integral to his entire

oeuvre – interpreted according to this typology – is rather Apollonian than Dionysian. At the same time, compared to the Actionists, Hajas's works are more trenchant and targeted, representing the existential position of the artist poised on the border between the fleeting moment and eternity. Its consummation can be found in *Text mirage*, in the strongly transgressive flow of the text with its accumulated images of carnality, destruction and atrocity. Although ideas from the most diverse contexts (media, religion, counterculture, sexual pathology, etc.) are heaped one on top of the other in Hajas's writing, the lines are bursting with the aggressive presence of the Dionysian rite, celebrating the vibrant pulse of life with its scenes of destruction, disintegration, and barbarity. To all intents and purposes, the ramified references found in *Text mirage* integrate the "Dionysian" aspirations of Nitsch with the "Apollonian" aspirations of Schwarzkogler. The highly complex narrative concerns certain aspects of "love designed and implemented as a work of art" (in Tibor Hajas's own words), in which material/physical images of sexual perversion, ritual acts of cruelty, sadistic rage and repulsion are interwoven.

The principal reasons for and indications of Schwarzkogler's "isolation" are outlined below. Compared to most of the Actionists, his art was more articulate, aestheticised, and cerebral: "more Apollonian", so to say. In terms of contemporary art, the starting point and background to his actions was not art in formal or gestural painting, but rather conceptualism. With the exception of the first, his actions were not public: they were carefully planned sequences, photographed in their entirety, which ultimately acquired permanency in works of fine-art photography (tableaux, montages, and series). Interestingly, the characteristic features that distinguished Schwarzkogler's works from the majority of the Actionists are also to be found in Hajas.



A comparison of Hajas's actions with the work of the Actionists makes clear that in the case of the Budapest artist, too, the actions appear more ascetic, introverted, somehow "more constricted", and far less organic compared to the material and sensory excess of Nitsch, Brus, and Muehl. Food, for example, never featured in Hajas's actions, while, by contrast, the use of fruit, flour, meat, honey, milk and eggs – and the rituals associated with eating in general – were one of the trademarks of actionism. At most, Hajas ventured to drink paint, but if one considers it carefully, the associated "performance vomiting" was in itself more shocking than the majority of the Actionists' works. Like Schwarzkogler, Tibor Hajas approached action art from the direction of conceptual art, and he likewise distanced/alienated himself from actions performed in the presence of the public. His studio performances were photographed by János Vető, while the photographs that embodied the actions were finalised under Hajas's supervision. There are also similarities in the reception and "philology" of Schwarzkogler and Hajas in terms of the history of photography: the corpus representing their endeavours is located within the force field of the artist-authorised tableaux that enshrine and canonise the actions on the one hand, and the entirety of the extant photographs on the other.

Otto Muehl: *Materialaktion Nr. 2, Versumpfung einer Venus*, 1963. Muehl's studio, Vienna. Photo by Ludwig Hoffenreich. Courtesy of Galerie Konzett

Opposite: Rudolf Schwarzkogler: *1. Aktion (Hochzeit)*, 6 February 1965, Vienna. Courtesy of Galerie Konzett

In what follows, I examine thematic unities in relation to the parallels between Hajas and Viennese Actionism, and within it primarily Schwarzkogler. The first theme is that of body painting – the importance of painting with the body and painting the body. The second is the use of “nonartistic” materials and props. The third is the question of makeup. The fourth is the bandaging, binding, and distortion of the body. The fifth and final theme is the peculiar “semiotics” of dissection, mutilation, amputation, and castration. There are overlappings among all these themes, since the bandaging of the body, for example, is in itself a kind of masking; while binding and incision are both aspects of medical (surgical and psychiatric) praxis, as well as sadomasochistic sexual practice. In its entirety, this is encompassed by one of the fundamental problems in action art: the question of authority and control over the human body. Below, I examine these themes in greater detail:



(1) Self-painting and painting with the body are a decisive aspect of Schwarzkogler's early works – for example his first action, *Hochzeit* (Wedding, 1965). There is evidence that Hajas was familiar with Günter Brus's concept of *Selbstbemalung*, which, in terms of body-painting actions, perhaps made a deeper impression on him than similar endeavours by Schwarzkogler. Body painting includes the smearing of the body with blood, eggs, and a mixture of all kinds of filth, which was otherwise an inevitable aspect of action art. The painting of the body, and its resulting stylisation, enhancement, or degradation, was a typical device in Viennese Actionism, whether in the form of deliberate self-painting or as spontaneous smearing with the organic substances used in the actions. It had numerous functions, from the expansion of painting and the pictorial plane (informalism), through the capturing of the physical gestures of painting (tachisme), to primeval dissolution in the material-biological principle (“Materialaktionen”). In terms of the significance of body painting, it is simplest in Hajas's case to refer to one of his most famous works, *Húsfestmény* (Flesh painting). While Hajas's work unquestionably has a different sequential and narrative structure than that of *Wedding*, for example, there is an obvious thematic and technical similarity.

On this page: Günter Brus: *Selbstbemalung*, 1964, gelatin silver print, each 16.5 × 22.7 cm. Courtesy of Galerie Konzett

Opposite: Tibor Hajas: *Makeup Studies*, 1979, gelatin silver print, vintage, 24 × 30 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Next spread (left): Tibor Hajas: *Flesh Painting I*, 1978, gelatin silver print, vintage, 18 × 24.5 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Next spread (right): Tibor Hajas: *Surface Torture III (Fossils)*, 1978, gelatin silver print, vintage, 30 × 24.2 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography





(2) I will break down the problem of “nonartistic” materials and props into three sub-questions. The first concerns the use of everyday objects (tools, instruments, items of clothing, furniture, etc.); and the second is the use of objects and instruments, the provocative or threatening nature of which lends them a particularly subversive or destructive impact (knives, razors, razor blades, hatchets, cramp irons, nails, needles, surgical instruments). The third is connected to informalist aspirations and to the problem of *Materialaktion*: it comprises the loam-like substance worked together from building materials, foodstuffs, organic substances, animal blood, offal and faeces, which was partly the medium, partly a prop, and partly the result of the actions – especially, although not exclusively, in the case of Otto Muehl. “Chopped-off genitals, bleeding ears, labia with eggs and sandwich wrappings, everything mixed together, with no kind of coherence that would allow anyone food for thought.”<sup>3</sup>

It is highly likely that it was in comparison with this kind of direct framing of, and approach to, “reality” that commentators saw Schwarzkogler’s works as cold, conceptual, minimalist, and perfectionist. The expansion of loamy, swampy, occasionally downright disgusting materials defines not so much Hajas’s visual works as certain paragraphs in *Text mirage*. In many respects, *Text mirage* is the verbal adaptation and reformulation of Muehl’s and Brus’s actions, and their extension into the medium of the literary text. “Let your blood,

your sweat, your tears, your mucus, your urine, your faeces first trickle then flood; smear me, bathe me, submerge me, smother me deep below your surface, in your substratum, in your slime.”<sup>4</sup>

The blending of entirely heterogeneous, often incompatible materials was a typical feature of Muehl’s actions – for example, *Materialaktion Nr. 1. Versumpfung eines weiblichen Körpers - Versumpfung einer Venus* (1963). Generally speaking, the term “swamping” is related to the loam-like paste formed from fruit, blood, cement, rags and offal that played a role in Muehl’s material action art, and to the sometimes slightly childish wading and wallowing in it. This kind of manifestation of infantility was not typical of Schwarzkogler or Hajas; in the case of the latter, it should be noted that what otherwise differentiated his actions entirely from the majority of the Viennese Actionists was an apparently completely humourless and uncompromising gravity.

The passage in *Text mirage* in which the phrase “swamping” appears concerns the moistening/saturation of the environment with sperm on a hyperbolic scale. At the same time, Hajas’s ambition in his writing – to depict physical and objective realia (body parts, bedclothes, faeces, animal carcasses), physical conditions and sensations (bodily fluids, odours, perspiration) as a kind of sprawling, amorphous swamp-like medium – is likewise connected to the idea of the swamp and is strongly reminiscent of the use of materials employed by the Actionists.

(3) A common feature of Schwarzkogler’s and Hajas’s work is their predilection for makeup and for the mask-like isolation or concealment of the head and face. On the one hand, makeup (like the bandage-swathed faces favoured by both Hajas and Schwarzkogler) can be interpreted as a kind of mask wearing, while on the other hand – as part of cosmetics/beauty-related discourse and practice – it connects art and its mission with issues of externality, artificiality and contrivance, even if we do not happen to consider the works, the “result” in the everyday sense of the word, to be aesthetic.

In Schwarzkogler’s 1965 work *4. Aktion*, the model’s made-up face evokes the image or vision of clown, death mask, and transvestite. By contrast, through its characteristic black-and-white contrasts, Hajas’s 1979 tableau *Sminkvázlatok* (*Makeup sketches*) draws partly on mask-like connotations and partly on manipulations suggestive of the disintegration of the body, the surface, and the image. In the case of *Makeup sketches*, it is not just the associations

with the eroded picture surface of *Felületkínzás* (*Surface torture*) that are of primary importance, but also the name given to the work. The concept of makeup is related not only to the transformation of the face (whether in the interests of beauty or for ritual purposes), but also to the issue of sexual ambiguity. Makeup is at the same time corrective, transformative, and destructive. It fits into the specific “camp” narrative that foregrounds externalities, appearances, and superficiality (makeup, fashion, models, advertisements, pop culture, and the glitter and bling of glam rock), which was a determining factor throughout Hajas’s oeuvre, creating a paradoxical unity with his penchant for metaphysical and spiritual models. At the same time, makeup is a means of undermining and subverting fixed identities, both in the neo-avant-garde and in popular culture. It might be intended as a ritual mask, or it might be worn to convey the sexual ambiguity of camp or to achieve the various purposes of queer aesthetics.







Previous spread: Tibor Hajas: *Surface Torture*, 1978, gelatin silver print, vintage, 20 x 29 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

Above: Rudolf Schwarzkogler: *2. Aktion*, 1965. Photo by Ludwig Hoffenreich. Courtesy of Galerie Konzett

Right: Tibor Hajas: *Tumo I*, 1979, Agfa Chrome, vintage, 39 x 50 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

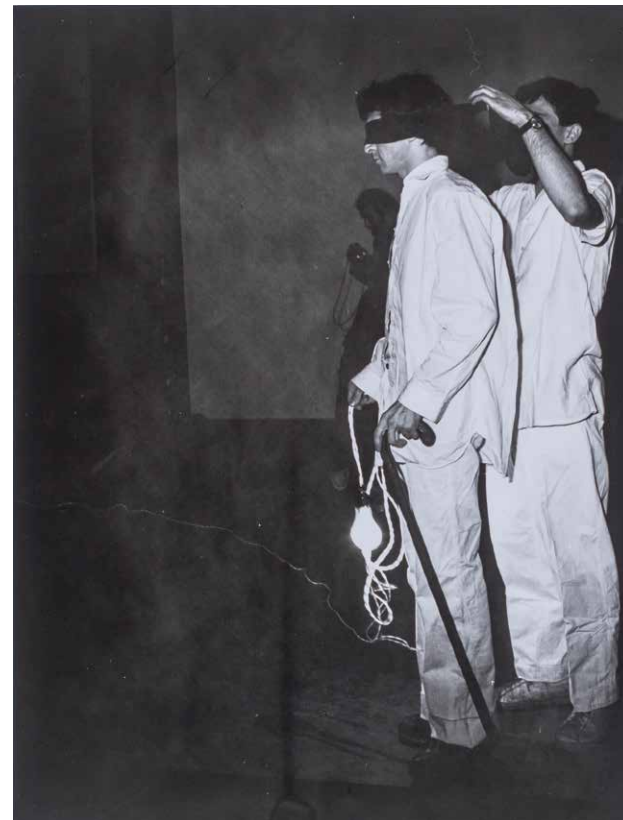
(4) In the case of both Schwarzkogler and Tibor Hajas, the predilection for bandaging and binding the face – and indeed the entire body – is particularly striking.<sup>5</sup> Here too, one can observe a combination of elements related to ritual, sexual pathology, and medicine. The ritual aspect stems from the fact that the concealed face and body are detached from the individual, from the idiosyncratic features of the unique persona, becoming the expression or bearer of dispossessed being. The ritual context is similarly reinforced by the fact that in animal or human sacrifices, the head is typically covered, thus the covering is in itself a symbolic marker or expression of “lethality”, or an association with death.<sup>6</sup> Bondage and trussing are also aspects of sadomasochistic sexual practice and are highly significant in the case of the Actionists, including Schwarzkogler and (to an even greater extent) Tibor Hajas.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not merely the concrete symbolic elements of binding (medical treatment, mumification, sexual submission and dominance) that are significant, but also the sheer degradation of the body; this can be observed in works by both Schwarzkogler and Hajas in which the bandaged body appears in various grotesque and twisted poses. All things considered, this aspect of their art emphasises the symbolic fusion of death and sexuality, which is, on the one hand, an essential archaic ritual and religious experience, and on the other hand a fundamental feature of turn-of-the-century Viennese modernism, this element of which exerted a significant influence on the whole of Viennese Actionism.



(5) In the case of both Schwarzkogler and Hajas, there is a striking use of objects and of references associated with medical treatment, surgery, psychiatry, and health care; these play a role partly in connection with cutting open the body, revealing the internal organs, or wounding the body. Otto Muehl and Schwarzkogler's description of their planned joint action *sanitäre kunst* features a surgical gown, rubber tubing, spittoon, red cross, brain surgery, gastrotomy, and fragments of flesh. Operations involving penetration beneath the surface (the body surface or skin surface) are a typical aspect of Hajas's fantasies about surgery, dissection, torture, and sexual aggression, whether we look at the fragmentary notes made in preparation for his works or at individual excerpts from *Text mirage*.

Fundamental to both Schwarzkogler and Hajas is the use of surgery and dissection as an epistemological metaphor, as well as their close connection with the representational techniques partly of S/M sexuality, and partly of horror. It should not be forgotten that medical and psychiatric language and praxis are at the same time a peculiar technique for exerting control: they are effective tools for differentiating between normal and deviant bodies, mentalities, and behaviours, and for enforcing the associated political, legal, and religious norms. It follows that castration, sterilisation, or brain surgery, for example, are not merely medical operations but techniques for wielding power. In Otto Muehl's work *Materialaktion Nr. 26: Gehirnoperation* (1965), the "brain surgery" carried out on the animal using a drill and hand brace achieves its impact not merely via its absurdity and horror, but also because, owing to both the surgical setting and to the brutality of the operation itself, it is an allusion to frontal lobotomy, which plays an important symbolic role in the practices and language through which brain surgery is realised, or rather judged, as well as its punitive/disciplinary psychiatric functions.

Very similar "medical/surgical" settings and operations are encountered in the works of Tibor Hajas. Their function is likewise to fuse the images and operations of body modification, sexuality, cruelty, and cognition. It can be assumed that in those jottings in which Hajas fantasises about open razors, razors wrapped in tissue paper, and razors cutting into flesh, the influence of Schwarzkogler is at play. In the case of both artists, these objects and practices belong to a discourse set in the context of fears of surgical amputation, self-mutilation, and castration, and of incisions made by surgeon or pathologist, which exert their influence in the force field between the poles of artistic expression and biological knowledge.



#### 4.

Hajas's relationship with the Viennese Actionists can thus be examined and interpreted in many different ways: from the viewpoint of philology, comparatistics, as well as reception and impact history. In terms of impact history alone, of course, of far greater significance is the kind of innovative quality that Hajas succeeded in fashioning out his manifold sources of inspiration.

Translated by Rachel Hideg

The present article is a shortened version of an unillustrated paper published in the September 2018 issue of the journal *Jelenkor* and was edited in 2022 by Lilla Lípusz.

- 1 László F. Földényi: *Az érzékek purgatóriuma: Rudolf Schwarzkogler, 1940-1989* [The purgatory of the senses: Rudolf Schwarzkogler, 1940-1989]. *Holmi*, September 1993, 1322-1325, 1322.
- 2 Tibor Hajas: *Szövegek* [Texts]. Budapest, 2000, Enciklopédia. He refers to Brus's *Selbstbemalung* series on page 377, and to Schwarzkogler on page 372.
- 3 P. Weibel and V. Export: *Wien: Bildkompendium*, 305.
- 4 Tibor Hajas: *Szövegképrázat* [Text mirage] (Sídpa Bardo). In: Tibor Hajas: *Szövegek* [Texts]. Enciklopédia, 2000, 153.
- 5 In Schwarzkogler's works: bandaged head, hypodermic needle, thread: 2. *Aktion* (1965); bandaged head, a thread emerges from a gap in the bandage: 2. *Aktion* (1965); a similar scene: 3. *Aktion* (1965). In Hajas's work, bandaged head, packing needle, thread: *Chöd*, 1979; *Tumo I-II*, 1979.
- 6 Károly Kerényi: *Gondolatok Dionysosról* [Thoughts on Dionysus]. In: *ibid: Halhatatlanság és Apollón-vallás* [Immortality and the religion of Apollo]. Magvető, Budapest, 1984, 181-204, 89.
- 7 The binding and pulley scenes are repeated in Hajas's series *Aktionsraum - Képkorbácsolás* [Image whipping] (1978), even the German title of which is an allusion to the Viennese Actionists.



Opposite and below: Tibor Hajas: *Vigil*, 18 May 1980, Bercsényi Kollégium, Budapest, gelatin silver print, each 24 x 18 cm. Photo by György Makky. Courtesy of Tibor Hajas Estate

Left: Tibor Hajas: *Tumo II*, 1979, Agfa Chrome, vintage, 39 x 50 cm. Photo by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



# Ákos



# Ezer

(1989)



PATRICK TAYLER:

CONCERNING THE PAINTERLY UNIVERSE  
OF ÁKOS EZER

# Let's Hang Out Together!

Ákos Ezer's loud painterly visions evoke lads tumbling absent-mindedly into the ordeal of becoming expressive ornaments of a society gone bonkers. His protagonists transform into allegorical figures of painting: sporting patterned t-shirts, spaghetti-like hairdos and shiny, tube-like limbs that resonate across the entire colour spectrum. His *Homo inflexus* (a term coined by influential proponent of the artist, art writer, and curator Sasha Bogojev) falls into a fictional evolutionary category, where the elastic properties of abstract painting blend with the classical notions of the human body's representation, resulting in a choreography of groovy heroes whose entanglement defies straightforward logic. The artist relies on eclectic sources: like many from his generation, Ákos Ezer dedicates himself to fusing the visual logic of pop culture with the material-oriented language of the London School, Heftige Malerei, Bad Painting and the other crashing waves of expressive figuration.

In the catalogue published following Ákos Ezer's touchstone exhibition titled *Abstract Hungary* (2019) at Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien in Graz, the curator Sandro Droschl interpreted

Ákos Ezer's work as a form of "ironically twisted socialist-realist painting." Instead of the fabrication of the glorious socialist utopia, however, we confront the growing entropy of a weekend BBQ, the smoky adrenaline rush of a poker session or an innocent-looking shopping spree breaking down into multicolour chaos. In one of his interviews given to *Juxtapoz*, Ákos Ezer described himself as "half storyteller, half deconstructionist." He tells stories of a generation that are without a sense of the future: the agitated, escapist souls find solace in each other's company, inhabiting a drawn-out present tense. While being together alone, they also deconstruct the idea of singular individuality and – following the thoughts of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy – reveal existence as co-presence. More simply put, hanging out – or chillaxing – with others is when you are truly yourself. The critical and compassionate narratives of Ákos Ezer are also platforms where the painter can go wild: well-fed gestures of straight-out-of-the-tube oil paint collide with smooth, metallic gradients, while the different layers bounce around till they collapse into the full-throttle frenzy of painting.



Ákos Ezer: *Catching the Ball*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Ákos Ezer: *Strike 1*, 2022, oil on canvas, 174 x 147 cm. Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Ákos Ezer: *Strike 3*, 2022, oil on canvas, 174 x 147 cm. Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Ákos Ezer: *Strike 2*, 2022, oil on canvas, 174 x 147 cm. Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

At the beginning of the 2020s, the bumbling figures – slap-stick-slapped into place by the edges of the rectangular paintings – are complemented by loners smoking cigarettes with elegant chrome-like fingers or eating an unruly tornado of pasta, dissolving calmly into the arcadian atmosphere or jazzing up the laid-back vibe of quarantined hours. In the electrified classicism of this latter period, the smouldering smoke, the glimmering twigs and leaves and the random objects, formed by bright transitions of increasing colour intensity, have become the crucial elements of the compositions. Even in the case of Ákos Ezer’s latest cinematic-scale, panorama paintings, which are often created as seamless diptychs, we concentrate on the objects: a multi-camera smartphone ready to be dropped, a deliciously rolled-up foam mattress, a ping-pong table floating mid-air, a flash of a lethal yo-yo in the middle of a Hannah-Barbera-style fight scene or a gargantuan stack of plates ready to plummet, ensuing disaster. In both his portraits and his group compositions, the (fictional) inner world of the characters is often symbolized by – or substituted with – their gadgets. The private universe of each figure might be more accurately observed in the reflection of a gold wristwatch heated up in the afternoon sun, an unnaturally elongated, pointy-nosed sneaker or a plastic cup of gruesome vending machine coffee depicted with greasy painterliness, than by the gaze of the protagonists, which is often fixated upon distant points, as if the pupil were the best exit route from the burdens of independent existence.

The diverse painterly statements – which Ákos Ezer turns into the raw material of his stories – are inspired by the subversive technical shortcuts of kitsch, the overemphasised sense of gravity inherent to the hallucinations of neoexpressionist tendencies, the no-nonsense attitude of hip and glossy graphic design and the treasure trove of art kept safe in the temple-like chambers of museums. Ezer takes these influences and creates smooth visual cocktails, where there is always an extra cherry on top rewarding the attentive viewer. This attitude connects strongly to the current discourses concerning contemporary painting and reveals Ákos Ezer as an artist who is at ease with juggling multiple visual strategies simultaneously. He visualises the ambiguous phenomenon of *somesthesia* (or bodily perception) by creating surface-independent, levitating patterns on his protagonists’ outfits, turning arms and legs into twisting and turning chrome-like cylindrical shapes and by fragmenting the body into a labyrinth of sizzlingly hot and ice-cold patches of colour. These are some of the methods Ákos Ezer uses to create titillating tension between the various layers of his paintings, resulting in the pictorial space being experienced as a kind of puzzle by the viewer. Binding dusk-tinted highlights into the free fall of brutal materiality, Ákos Ezer’s painterly constructions are complex beasts. Nevertheless, his paintings are always clear and straight forward. His painterly choices are radical and tongue-in-cheek solutions to the many questions that figurative art poses today.

In recent years, Ákos Ezer has started to work on glazed ceramic pieces, which explore the spatial aspect of the figures who populate the artist’s canvases. In contrast with the paintings, these three-dimensional objects are always single figures, where the protagonist becomes a pedestal of sorts for random objects: perched on top of O-shaped lips we see a chewing gum or a tennis ball, but ephemeral materials such as smoke also materialise as shiny, amorphous masses of material. These humorous entities were first exhibited in Galerie Droste’s Paris showroom in the exhibition titled *Memories from the Future* (2020), where the viewers could also see a special graphic print created by the artist with 3D modelling software. Since then, the artist has also collaborated with AISHONANZUKA to create a limited edition 3D sculpture titled *Delivery Man* (2021), which will be followed by further exciting cooperations, transgressing the notions of art and design, enriching the contemporary scene of collectable, special editions created by artists of the young generation.

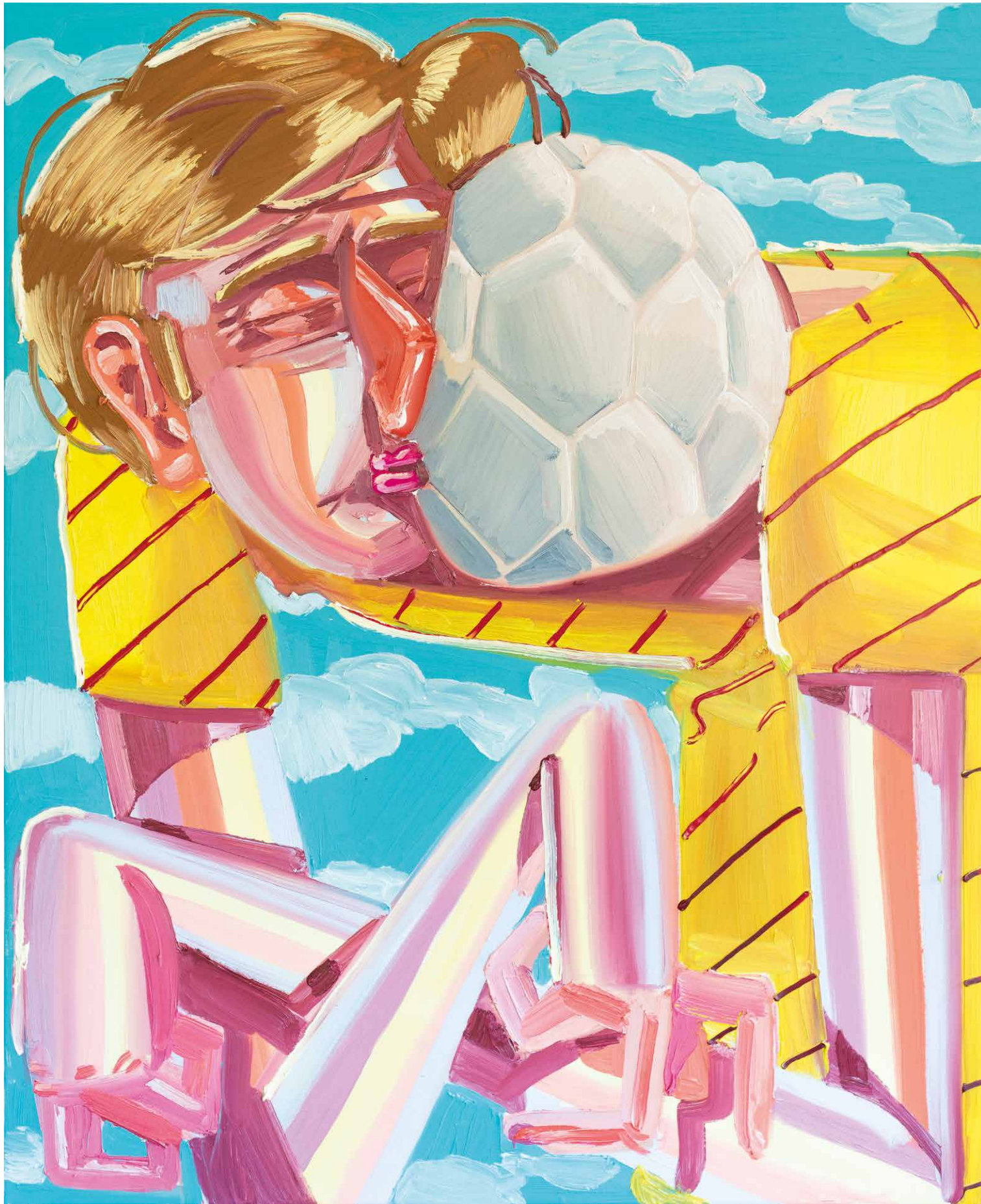
Ákos Ezer is invested in a concept of the body’s morphology that has an enticing history. By remixing and *terraforming* the body – using it as a groovy font that can be stretched in many ways – he tells stories of human society and private experiences. For centuries, the starting point for the representation of the human figure has been the body itself, steeped in representational traditions and various humanist theories. It is a textbook cliché that the succession of historical styles called for certain modifications concerning

“By remixing and terraforming the body – using it as a groovy font that can be stretched in many ways –, he tells stories of human society and private experiences.”

the image of the body. While mannerism merely lent its figures a more graceful neck and the baroque era added a few extra vertebrae to the spine, the various –isms of modernism called for radical transformation: they shattered the body into pieces, flattened it and blew it apart. The twists and turns of art in the last few centuries gradually shifted the spotlight away from the figure and towards the ideas “manipulating the puppets”, in other words, the philosophical or ideological background structures. The steely-muscled heroes of *agitprop* (propaganda art), the flattened workers of the Mexican muralists and the clay-cast individuals of the London School presented the individual in ever-new variations, expanding and distorting the self-image of man.



Ákos Ezer: *Fairplay*, 2022, oil on canvas, 235 x 400 cm.  
Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography



Ákos Ezer: *Hit*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm.  
Photo by Ákos Ezer. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography

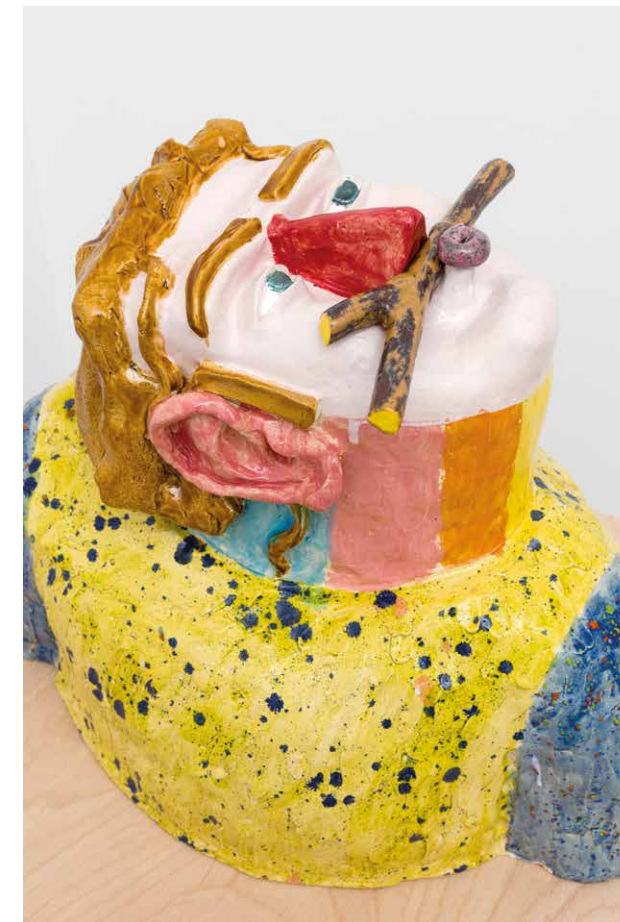
Apart from this historical genealogy, the silhouette of the protagonists of Ákos Ezer's work is informed by the pictorial language developed by the great modernist predecessors (Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Max Beckmann, Fernand Léger), an exciting dialogue with amazing contemporary artists (Dana Schutz, Nicole Eisenman, Kristina Schuldt), but also by the inner logic of moulding 3D objects in virtual spaces, the topsy-turviness of high-speed animation scenes, the notion of cartoon physics or the hilarious glitches of NPCs (non-playable characters) in computer games. This cheeky celebration of low-brow culture connects Ezer's artistic practice to the world of neosurrealist magic kingdoms, where the emphasis is placed on the creation of universes and heroes that function according to a different set of rules. One might mention here the brash cuteism of Szabolcs Bozó, the oversaturated party animals of Super Future Kid, the smooth & jazzy trompe l'oeil babes of Oli Epp or the hysterical crybabies of Joakim Ojanen's sculptural microcosm – these are all artists who navigate the global village with ease, create enticing artistic personas and wreak havoc on the classical rules of bourgeois taste.

Since his first exhibitions at Art+Text Budapest organised by Gábor Einspach, Ákos Ezer has become one of these rising stars: he has shown his work all around the world, from Galerie

Droste's exhibition venues in Wuppertal (DE) and Paris (FR) to the exhibition space AISHONANZUKA in Hong Kong (HK). He has participated in several notable art fairs, including a solo debut presentation at Art Berlin Contemporary with Art+Text Budapest and Tanja Pol, as well as a shared duo exhibition at Viennacontemporary with artist Tamás Soós organised by Art+Text Budapest in 2018, and more recently: Art021 Shanghai with AISHONANZUKA and Dallas Art Fair with Galerie Droste in 2022. He has proved himself in large-scale solo shows, such as his exhibition titled *Abstract Hungary* (2019) at Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien in Graz, Austria and *Closer Look* (2019) at Cluj-Napoca Art Museum in Romania. The latter exhibition was organised with Gábor Einspach – a long-time supporter and the first gallerist to represent Ákos Ezer's work in Hungary –, who has recently also positioned the artist's first piece (*Nightwatch*, 2016) in the prestigious acquisitions programme of the Hungarian National Gallery's Contemporary Collection. This international outreach affects his practice as well: with his paintings reaching a wide audience, Ákos Ezer spreads his helter-skelter mythology to each continent, showcasing an alternative mode of existence, where we might be able to hang out without destroying each other.

Left ceramic:  
Ákos Ezer: *Relay Run*,  
2022, glazed ceramic,  
45 x 60 x 50 cm. Photo by  
Dávid Biró. Courtesy of  
Einspach Fine Art &  
Photography

Right ceramic:  
Ákos Ezer: *Runners Blues*,  
2022, glazed ceramic,  
40 x 65 x 45 cm. Photo by  
Dávid Biró. Courtesy of  
Einspach Fine Art &  
Photography





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**COVER**  
Orshi Drozdik: *Pornography*, 1978 (detail), gelatin silver print, 8.8 × 12.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist

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The gallery is open from  
Tuesday to Friday 11.00-18.00  
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Street view of the gallery. Photo by Dávid Biró

