

published in: CENTROPA – a journal of central european architecture and related arts, volume VIII, number 1 (january 2008)

## **Does Democracy Grow Under Pressure?** **Strategies of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s**

Eva Forgacs  
Art Center College of Design, Pasadena

Oppositional art was a counter-culture in Eastern Europe, but not in the sense Theodore Roszak used the term: rather than walking out of the culture altogether, the dissident artists wanted to have access to their own culture and set out to re-conquer it. They wanted to be *inside* it, and not ousted from it. They wanted a democratic, pluralist, colorful culture in sync with the present, where, unlike the monolith authoritarian culture of the totalitarian regime, every kind of art can flourish. This struggle was fought in different ways and with varying results in each country of the region. What I will examine in this paper is whether it was possible for the Hungarian vanguard art of the late 1960s and the 1970s to create a democratic counter-culture under the oppression of a non-democratic state-enforced culture.

The task cut out for the counter-culture was to maintain esthetic diversity and demonstrate pluralism while staying politically united against the oppressive regime.

### **1. The term ‘neo-avant-garde’**

While the second, post-World War II generation of the avant-garde is referred to as the *neo-avant-garde* in the Western context, the followers of the classic avant-garde in Hungary were still labeled, in the spirit of continuity, simply the *avant-garde*. This reflects the lack of change in the position of the avant-garde in Hungary. The neo-avant-garde in the West accused their forefathers of betrayal for accepting privileges and riches from those whose privileges and riches they had rebelled against, but the younger generation of anti-establishment Hungarian artists had nothing to accuse their predecessors of. Nothing was won, nothing was changed, and the walls of the establishment did not come down before any of those artists who had set out to storm them, although the political regime behind these walls had changed several times between the 1920s and the 1960s.

Another circumstance that complicates the situation of the post-1956 Hungarian vanguard art is that until ca. 1968-72 most of its representatives trusted that they can become the fully legitimate agents of a renewed and modernized contemporary art in Hungary. With Stalinism left behind, the young generation hoped for a slow but consistent progress the outcome of which would be the overcoming of the avant-garde versus official divide. It was only after the November 1972 party session declaring the return to hard line politics that vanguard art was forced out of public venues, and the term ‘underground’

came to replace the honorific of the ‘avant-garde’, justified official art. In spite of the honorific of the ‘avant-garde’, justified official art would like to avoid the confusion that would originate from using the same term for the artists of the 1960s and 1970s as for the classic avant-garde between 1910 and the 1940s. In order to do justice to

their distinguishing generational characteristics, I will refer to them as the *neo-avant-garde*<sup>1</sup> albeit in the modified sense of the term that follows from the above explanation.

## 2. The late 1960s and the 1970s in Hungary

The Hungarian neo-avant-garde emerged in the early and mid-1960s, after the deadly silence that followed 1956. The cruel retaliation for the 1956 revolution was followed by a general amnesty to political prisoners in 1963. By that time the building of a national consensus and the consolidation of the regime had begun, and the grip of censorship and tight ideological control gradually gave way to a relative thaw. All this was based on the recognized necessity of economic reforms which got under way in the Soviet Union, but were also theorized and initiated in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Hungary, opening a gradual, partial, slow, and ultimately flawed shift from ideology to pragmatism.

As a result, a new revisionist discourse about the pre-1956 hard line Stalinist type communism was encouraged also in the field of culture. New voices appeared in films, literature, and the arts, and essays in an objective and critical intonation were published in increasingly liberal-looking, but still strongly controlled journals. “Telling the truth” about the atrocities of the 1950s was officially solicited within certain boundaries as was a cautious kind of modernization in architecture, but the officialdom remained vigilant to quench new artistic styles, new modes of communication and genuine free expression. Abstraction was, on a reason not quite understood, seen as the arch enemy of socialist culture and thus adamantly disapproved<sup>2</sup>. Around 1966-67 though, disapproval did not necessarily mean instant ban, and that was a significant change.

By 1968 a new generation of artists had come of age. Innovative architectural design, politically loaded allegoric language in the cinema, modernized product design and sur-naturalism<sup>3</sup>, hyper-realism as well as, against all odds, abstraction in painting broke new grounds and forced, if not tolerance, at least reckoning with from the political regime.

The beginning of the economic reform transformed the cultural climate of the country. There was some new hope in Hungary, because this time it appeared that not a mass movement, but a political and economic reform from the top down would lead to more freedom. Rumors spread in Budapest about the chief architect of the officially announced “New Economic Mechanism” leaking the view that “there cannot be liberal economy without liberalism in culture”<sup>4</sup>. These words were promising and corresponded with the apparent beginning of some degree of liberalization, which fueled – or just coincided with - staggering creativity in the arts. Leaking, rather than publishing this message was also meant to suggest a virtual alliance between the leaders of the country (like they were also subject to censorship) and the population, pointing to Moscow as the

<sup>1</sup> As I did in a previous essay: “Struggle for International Presence: the Dilemma of Nationalism and Internationalism in Hungarian Modernism and Postmodernism”, *Centropa*, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Although the power of abstract art to mobilize society in any way was grossly overestimated by the officialdom, two major reasons of its rejection are obvious. One was the tradition of the constructivism of the classic Hungarian avant-garde that was still vigorous, and was associated with unorthodox leftism, a current that, along with all varieties of the New Left, Moscow-line communism particularly dreaded. The other was Georg Lukács’s personal dislike for and condemnation of abstract art. His complicated political history

notwithstanding, Lukács was an authority in Hungary until his death in 1971, and even after. The term “sur-naturalism” was first coined for the thick-texture d work of György Korga in 1964. This painting grew out of realism but the dripped, chiseled, and otherwise manipulated dense surfaces turned it surrealistic without entirely deleting its scinal naturalism. Besides Korga, Akos Szabó, Tibor Csernus, László Lakner, and László Méhes had sur-naturalist episodes.

<sup>4</sup> These words were attributed to Rezső Nyers, secretary of the party’s Central Committee, chief initiator and supporter of the economic reform in Hungary.

‘common problem’. Whether someone bought into this suggested alliance or not, the years 1967 and 1968 were the time of hope and expectations. The ongoing reform movement in Prague was positively discussed in the news media.

This period of thaw and optimism was short, but it had a lasting impact on the art world. A new Hungarian cinema emerged spearheaded by Miklós Jancsó who analyzed the hot issue of power in his allegorical films, also touching on the sensitive issue of Hungarian independence and the retorsions after a national uprising (*Szegénylegények*, or Round-Up, 1966), the brutality of every war including the mythologized Civil War in Russia

(*Csillagosok, katonák*, or The Red and the White, 1967), the cynical idealism and skepticism toward Communism (*Pényes szelők*, or The Confrontation, 1968), the enigma of the charismatic leader (*Égi Bárány*, or Agnus Dei, 1970), and the dynamics of a fated uprising (*Még kér a nép*, or Red Psalm, 1971). Jancsó’s highly stylized cinematic language using long takes and the symbolism of songs and choreography opened up a new world of potentially acceptable modes of expression and thus had more of an impact on the variety of new styles and idioms of the neo-avant-garde than generally acknowledged. The same applies to his coolly analytical rhetoric which, unlike straightforward opposition, seemed resistant to political scrutiny.

A new generation of documentary film makers stepped up, who unveiled the country’s true realities: a tragicomically overgrown bureaucracy (Gyula Gazdag), poverty (Pál Schiffer), confusion about values and the manipulative methods of the bureaucracy (Gazdag). Immersing in reality and showing its true face was also the ambition of many new artists.

Even after the brutal military crash of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 in which Hungary participated, it took several years for the Hungarian leadership to return to hard line politics. The illusion lingered that Hungary would go ahead on her own with a slower, less radical economic reform than Czechoslovakia, and this bias would be tacitly tolerated by the Soviet Union. Behind these hopes lied the fact that the leadership was divided into reformers and conservative Muscovites, and the latter prevailed only after a few years of inner struggle in 1972.

In the wake of this change in the party line the dismantling of the modest results of the previous years began. In March 1973 a party decision was taken to fire the philosophers and reform-sociologists who had opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Miklós Haraszty, author of a sociological work about the exploitation of the workers in a tractor factory was put to trial and convicted as the enemy of socialism. Sociologists György Konrád and Iván Szelényi were investigated and harrassed for their book theorizing that the intelligentsia may become a new social class.

The Western student movements of the 1960s which culminated in the student revolution of May 1968 in Paris appeared, from the perspective of the Budapest artists, as the background to what was happening in Prague, as it was the outcome of the breathtaking Czech reform movement that spelled the future of Hungary. However, De Gaulle’s use of force to reinstate law and order in France as well as the US’s continuation of the Vietnam War despite all protest added to the Czech catastrophe and underlined the sense of the worldwide defeat of a general reform and youthful rebellion. The lesson that Hungary learned was, as political historian Miklós Haraszty put it, that „Our region and our reforms are hopelessly the matter of Soviet internal politics”.<sup>5</sup>

But the sense of defeat was slow to sink in, particularly with the young. Having experienced the relative liberalism of the 1960s, the Hungarian neo-avant-garde got energized and its representatives were not willing to go underground. The term ‘underground’ was widely used, but always ironically, self-ironically, or in criticism of the status-quo and questioning its legitimacy. The subsequent history of the neo-avant-garde is

<sup>5</sup> Miklós Haraszty: “1969”, *Beszélő*, 1997, No. 12.

also the history of proving that the existing laws and rules were only a cover-up for unlawfulness and to demonstrate that, diametrically opposed to what the government claimed, there was no freedom of speech and freedom of expression in the country.

### 3. The art scene

The structure and the institutions of the art life in Hungary were established and re-organized in 1958 in order to keep all artistic activity under state control. A hierarchy of administrative offices implemented the state's monopoly in purchases of art works, control of exhibition venues, and artists' access to studio spaces and stipends. A person was legally considered an artist if graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts or the Academy of Decorative Arts and was member of the Association of Hungarian Artists. Prior to joining this organization, fresh graduates were supposed to join, for a maximum of ten years, the Studio of Young Artists which controlled their studio spaces, exhibition permits, sales to the state, and financial help. Since admission to the Academy hinged on the applicant's showing realist, figurative work, it was understood that s/he would continue the production of such works. That someone may engage in artistic activities without having attended an Academy was not considered. The possibility that a graduate from the Academy would bias from realism was equally outside expectations. The fine arts section of the Association of Hungarian Artists was subdivided into the departments of 'Painting' and 'Sculpture', automatically excluding anyone outside these two classic categories.

Still, the system started to be challenged by idiosyncratic artists like, for example, Béla Kondor (1929-1972) as well as some of the members of the Studio of Young Artists, and independent artists who worked in new genres, fields, and media.

Kondor was a lonely painter and poet inasmuch as he was not part of any group or trend, but he was a hero of the post-1956 decade and a half. He was the epicenter of a circle of poets, writers, artists and intellectuals, with a radically new, personal and free visual language and amazingly bold subject matters ranging from religious to utopian. His work reverberated among artists, including the younger ones. He was admired not only for his compelling, visionary imagery but also for his courage to paint openly religious pictures. Unlike some of his contemporaries who encoded religious messages in visual metaphors – religion having been sensitive territory because materialism was mandatory while it was clear that the population remained committed to religion - Kondor's series of icon-inspired paintings dating from 1958 to ca. 1968 appears to have exploited manifest religious motives in order to evoke an even more forbidden and radical message: his own rebellious desire of political freedom. It was this inherent political charge that made his representation of saints so relevant.

Kondor's art appeals to a cosmic horizon, but he was equally bold and radical in expressing political dissent. He got away with it because, according to consensus among his friends and critics, he remained a figurative artist, never crossing the line to abstraction. He was among the very few, however, who openly thematized the 1956 revolution for example in his 1959 painting *Forradalom* (Revolution), and although he was generally regarded, as art historian Péter Kovács put it, „the last icon painter”, he was, in a way unprecedented in Hungarian art, so intensely taken by the present that, in 1972 he responded to a current event, the massacre of the Israeli athletes in Munich in his painting *Gyilkosság az Olimpián* (Murder at the Olympic Games)<sup>6</sup>.

Even if he remained solitary, his 1966 exhibitions in small provincial galleries are listed among the important events in the chronology titled "Hungarian avant-garde 1966-

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<sup>6</sup> This was another subject matter that could not, in spite of Hungary's anti-Israel politics, be rejected lest Hungary appeared as anti-humanitarian.

1980”.<sup>7</sup> Another solitary representative of the neo-avant-garde, painter Péter Donáth (1938-1996) paid tribute to Kondor in an essay<sup>8</sup> underlining Kondor’s extraordinary importance because he had broken out of the ‘avant-garde versus socialist realism’ dualism and represented a new “reform-generation of common sense” that was ready to transcend that old dichotomy.

The 1966 official exhibition of the Studio of Young Artists titled *Studio '66* brought into focus some of these young people. Thanks to the new leadership intent to shake up the Studio – and dismissed shortly after this show<sup>9</sup> – the exhibition was the model of pluralism,

a concept the political and ideological leadership dreaded. Even such artists showed their works, who were not members of the Studio. A separate, roughly equal size space was given to each different artistic current such as hard-edge constructivism (Imre Bak, 1938), expressionism with surrealist overtones (János Major, 1934), sur-naturalism (a home-grown current of Hungarian art, represented here by László Lakner, 1936), lyrical abstraction (Ilona Keserü, 1933), magic realism (László Gyémánt, 1935), and realism. That the officially required realism was just one among other tendencies each of which was presented as equally relevant and important, turned the show into scandal. The following year’s exhibition was very strictly juried and only carefully selected works got in, leaving only a few neo-avant-garde artists in the show.

Besides, in the loopholes of the existing regulations, the neo-avant-garde explored new venues for the purposes of art exhibitions such as the clubs of various institutions which were considered ‘for members only’ and thus did not count as public locations (although they were freely accessible), which made it possible to organize jury-free shows there; many exhibition galleries in the countryside which were in the blind-spot of censorship; and private apartments and residences where it was legal to put up ‘studio exhibitions’ for the duration of 24 hours.

The group exhibitions of this time typically brought together very different artists rather than any homogenous team. For example the participants of the February 1966 *New Tendencies* exhibition included the hard-edge geometric abstraction of Imre Bak and István Nádler (1938), the symbolic-abstract paintings of Sándor Molnár (1936), the purist-minimalist sculpture of Pál Deim (1932), the stylized, surrealist fairy-tale pictures of Tamás Galambos (1939), and others.

The abstractionist Sándor Molnár brought together a circle of like-minded artists who regularly met in his apartment. The members of this society called the *Zuglói Kör*, or the Zugló Circle (for the part of town where Molnár lived) discussed and analyzed the works of contemporary non-figurative artists, translated some of Kandinsky’s writings on abstraction and carried on passionate debates on art.

In June 1966 the first happening titled *The Lunch. In Memoriam Batu Khan* took place in a private home, performed by Tamás Szentjóby (1944) and Gábor Altorjay (1946), with the participation of Miklós Erdély (1928-1986)<sup>11</sup>. The action started with music by

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.c3.hu/collection/koncept/images/years.html>. Since I offer a general assessment rather than a detailed chronicle of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, I refer the reader to this website for a complete list of events.

<sup>8</sup> The essay was written in 1979, but published in 1991: Péter Donáth: „Ami két ’nem’ között történt. A Kondor jelenségről” (What happened between two ’no’-s. On the Kondor syndrome.) *Új Művészet*, 1991/5, 7-12.

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive description of the Hungarian art establishment and the Studio of Young Artists I relied on Katalin Aknai and Orsolya Merlán: „A fiatal képzőművészek stúdiójának története” (The history of the Studio of Young Artists), in Hans Klon, ed.: *A második nyitottság. A 20. század magyar művészete* (Secondary venues. 20th century Hungarian art), Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó, 2002, pp. 200-228.

<sup>10</sup> As Mária Ludassy noted, pluralism of every kind projected the possibility of a multi-party political system, therefore it was “the object of exorcism”. (Mária Ludassy: “1973”, *Beszélő*, 1998/04)

<sup>11</sup> Miklós Jankovich and István Varannay also cooperated. Péter Sinkovits notes that the first happenings in the countries neighbouring Hungary were also performed in the 1960s: in Vienna by Otto Muehl, Hermann

Penderecki. Then the performers ate chicken. The noise of chewing was amplified via microphones. They nailed a chicken to the table then they drank salted water and threw up what they had eaten. One of the performers was tied up with wires, and the others pelted him with wet and half rotten horse hair.<sup>12</sup>

With all its harsh elements and coarseness this happening broke new grounds for live event-making as art and got farther than anything before from the officially approved ways of art making. It opened up the concept of art to a previously unimaginable extent. In the end of the same year another happening (*Golden Sunday*, by Gábor Altorjay) took place

in the basement of Miklós Erdély's house, turning the happening into a new way of exhibiting absurdity and a sanctioned mode of expression for the neo-avant-garde. The happenings invigorated the Budapest art scene because they demonstrated that, contrary to all restrictions the artists had to suffer, there was an artistic space where nothing was impossible; and since the event was temporal, nobody could confiscate or even censor it. The happening was also heartening because it brought people together and strengthened the sense of solidarity and coherence in a crowd which was seeking new art and new heroes.

Throughout 1967 and 1968 a series of club-exhibitions opened of the works of young and controversial artists almost on a monthly basis, many curated by a fresh graduate in art history: Péter Sinkovits. These artists included Imre Bak, Tibor Csiky (1932-1989), Dóra Maurer (1937), László Lakner, János Major, Gábor Pásztor (1933), Krisztián Frey (1929-1997), Endre Tót, and Tamás Hencze from among the young, and Dezső Korniss (1908-1984), Béla Veszelszky (1905-1977) and Tihamér Gyarmathy (1915-2005) from the older generation. A veteran of the classic avant-garde, Korniss opened his studio for young artists who were eager to discuss art as well as the history of Korniss's generation with him. Another group of young artists was attracted to the rejuvenated art of the sculptor Erzsébet Schaár (1908-1975) who all of a sudden became one of the most progressive of artists. She abandoned her Giacommetti-like style for lyrical narratives in intimately small bronze pieces and later a combination of plaster casts and polyurethane, a material that had not been used in sculpture before.

The young generation systematically demonstrated the continuity and solidarity with the classic avant-garde. Therefore one of the most important events of the entire vanguard art community was the 1967 retrospective of Lajos Kassák (1887-1967), the already mythical, iconic leading figure of the classical Hungarian avant-garde in a small Budapest gallery. It was scandalous and was repeatedly mentioned that (because of a short-lived bureaucratic measure) the event had to be paid for by Kassák himself. This was the more disrespectful because the exhibition was inevitable as it was Kassák's 80th birthday (he was decorated with a high state award and died in the same year), and earlier in 1967 the giant exhibition *Avantgard Osteuropa 1910-1930* opened in West Berlin, featuring the protagonists of the Hungarian avant-garde: Moholy-Nagy, Kassák, Bortnyik, Péri, and others whose works were not shown in Hungary. Also, by that time Kassák had had several exhibitions in commercial galleries abroad and none in his homeland. He had unparalleled prestige in Hungary's progressive circles not only for his literary and artistic work, but also for his moral integrity; and since his program was never realized, it was still seen as fully relevant, waiting to be carried on by the young.

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Nitsch and Frohner on June 4, 1962; in Prague by Milan Knizak and the group Aktual in 1963, and in Warsaw by Tadeusz Kantor in January 1967. See Péter Sinkovits: „Chronol ogy”, in *Iparterv 68-80*, Budapest, 1980, p.2

Tamás Szentjóby participated in Kantor's 1967 *Panoramic Sea Happening* in Kołobrzek, Poland (see [www.artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszekst\\_auby\\_tamas](http://www.artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszekst_auby_tamas))

<sup>12</sup> I followed the description of Péter Sinkovits, as in Note #10, pp. 6-11.

#### 4. The Emergence of the full-fledged Neo-Avant-Garde: The December 1968 *Iparterv* show, its participants and reception

The actual breakthrough of the new art happened at an exhibition organized by Péter Sinkovits in December 1968 (a sequel to which followed in 1969). This exhibition is still known as the *Iparterv* show for the name of its semi-official venue, an architectural planning office in the center of Budapest, where rules of censorship happened to not apply, at least for about two weeks.

This exhibition was striking because it confirmed the existence of a new, specifically Budapest voice in art which consisted of many individual artist's solos, and because it made visible the new-found freedom in Hungarian art. The *Iparterv* show was a summary of the new tendencies. Sinkovits wanted to include Kondor in the show as the bridge between the older generation and the new, but he backed out in the last moment. Having to renounce of the historical link, the curator was able to demonstrate the keen interest of the participants in different contemporary art currents and their individual interpretation and specific adoption of them. The exhibited works attested to the intense desire of the artists to prove their work relevant in the international art scene.

Sculptor György Jovánovics's (1939) *Man* (1968) was the most dramatic piece. It is a plaster cast of a man in a toga with a classical Greek head complete with a worn wool cap and a scarf thrown around the neck (all plaster). It stands erect and steps forward like the ancient Egyptian statue *The Scribe*, with added Bourbon lilies printed on the 'skin' of his hands and face. Part a disguised antique god, part a guy from the streets of Budapest, its mix of the classical and the mundane is perplexing and resonated in 1968 as a new blend of abstraction and naturalism, sublime and trivial, past and present. It brought together the spirit of Pop Art, antiquity, and Arte Povera. It brought to mind George Segal's similarly plaster-cast mix of stylization and naturalism except for its distinctly European antique element. This piece was as new and relevant as any artwork of the international art of the present.

The minimalist abstract pictures of Tamás Hencze (1938) featured very fine, hardly discernible hues of grey as transitions between forms and colors. Hencze sprayed and rolled the paint onto the canvas for the perfect optical effect of the finest possible gradations and the de-materialization of form and color. His series of Op-Art paintings lacked the physical touch of the painter, and looked more like prints executed with some high-tech method. They exuded a sense of objectivity reminiscent of the universality of the classic avant-garde.

By contrast, Ilona Keserü's abstract paintings exploded with color. They exuded robust energy through their intense colors and formal vocabulary which sprang in Hungarian folk art. Keserü used ancient Hungarian and Turkish motifs and channeled the vast power of tradition into her youthful, fresh and colorful abstract imagery. She used a lot of red, pink, and purple, and sensual, full-bodied, dynamic forms. Her paintings were free and lively, and compositionally balanced at the same time. Hers was a liberated art inspired by contemporary poetry and the increasingly vibrant Budapest culture as well as the new international trends in painting. She was one of the first woman artists in Hungary to express markedly feminine sensuality and erotic in painting, which also spelled a rebelliously free attitude.

Innovative as they were, the balanced abstraction of Hencze and Keserü had clear connection to the classic avant-garde, but the most direct continuation of that tradition materialized in the hard-edge geometric abstractions of Imre Bak and István Nadler. They reinvented the pure rational forms of geometry by "magyarizing" this idiom that is, combining the clear-cut forms with the curves and the colors of Hungarian folk art motifs. The mix of stream-lined simplicity and folkloric reminiscences was a new and evocative

combination at a time when both were forbidden. These pictures also blended the industrial-modernist and the emotional, which came across as the modernization of a long tradition of national culture.

The rebellious hyper-naturalism of László Lakner was not less striking than the abstract works. His large size oil painting *Bones* (1968) represented grossly enlarged hip- and thigh bones repeated on the canvas which was divided by a vertical line. It brought to mind Andy Warhol's repetitive pictures, but even more vividly, the recent tradition of Hungarian realist painting scinating from Aurél Bernáth (1895-1982) and his most famous student Tibor Csernus (1927), whose realist style, as would Lakner's, morphed into the already mentioned 'sur-naturalist' style, a naturalism-based idiom filled with abstract details of the pigment-filled texture. At the time of the *Iparterv* show Csernus was no longer in Hungary. He emigrated to France in 1964.

Gyula Konkoly exhibited Claes Oldenburg-type soft Pop Art sculpture which was half-way between painting and free-standing work, provocatively not meant to please; Ludmil Siskov (1936) showed hazy versions of photo-realist paintings representing nightclubs, astronauts, and other things which transcended the boundaries of the given reality.

Krisztián Frey's free-hand, graffiti- and Cy Twombly-like paintings included an overt political message in the title of his painting *August 1968*, the image of a graffiti memorial marking that date among other banal wall inscriptions. To have graffiti as the subject matter of an oil painting (long before Basquiat) also spelled that the message – protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia – expressed the view of the 'silent majority', graffiti being validated as the spontaneous and anonymous expression of 'the man of the street'.

Hyper-realism reappeared in the second, 1969 *Iparterv* show, represented, besides Lakner's new works, by László Méhes's (1944) oil painting *Week Day* (1968). This was the first painting in Hungary which represented quotidian life in the medium of oil painting. Lending the solemnity of the oil painting to the banal scene of a tramway ride was refreshingly new and radical, and led to further articulation of the Hungarian reality in Méhes's early 1970s series titled *Lukewarm Water*.<sup>13</sup>

The conceptual artist Tamás Szentjóby participated at the 1969 exhibition with *Portable Trench for Three* (1969), a wooden, gauze, sulfur and reed construction, which may have been inspired by Edward Kienholz's 1968 *Portable War Memorial*. Szentjóby also exhibited *Cooling Water* (1965), a transparent bottle containing clear water; and *New Unit for Measurement* (1965), a lead stick used by the police.

The architect turned film-maker, poet and conceptual artist Miklós Erdély, who showed conceptual works in 1969, and Tamás Szentjóby, with the collaboration of other participants, performed a series of happenings in the exhibition room of *Iparterv*, prior to the 1968 show there. Szentjóby defied every definition as an artist. He gave talks, translated and distributed texts on Fluxus, wrote poetry, was a performer, made installation art and an experimental film, became one of the central figures of the neo-avant-garde. His Christ-like figure – long blond hair, short beard and moustache, alert blue eyes - wearing a worn brown leather jacket and carrying a sack like a wanderer – was ubiquitous in the Budapest cafés, exhibition rooms, wherever the action was. In 1968 he invented and declared the establishment of the *International Parallel Union of Telecommunication* with the goal to „collectively operate a level of reality parallel to the staus quo”,<sup>14</sup> which can be taken for the quintessential definition of the neo-avant-garde. „Art is what is forbidden. Be forbidden!” he said, and put a chair out to a street corner, had his mouth taped and had thus

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed description, see my essay referred to in Note # 1.

<sup>14</sup> See the web address referred to in Note #11.



photographed himself<sup>15</sup>. In 1975 he made an experimental film titled *Kentaur* in the Béla Balázs Studió, in which tired, ordinary people riding trolley buses and caught amidst the most banal wanderings through the city are talking, as a result of the manipulative use of the sound track, lines from Marxism handbooks. The striking nonsense of ideological phrases and its total irrelevance to the actual life comes across as irresistibly, but also painfully comical – no wonder that the film was banned right after its first screening.

Emblematic for the post-1968 period was Gyula Pauer's (1941) conceptual *Pseudo* series of 1970 and 1971, the most astute comment on the fundamental manipulative lies the population was exposed to. Accompanied by the *Pseudo Manifesto*, these works demonstrated that nothing was what it appeared to be. Pauer sprayed paint onto the smooth, even surface of a cube in such a way as to make it appear made of wrinkled paper, but viewers were invited to touch it, and feel the difference between the optical and the tactile – the illusory and the real - experience.

The diversity of the new works shown at the *Iparterv* could have launched a debate in art criticism about the relevance of one or another, or all of the emerging tendencies. It was the time to embrace the pluralism of the new art or to open a debate about one or another of the trends. Instead, the critical reception of the *Iparterv* show revealed a deep-lying divide between two fundamentally different, even conflicting attitudes in Hungarian culture, dividing the neo-avant-garde, too, in spite of the overlap in some of the programs and even some artists. In a surprising review art historian Lajos Németh represented a critical stance which was not that of officialdom – although usable for their purposes – but of a more hidden resistance to modernity implying that modernity belonged to rootless cosmopolitanism and as such, it was opposed to genuine Hungarian tradition. He wrote: “[the artists of the *Iparterv* exhibition] have posited themselves against the Hungarian tradition and the dominant trends of contemporary Hungarian art. ... Their rejection [of this tradition] proves them to be the uncritical imitators and cliché-makers of the fashionable international trends. ... The question is whether they want to become part of those uniform, ubiquitous international tendencies which have come to reject the concept of autochthon development and national tradition or they will face the undoubtedly more demanding task of creating a new art which is both Hungarian and international...”<sup>16</sup>

On the other side of the divide was, as Edit Sasvári points out<sup>17</sup>, the *Szürenon* group (the name, derived from 'Sur-naturalist' was coined by the painter Attila Csáji, [1939]) including, besides a few neo-avant-garde artists, other, less radical painters, poets, and writers of the older generation – all in opposition to the official ideology - with the slightly different agenda from that of the *Iparterv* crowd of countering the obsolete trends not only in Hungarian art but also what they called the “fashion-trends”<sup>18</sup> in contemporary Western art. Some representatives of the *Szürenon* joined, in fact, the already operating circle of the catholic priest Isván Demeter who promoted the idea of a modernized Catholicism and selected his outstanding poet, musician, and artist guests to make sure they represent Christian and Hungarian values. The *Iparterv* artists, in comparison, celebrated New York and Paris-based contemporary trends such as happenings, conceptual art, neo-

<sup>15</sup> See photo in my essay as in Note #1.

<sup>16</sup> Lajos Németh: “Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben” (New trends in Hungarian visual arts), *Kritika* 1969/4, reprinted in *Iparterv 19680-80*, ibid. p. 16. My translation.

<sup>17</sup>

Edit Sasvári: *Tízévtől az avantgárd: Galántai György: haláltonbélvári képzőművészeti körkép 1970-1973*, Budapest: Artpool-Balassi, 2003, pp.22-23

<sup>18</sup> A regrettably recurring feature of the Hungarian art scene is the deliberately pejorative use of the words ‘fashion’ and ‘fashionable’ to dismiss those artistic trends that don’t fit into the concept of the author. In many cases ‘fashionable’ stands for ‘unprincipled’ or ‘cosmopolitan’, understood as the opposite of ‘genuinely Hungarian’.

constructivism, or informel, and their actual efforts to merge these idioms with Hungarian traditions were entirely overlooked or not accepted.

However, as Szentjoby said in an interview, „the oppression of the state united us”<sup>19</sup>, and in December 1970 the *R-exhibition* (named after the 'R' building of the Budapest Technical University, the location of the show) was organized with the participation of both entities. The *R-exhibition* was visited by chief communist party ideologue Gyorgy Aczel and other notables, and was almost immediately closed down as intolerable.

Confrontation with the authority was taking a different form in Hungary than, for example, in the Soviet Union where the nonconformist artists showed their works at an open-air exhibition in September 1974 to demonstrate their lack of venues, indeed their homelessness as artists, whereupon their works were destroyed by bulldozers. The „Bulldozer Show”, as it has come down in history, was proof of the lack of dialogue between dissident artists and the authorities.

The means to keep the neo-avant-garde in check were more subtle and more manipulative in Hungary. Here a bitter dialogue *was* going on in the course of which the artists exploited legal (because overlooked) opportunities to appear or „to play” legitimate and the authorities took administrative – but not physical – measures to deprive them of these opportunities. The deep, traditional divide between the nationalist and the internationalist concepts of culture was, apart of such rare notes as those of Mr. Nemeth, bridged by the common oppressor.

## 5. Besides Painting

In post-1968 Budapest a particularly lively scene unfolded in the theater, happenings, photo-based works, alternative film-making and performances.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important creative centers was the “apartment theater” of Peter Halasz and Istvan Balint, previously called *Kassak Studio*<sup>21</sup>. Having been banned from all theaters and culture houses this group set up shop in Halasz’s and his wife Anna Koos’s apartment (20, Dohany utca) that they opened up for a limited number of viewers at a time for their performances which they publicized by word of mouth. Along with other theatrical groups like Tamas Fodor’s *Orfeo* (later *Studio 'K'*) and Laszlo Najmanyi’s *Kovacs Istvan Studio*<sup>22</sup>, which were still able to find public venues for their performances, Halasz and Balint experimented with new stage language, a blend of stylization and the vernacular adapted to the smallness of the space which made the connection between the performers and the audience way more intimate than in any actual theater. On the one hand, the actors and the audience were all part of the very same context; on the other hand, the actors were on the other side of a symbolical divide. No traditional theatrical effects could be used because nothing could be hidden on the “stage”, no illusions could be created. Being real – action happening in real time, props being real parts of the household, child characters being the actual children of the actors – was one of the strong points they made. In the 1972 piece *The Puppet Theater of Peter Halasz*, Halasz stood as „the half naked

<sup>19</sup>Sasvari, *ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>20</sup>

The scope of this article permits me to mention only a few of those groups and individuals whom I find emblematic for the period, but there were many others who were important participants of this era and would deserve to be mentioned and discussed in details.

<sup>21</sup> Until they were banned in 1972, they performed in the *Lajos Kassak Culture House* in Budapest’s XIVth district.

<sup>22</sup> Named after the invented name that Laszlo Rajk Junior, the son of the show trial victim and former Minister of Interior Laszlo Rajk was given after he had been put into an orphanage.

truth”<sup>23</sup>, the left side of his body naked, the right side elegantly dressed up. The actual reality of both the actor’s body and its appearance as a character was visualized with rare tangibility.

The group rejected the “writing – directing – performing” paradigm. Instead they proposed “living – reflecting – theater making – living”<sup>24</sup> Also, they touched on a chord of solidarity and cooperation with the viewers which also resonated as a political statement. Absurdity, sarcasm, and humor were part of the communicational mode as a language of implications, underlying meanings and mutual understanding with the audience.

Now that some of the secret police’s surveillance files have become accessible it has come to light that all these groups and their audiences were closely watched by the police. Detailed interpretative descriptions of all performances and the names of those who attended were regularly delivered to the secret service. Halász and Bálint’s ‘apartment theater’ was denied permission to participate in various international alternative theater festivals, after they had had great success in Nancy in 1971.<sup>25</sup> Following their unofficial participation at the Open Theater Festival in Wrocław, Poland, in 1973, the passports of the leading members of the group were withdrawn and they were forbidden to leave the country, according to the police decision, until the end of 1977.<sup>26</sup>

The more political *Orfeo Stúdió*, organized by Tamás Fodor in 1971, the theater group of the University of Szeged, organized by István Paál, and the *Kovács István Stúdió* organized by László Najmányi were important presences, as was, for example, the one-person theater of Zsuzsa Forgács, who performed Jean Genet’s *The Maids* in her apartment acting all three parts. This innovative and nuanced show opened up another possibility, that of the solitary, unconditionally independent performer.

The works of the radical poet, conceptual- and performance artist Tibor Hajas (1946-1980) were mostly solitary performances and transgressive photos, that is, mostly self portraits taken under physical duress, in the midst of open-ended actions, while ablaze or in the moment of orgasm. Like members of the *Viennese Aktionismus*, he regarded his body as medium and “forced it to become an art object”<sup>27</sup>. He felt compelled to take photos of himself while testing the boundaries of his bodily capabilities as a means of seeing himself from the outside, and considered photography “the death cult of the XXth century”<sup>28</sup>. Body works were particularly intolerable for officialdom, because – and Hajas’s photo-documented actions and performances were a case in point – they were seeking ultimate freedom using an object that the artist legally owned: the private body.

The theoretical and professional differences between the theater- and performance groups and individuals could not be articulated without the risk of becoming an existential threat to each other and themselves. There were, however, friendly ties and professional solidarity, for example between Hajas and Halász. Hajas, who made a point of the precariousness of what exactly a personality is, created a document dated April 9, 1974 in which he gives Péter Halász the power of attorney to autograph his works instead of him

<sup>23</sup> See Magdolna Jákfalvi: *Avantgárd – színház – politika*, Balassi Kiadó, Budapest: 2006, p. 198

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> International connections were particularly discouraged. An article on the theater group titled “Hungarians Seek Stage” was published in the New York Times on January 19, 1972 by James Feron, who “had happened to give a lift to Péter Halász who was hitchhiking to the Lake Balaton and invited Mr. Feron to a coffee.” The letter prohibiting further activity in the Kassák Culture House was handed to Péter Halász on January 24. For

more details see Eva Bushmüller and Anna Koós, eds.: *Squat Theater* New York: Artists Space 1996, Chronology, pp. 203-226.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Tibor Hajas: “Performansz: A halál szekszepilje 1. /A kárhozat esztétikája/” (Performance: The sex-appeal of death. /The aesthetics of doom/), in Tibor Hajas: *Szövegek* (Texts), ed. By Éva Almási, Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó, 2005, p. 329.

<sup>28</sup> Tibor Hajas: “A hetvenes évek” (The Nineteen Seventies), *ibid.* p.296

and sign just any document for him.<sup>29</sup> In a thoroughly bureaucratized political climate where written personal statements and signatures could be turned against someone at any time, such a frivolous play with these cornerstones of bureaucracy was incendiary.

In the way of tackling the power of bureaucracy one of the most inventive and most provocative initiatives was György Galántai's (1941) renting an abandoned funeral chapel at Balatonboglár near the Lake Balaton in 1970 and opening it up for art exhibitions and alternative theater shows. Galántai's bold new idea was to test the boundaries of legality. He signed a lawful business contract with the owners and paid the rent, that is, he

conducted a fully legitimate business transaction. Balatonboglár instantly became the new center, a sort of home away from home of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Viewers shuffled between Budapest and the village – a mere 120-130 kilometers apart – and made good use of the natural surrounding, the inspiring new architectural environment and the newfound freedom there. There were individual exhibitions, happenings, talks, and theatrical events. Péter Halász's group performed their *King Kong* show, for which Péter Donáth designed the King Kong figure, whose „skin” was woven by the women in the group. They also performed Péter Breznyik's *Birds and Red Epaulets*, a „daytime improvisation”, and a happening. People were sleeping around in sleeping bags to stay for next day's shows and performances, which circumstance, as well as other, intentional gestures of the artists turned the viewers into participants.

One of Galántai's most important undertakings was the extension of the program to artists of other countries of the East-Central European region. The invitation of Czech and Slovak artists (organized by László Beke) was particularly provocative in the eyes of the authorities as the demonstration of solidarity with the people of Czechoslovakia.

One of the most resounding scandals was caused by the exhibition of the sculptor István Haraszty (1934) in the summer of 1972 which included works from his previously banned show and works he exhibited at the already mentioned (and equally banned) *R-Exhibition*. When the official visitors inquired about the meaning of his work titled *Like a Bird* (1971), he readily explained that “an electric system controls all the activities of the bird in the cage like its moving around, eating, etc. When the bird reaches a certain bar the door of the cage automatically opens so it can fly out, because it is free. But its freedom is only apparent, because as soon as it leaves that bar, the door automatically closes. This system, more exactly the bird's case is an example for the seeming freedom of people.”<sup>31</sup> When asked, how many times a day he provided that explanation, Haraszty answered that about eight times in varying details and intensity, depending on the visitor.

As the consequence of a series of orchestrated attacks against the artistic activities at Boglár which included a staged protest of the local inhabitants, attempts of party officials to divide and intimidate the organizers and the participants, and viscious, incriminating newspaper articles, the Balatonboglár Chapel was closed down in 1973.

## **6. Unchallenged: The solitude of the artist** **The case of Miklós Erdély**

Since political oppression was regardless of the features of the neo-avant-garde art work or the artist, solidarity overruled aesthetics or artistic quality. In an effort to transgress all officially sanctioned boundaries holistic thinking gained ground in Hungary in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. The new theoretical orientation embraced linguistics, sociology, and the history of sciences and technology as well as the long forbidden

<sup>29</sup> Tibor Hajas: “Meghatalmazás” (Power of attorney), *ibid.* p. 328. Tamás Szentjóby and László Najmányi signed as witnesses.

<sup>30</sup> Sasvári, p. 33

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. My translation.

psychoanalysis. Roman Jakobson, Ferdinand Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Werner Heisenberg, Nils Bohr, Einstein and Freud were widely read in new or first Hungarian translations. An important current of the neo-avant-garde was to make efforts to integrate physics, linguistics, sociology, critical theory<sup>32</sup> and philosophy into an overall new art with a new *Weltanschauung*. That is, the art work had to attest to critical thinking and open up a wider field of reference at the same time. Erdély, who took a passionate interest in sciences, noticed that popular scientific magazines published less and less important and informative articles about the universe, the Big Bang or the Black Holes, as if blocking people to get to such vital information. He emphatically underlined and often voiced the importance of all knowledge in the process of forming informed opinions whether in art or otherwise. As an artist and poet he thematized scientific issues to demonstrate that nobody can or should isolate art from the universal context.

Holistic thinking had an added meaning in the particular political space in Hungary as by the early 1970s the more and more artists and intellectuals thought that the categorization of the creative fields had become obsolete. In order to free fresh energies and encourage several viewpoints historians, economists, sociologists and philosophers were invited to write film reviews, film directors and artists got offers to work as stage directors in theaters, painters and sculptors designed stage sets and costumes, poets and writers played leading roles in films, amateur artists obtained funds for directing short films, and the list goes on. There was general mistrust in specialists while this game of everyone venturing into a new territory had released remarkable new creative energies and cleaned the art scene of the last vestiges of routine.

Consistently with defying the antiquated professional brackets, emphasis from the art work shifted to the personality of the artist. This was the time when Miklós Erdély emerged as the new leader of the neo-avant-garde. His rise was necessitated by Kassák's death in 1967 which left the key role of the non-official art scene, that of a father-like anti-authoritarian authority, to be filled. Erdély, a multi-talented figure like Kassák, who had been part of the great myths of the previous decades since he was close friends with Kondor and Csernus, and had been a regular at all important tables where art and culture had been discussed, was the obvious choice. The more so, because he happened to seek exactly this role.

The role of a part father figure part high priest had been created in the absence of an inner structure and a differentiated scale of values of vanguard art in Hungary. Throughout the history of Modernism in Hungary there had never been time to develop a pluralist system of non-official art, nor were there any models for that in mainstream culture. Thus the vanguard art community, instead of articulating its inner political and esthetic differences, preferred to put a charismatic personality in charge who would make the decisions on values. But having one designated leader also means emphasis on shared values rather than differentiating. Rather than underlining the specific features of each group, workshop, or individual, the tendency is to focus on the shared features and develop some kind of united front against officialdom.

As a consequence, art criticism, even for the internal use of the vanguard artists, became practically nonexistent. In public venues it was impossible anyway, because the very mention of non-official artists was prohibited; but even hypothetically, a critical analysis of an otherwise banned artist, or someone whose public appearances were thoroughly limited and censored, would have been tantamount to stabbing him or her in the back. Unevenness of artistic production was not to be discussed, serious criticism, if any, was restrained to personal private discussions, and emphasis in public was shifted to the shared values rather than differences.

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<sup>32</sup> C.P. Snow: *The Two Cultures*; "New Criticism", Roger Garaudy, Sartre, etc.

Erdély whose element was the sharp debate, badly missed a formidable opponent. “Most of the critics have ceased critiquing”, he said in an interview: “to reveal the meaning of an independent artwork, that is, to “scrape it off” the wall as if it were a mural, is a very demanding job, from which the art critics have long distanced themselves. ... I need help with the interpretation of a fine and complex artwork, and I cannot perform it on my own work. I can do it when it comes to someone else’s work... but when it comes to my own, there is nobody to do the job.”<sup>33</sup> The reason for there being no debates about Erdély’s works was that by and large everyone in the neo-avant-garde was agreement with him, or thought that any kind of controversy was counterproductive because inner debates would provide arguments for a possible official attack.

Erdély clearly saw that debates were vital for making progress and that each and every concept had to be clearly articulated. For example he wanted a discussion about the notion of art. “The fog that envelops this rather old concept has been thickening lately... and it is hard to challenge your reverence for it...” he said after another unsuccessful attempt to provoke debate.<sup>34</sup>

The paradox about Erdély’s role was that he had to be a unifier and the one-person embodiment of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, while he understood the necessity of diversity and made attempt after attempt to generate debate. However, he was apparently cursed by being surrounded with goodwill and agreement.

## 7. Archiving the Neo-Avant-Garde

After hard-line politics were back in 1973, the political leadership dealt fatal blows to Hungarian culture in general, and the neo-avant-garde in particular. For some time even the 1975 Helsinki Accords, guaranteeing free speech and free travel for the citizens of the East European countries, backfired. The Hungarian government interpreted it in such a way as to offer free one-way travel, that is: emigration without the possibility of return to those who could not accept the newly reinforced rules and were considered troublemakers. Philosophers Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, György and Mária Márkus, sociologist Iván Szelényi, film critic and writer Yvette Bíró (also the editor of one of the most important journals), conceptual artist Tamás Szentjóby, and the entire theater group of Péter Halász and István Bálint left Hungary by or in 1976 for what appeared to be for good<sup>35</sup>. Besides, several artists had already emigrated in the early 1970s including such key figures as László Lakner, László Méhes, Krisztián Frey, Gábor Tót, Gyula Konkoly and the most important and articulate interpreter of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, art critic Géza Pernecky.

These losses were irreparable. Under these circumstances György Galántai decided to save whatever could be saved for posterity. Having taped some discussions and publishing their transcripts as samizdat he got engaged in mail art and set to the establishment of an archive. *Artpool*, run by him and his wife Júlia Klaniczay was an illegal archive when founded in 1979. It set the goal to document the present, collecting not only the documentation of the art and art life as it was happening, but also the documents of the oppression, official ban, the clandestine movements and non-official currents. It has been collecting and has become the archive of the documents of the neo-avant-garde not only retroactively, but also parallel with its unfolding in Hungary. It is an “Active Archive”,

<sup>33</sup>

László Beké: “Egyenrangú interjú”(Interview of equals) and interview with Miklós Erdély, published after Erdély’s death in *72-es évek, Budapesti szemle*, Budapest, 1987, pp. 181-191

<sup>34</sup> Undated manuscript, published in Miklós Peternák, ed.: *Erdély Miklós: Művészeti írások* (Writings about art) Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1991, p. 129

<sup>35</sup> After a short stay in Paris the group moved to New York City, where they were became known as the *Squat Theater*, one of the most recognized avant-garde groups for several years. They lived and operated in West 23d Street, near the Chelsea Hotel.

documenting the trends of non-mainstream contemporary art as well as the relations between society and art, and art in the context of everyday life. It has spanned the period of handwriting and typewriting to digital information transfer and storage. The estimated number of the documents it presently holds is 500,000.

*Artpool* is a major achievement and unique in its kind. It has been a forum for art events, a publisher of documents Hungarian as well international, and an attempt at the re-definition of archival work, research, and collecting. It has also become the major repository of the rich culture of the neo-avant-garde in Hungary.

Throughout its existence the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, incessantly threatened by censorship and police measures, chose to keep inner debate under wraps in order to fend off external attacks. This strategy served the goal of survival, but did not help to create a culture of debates between different views. The purpose of inner debates would have been the confirmation of the plurality of values and the generally accepted coexistence of different views and tendencies. Its now archived history suggests that it is very hard, if not impossible, to have freedom and a democratic dissident culture in an un-democratic political context. Democracy does not seem to grow under pressure.