

Revisiting Hungarian Art  
of the 1960s and 1970s

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Hans Ulrich  
Obrist

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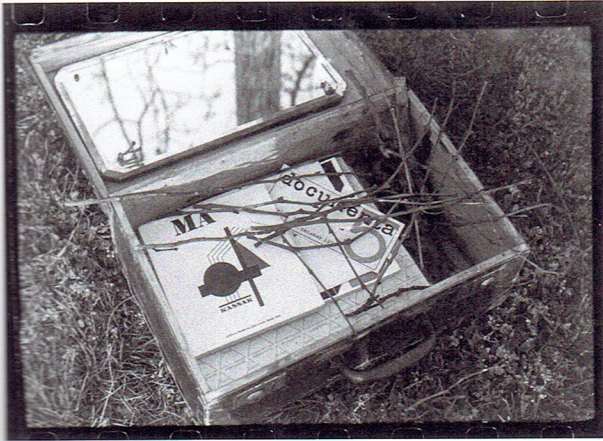
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A black and white photograph of an open suitcase reveals a pile of roughly hewn stones, an Andy Warhol reproduction and a mirror reflecting outdoor surroundings. The similarly unlikely contents of an upturned mirror, a copy of the avant-garde journal *MA* with a Lajos Kassák geometric design on the cover, and an entry ticket for Documenta 5 adorned with a scattering of twigs is visible on another image. Both belong to the series *Plan for a Memorial* (1973) that was conceived by artist Károly Halász [or Hopp-Halász] as a tribute to an inspirational trip to Germany undertaken the previous summer.<sup>1</sup> The suitcases suggestively contained not only souvenirs from this transformative journey to the hearth of the contemporary artworld, but also references to home-grown traditions of international art. What is more, the twigs and rocks from the immediate environment place the baggage in a specific geography, acting as latent symbols of the burden of local conditions that the artist is obliged to carry with him. The suitcases disclose the reflexivity of artistic production and desire to be embedded in local art histories and contemporary art practice despite working in the restrictive conditions of actually existing socialism.<sup>2</sup>

The illustrious development of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s was shaped by artists' efforts to surmount the manifold challenges of particular local circumstances and lucidly participate in contemporary art currents. In spite of the obstacles posed by the Iron Curtain and the only slightly softer borders between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, they seized opportunities to share in processes of artistic exchange and contribute to the expansion of transnational art movements. In that sense, what constituted their intricate web of influences and cultural references, and how decisive were the rare opportunities for travel and personal contact with art professionals both on the same and the opposite side of the Cold War geopolitical divide? Which strategies did artists devise to overcome hurdles in reconnecting with the achievements of Hungarian avant-garde artists of the older generation who were faced with oblivion under strict communist rule? How did younger artists respond to the shortcomings of institutional art education, which although providing a thorough base in traditional artistic training was sparse in its coverage of contemporary art? Indeed, why was the idea of being contemporary so attractive to artists under state socialism and what was particular in the contribution of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde to the art of the time?

## **Intentionally Contemporary: Expanded Horizons of the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde**



Although any mention of the Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule in 1956 was strictly forbidden, the young generation of artists, who started their academy years shortly afterwards, had a vivid experience of its suppression and an unspoken understanding that the seeds of liberation had been planted by the popular revolt. In difference to countries such as Poland or Czechoslovakia where de-Stalinisation brought a visible lightening of the cultural and political atmosphere, the 1960s in Hungary began instead with the maintenance of party control over the artworld by enforcing a strict ban on abstract art, the infiltration of informers into experimental circles and the use of bureaucratic methods of divide and rule.<sup>3</sup> It was only in 1963 that a loosening of ideological restrictions on artistic production could be felt in tandem with the restoration of diplomatic relations with the West, as a consequence of which artists were able to make occasional individual trips abroad. This process of cultural liberalisation culminated during the period of the New Economic Mechanism, which from 1968 saw the implementation of a reformist policy of allowing small-scale private businesses to operate and easing foreign trade restrictions, until the experiment was brought to an end by the Soviets in 1972. Disillusionment with the subsequent refreezing of cultural politics spurred further neo-avant-garde artists to join the already sizeable community of Hungarian artistic emigrés that included Gábor Altorjay, Gyula Konkoly and Géza Pernecky.

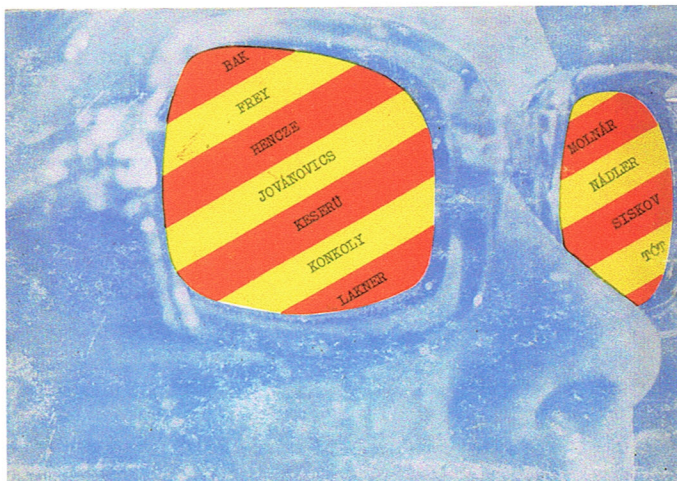
The state supported art of the 1960s encompassed a broad stylistic spectrum from benign forms of moderate modernism to post-utopian variants of realistic observation, simplified depictions of rural life with modern flourishes, as well as the continuous production of decorative public sculptures. International references were predominantly towards agitational works by politically-engaged Westerners such as Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Renato Guttuso, or to post-war renovators of figurative art, such as Bernard Buffet, whose matchstick-style depictions of the everyday exploitation of city dwellers were appreciated for their 'existential realism.'<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, the centralised structure of art education in Hungary, which revolved around the Academy of Fine Arts, followed a curriculum based on inculcating the principles of academic realism, reflecting the stylistic preferences of official art. Although the development of individual artistic approaches was encouraged by certain professors,

such as Aurél Bernáth who was an influential figure for several painters of the new generation, the system as a whole mitigated against artistic innovation. The endeavours of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde to be part of internationally relevant streams of contemporary art therefore necessitated distinguishing themselves from the mainstream of the local art scene.

Since their artistic curiosity could not be fully satiated by the traditionalist and ideologically-skewed programme of the Academy, many artists resorted to various strategies of self-education. These included seeking out rare publications on international trends that were occasionally available in local bookshops or painstakingly devouring catalogues, magazines and monographs brought back in the luggage of those returning from revelatory trips abroad. Discussions held during informal meetings in apartments and studios were often organised around reading samizdat translations of texts on contemporary artistic and theoretical trends. One of the most enduring and cohesive of such unofficial forums was the Zugló Circle (1958–1963), named after the district of Budapest in which the apartment studio of host Sándor Molnár was located, with Imre Bak and István Nádler amongst the regular participants. During the following decade, representatives of the neo-avant-garde devised self-organised educational forms to teach the new generation of contemporary artists. Emblematic in this case were the series of experimental workshops or 'Creativity Exercises' organised by Dóra Maurer and Miklós Erdély in a factory culture house, which appropriated the officially supported platform of amateur art for radical ends.

As hinted at in one of Halász's suitcases, knowledge about Hungary's modernist heritage and historical avant-garde had to be actively sought out, since proper evaluation of this legacy was obscured by the figurative preferences of even a modernised version of socialist art and ideological hostility towards non-party viewpoints. To pick up the threads of the artistic achievements of their predecessors, younger artists attentively nurtured ties with older painters and sculptors. One line of inquiry was directed towards the artists of the European School, which was founded in Budapest in 1945 on the principle of combining the progressive developments of East and West, as exemplified by their openness to surrealist and abstract tendencies and wide international connections. After the group was forced to disband following the communist takeover of 1948 and imposition of socialist realism, many of its members went into internal emigration and withdrew from the public circuits of the artworld. The influence of one such artist, Dezső Korniss, who together with Lajos Vajda had taken inspiration from the musicology of Béla Bartók in repurposing folk elements for avant-garde compositions, could be felt in the practice of artists such as Tamás Hencze, Ilona Keserü and Endre Tót. Another stream led further back to veterans of the classical avant-garde, whose preeminent representative in Hungary during the 1960s was Lajos Kassák. Despite his international status and record as a leftist art activist during the inter-war period, he was unable to show his geometric works until a self-financed exhibition in the year of his death in 1967. A thorn in the side for the apologists of actually existing socialism, Kassák was a source of authenticity for the progressives of the neo-avant-garde generation.

The legacy of the pre-war avant-garde, although submerged from the public sphere, could be strongly felt in the southern city of Pécs, which away from the capital was another major centre for Hungarian art. This was largely due to the fact that a number of local artists went to study at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, including architect and designer Marcel Breuer, while Pécs was also the birthplace of leading protagonist of op art Victor Vasarely.<sup>5</sup> Although many stayed abroad, Ferenc Martyn returned in 1940 from Paris, where he had been a member of



the group Abstraction-Création. He resided in Pécs and was instrumental in transmitting the knowledge of the avant-garde to a new generation, often through private tutorials, including to Ilona Keserü. Ferenc Lantos, a painter who left behind socialist realism for socially-engaged abstraction in the early 1960s, was mentor to a group of young artists who towards the end of the decade came together as Pécs Workshop, namely Ferenc Ficzek, Károly Halász, Károly Kismányoky, Sándor Pinczehelyi and Kálmán Szijártó. Their versatile practice encompassed neo-constructivist enamel designs, land art experiments, as well as conceptual and performative works.<sup>6</sup>

The thirst of neo-avant-garde artists for relevant knowledge was not just directed to overcoming amnesia regarding the historical avant-gardes, but even more so to obtaining information about contemporary artistic trends, a desire that was amplified by the obstacles placed in their path by the closed world of state socialism. Reading matter and reproductions could never fully substitute for direct encounters with contemporary art through exhibitions and personal meetings on travels that often turned out to be transformative for artistic careers. Several such trips have been immortalised in Hungarian art historical accounts, including László Lakner's visit to the Venice Biennial of 1964, marked by the dominance of American pop art, while for Imre Bak and István Nádler a trip around Europe included a stay in Germany where they encountered minimalism, hard-edge painting and geometric abstraction.<sup>7</sup> György Jovánovics was familiarised with the latest developments in contemporary art during the course of studies in Vienna and Paris in the middle of the decade and Dóra Maurer kept up to date through regular travel between Budapest and Vienna. Although there is a temptation to see a causal relationship between encounters with international movements and stylistic turns, as the interviews in this publication make clear such experiences were always filtered through the prism of individual critical responses.

Travels within the Eastern bloc could be equally decisive in developing international perspectives and tuning in to contemporary concerns. What is more, there were fruitful analogies and discrepancies to discover between the experience of neighbouring art scenes that were also exposed to the



mechanisms of actually existing socialism. Such visits often turned out to be rich in forging solidarities and finding kindred spirits, identifying commonalities not just in material circumstances but also conceptual approaches. There were for example a number of instances of Hungarian artists travelling to Poland, often to attend symposia and *plein air* gatherings, as well as to participate in exhibitions held at more independent or artist-run galleries such as Permafo in Wrocław, Akumulatory 2 Gallery in Poznań and Galeria Foksal in Warsaw, while Tibor Hajas participated in the 'I Am' performance festival held in Remont Gallery in Warsaw in 1978. The Hungarian neo-avant-garde also played host to important visits by other Central and Eastern European artists, with a group from Czechoslovakia invited by László Beke in 1972 to participate in the unofficial events at the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio, run by artist György Galántai.<sup>8</sup> When Katalin Ladik, an artist from the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina Yugoslavia, first visited Budapest on 1 May 1968, the occasion turned into an opportunity to realise the performative work *UFO* as a staged encounter with Tamás Szentjóby and Miklós Erdély on the banks of the Danube.

The international interests of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde were not restricted to Eastern Europe or the West, but also oriented towards making connections with art scenes across the globe. Non-institutionalised exchanges between artists in distant parts of the world were enhanced by the rise of dematerialised artistic approaches, with lines of communication opening up between disparate geographies. Exhibitions of Hungarian neo-avant-garde art were for example organised at the Centre for Art and Communication (CAYC) in Buenos Aires in both 1973 and 1974, with its Argentinian founder Jorge Glusberg drawn to East European art as a way to 'present alternatives to Western ways of making and administering art.'<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, an attitude of solidarity towards global protest movements, which overlapped with state support for anti-imperialist campaigns and was also inseparable from the revolutionary fervour of the years around 1968, could also be discerned in Hungarian neo-avant-garde art practice. Miklós Erdély and Tamás Szentjóby were two of the main protagonists of an event held at Budapest's Eötvös Club in 1971 entitled 'Freedom for Angela Davis'. They carried out absurdist actions that were both a caricature of the hypocrisy of the official campaign for the imprisoned African-American civil rights activist, and at the same time represented a 'new type of political art based on irony, ambiguity, doublespeak, over-identification.'<sup>10</sup>

The emergence of new forms of international solidarity with decolonial struggles and civil rights movements that transcended the political cleavages of the Cold War gave the 1968 era its global revolutionary élan. The drama of the Parisian May was followed by the debacle of August in Prague, when Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops brought to a sudden end the Czechoslovak experiment in 'socialism with a human face.' The demise of the Prague Spring unleashed a chain reaction of political and cultural aftershocks, to which the Hungarian neo-avant-garde were also compelled to respond.<sup>11</sup> A degree of convergence in the conditions of industrial modernity that crystallised over the course of the decade also gave rise to singular artistic responses to the spread of a mediatised consumer culture on both sides of the East-West divide, with the emergence of distinctive East European versions of pop art. Furthermore, the acceleration of technological and scientific developments engendered new artistic approaches, including Vera Molnár's experiments with computer art. Ultimately, the neo-avant-garde's radical questioning of the boundaries between art and life was indelibly coloured by the effervescence of countercultural experiences during the 1960s.



The culmination of individual and collective efforts to present a vision of contemporary Hungarian art that was closely aligned with international currents was epitomised by the two 'Iparterv' exhibitions that were held in the banquet hall of an industrial design company in Budapest during 1968 and 1969. That this was also the direct intention of the show is confirmed both by the recollections of participants and the introductory text by young art historian Péter Sinkovits, who described it as an attempt 'to make connections to current artistic processes in the world.'<sup>12</sup> Notably, while the first show encompassed gesture painting, neo-constructivism and pop art, the 1969 exhibition demonstrated a radicalisation of artistic positions indicated by a shift towards photorealism, conceptual art and politically-provocative works. Although the exhibition line up evidently omitted a number of active participants in the experimental art scene of the time, it nevertheless marked the definitive inauguration of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Their remarkable accomplishment consisted in deftly incorporating references to local circumstances and political realities while taking a critical stance towards the stylistic novelties of their more famous Western peers.

In subsequent years, relations to the international artworld became steadily more complex as the network of connections deepened and became more reciprocal. As more artists were now in regular contact with new friends abroad and exchanging photographs, typed sheets and publications through the post. The pioneering spirit of the first wave of artist travellers to European art capitals was



succeeded by more regular visits realised with the assistance of recent exiles, at the invitation of foreign museum directors, or with the support of cultural foundations. As the optimistic outlook and collective mission of the neo-avant-garde generation ran aground on the sands of political disillusionment and institutional co-option by the middle of the 1970s, the consensus over what constituted contemporary art gradually broke down. However, in the first of a series of rediscoveries, the restaging of the 'Iparterv' show at the beginning of the 1980s demonstrated the enduring appeal of experimental practices that had made a singular contribution to the future of Hungarian contemporary art.

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- 1 See, Sándor Pinczehelyi (ed.), *Károly Hopp Halász: Works 1966–2011*. Pécs: Pécsi Galéria, 2011.
- 2 See, Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, 'Art History in a Suitcase: The Itinerary of Art Trends in Socialist Art Criticism,' in *Socialist Internationalism and the Global Contemporary: Transnational Art Historiographies from Eastern and East-Central Europe*. Böhlau: Böhlau Verlag, 2018.
- 3 See, Sándor Hornyik, Edit Sasvári and Hedvig Turai (eds.), *Art in Hungary 1956–1986. Doublespeak and Beyond*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2018.
- 4 See, Zsolt Petrányi (ed.), *Within Frames: The Art of the Sixties in Hungary (1958–1968)*. Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 2017, p. 264.
- 5 See, Eva Bajkay, *Von Kunst zu leben. Die Ungarn am Bauhaus*. Pécs: Janus Pannonius Museum, 2010.
- 6 See, Attila Doboviczki et al. (eds.), *Parallel Avant-garde – Pécs Workshop 1968–1980*. Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017.
- 7 See, Gábor András, Gábor Pataki, György Szücs and András Zwickl, *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*. Budapest: Corvina, 1999.
- 8 See, György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay (eds.), *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East Central Europe*. Budapest: Artpool, 2015.
- 9 Katarzyna Cytlak, 'Transculturation, Cultural Transfer, and the Colonial Matrix of Power on the Cold War Margins: East European Art Seen from Latin America', in Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (eds.), *Globalising East European Art Histories Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 2018, p. 165.
- 10 Zsuzsa László, 'Exhibition as Diplomatic Tool – in Search for Artist Solidarity', *Third Text special issue on Actually Existing Artworlds under Socialism*, vol. 32 no.153 (2018).
- 11 See, Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, (eds.), *Revolution I Love You: 1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy*. Manchester: MIRIAD, 2008.
- 12 Péter Sinkovits, 'Introduction to Iparterv I,' in *Iparterv 68–80: Exhibition in the Meeting Hall of Iparterv*. Budapest: Iparterv, 1980, p. 22. The participants in the 1968 exhibition, Imre Bak, Krisztián Frey, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, Ilona Keserü, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, Sándor Molnár, István Nádler, Ludmil Siskov and Endre Tót, were joined the next year by András Baranyay, János Major, László Méhes and Tamás Szentjób, while Miklós Erdély was also listed in the second catalogue entitled *Document 69–70* (1970).