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**Shameless Attempt at Explanation II.
(1990-1998)**

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Hungary



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

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

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

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

István Hajdu

Shameless Attempt at Explanation II. (1990-1998)

In 1990, a French publisher and gallery owner -- by chance -- commissioned me to propose sixteen visual artists considered significant in Hungary, from the following perspectives, though not necessarily in order of importance: intact from an aesthetical-political point of view, with a measurable oeuvre or in command of anticipated "activity", able to satisfy a renewed Western European interest, appropriate for the market perspective, signifying an alternative to the fatigued transavantgarde, postmodern, post-art history, Western European artistic scene. The plan was too ambitious: this "action" was to be cushioned upon all of two hundred works, a coffee-table sized book, and an ideological foundation. I wrote the introduction to the published album¹, the "prop" of the French promotion of contemporary Hungarian visual art, as well as the brief biographies of the promotable artists. The desire struck high; yet it really sank as low as the American planes that soared a few weeks later over the Gulf -- the war brought everything to ruin. Even on the plain of our small-calibre panorama.

A few words...

For a deaf man who had the skill of lip-reading, there were no silent movies!
(Tibor Hajas)

One finds it rather hard to escape the cynical-sounding observation that from the end of the forties till the end of the seventies "official thinking" in Hungary sprang from a deliberate, well-considered, and carefully structured

¹ Les Ateliers de Budapest. Edition Navarra. Paris, 1990.

misunderstanding of a singularly uncreative kind. The discourse of madness, though it undoubtedly had some method in that it bore the stamp of its prototype, was a language of contagious sterility, meant to misunderstand and to be misunderstood. It went on mouthing its loud and very demanding formulas about civilisation, culture and art for a very long time. In most cases, these clichés misunderstood misunderstanding itself, though one was allowed to notice this only after 1956, and actually saying what one noticed became possible even later, sometime in the seventies. This misunderstanding was imported to Hungary from the Soviet Union in the period of 1947-49 and, while its coming was certainly a gradual and piecemeal process, the product was ruthlessly imposed on Hungary in all its unprocessed and unpackaged rawness. Zhdanov's theory of a wholly mythic "Socialist Realism" was a sterile misunderstanding in its original form and it shared this quality with Lukács's theory of "art as the reflection of social reality" which was after all only a more "European", more sophisticated-looking version of Zhdanovism despite the fact that there had been times, especially in Eastern Europe, when the theory was not respectable, while in later times, as in the sixties and the seventies, its enthusiastic acceptance was de rigueur, especially in Western Europe. Misunderstanding only breeds further misunderstanding, while sterility never brings fruits; there is no mathematics here: two negatives will never make a positive. This tragedy of sterility and/or misunderstanding was the general tragedy of Hungarian (and East European) art and artists; though it is frequently perceived as something of a comedy, too, especially with present-day hindsight which can lend an almost farcical air to those bygone times.

In flight from the crushing onrush of Socialist Realism, representatives of progressive art in Hungary (including survivors of the classic Modernist period of the 1910's and the 1920's, such as Lajos Kassák, and members of the forties generation with their wholly autonomous art of European standards) chose the silence and obscurity of self-imposed internal émigré status, which they left only for a very short time in 1956-57, only to withdraw again as times soon became inclement and conditions harsh. By the end of the fifties, political authorities and their officially sponsored artworld thoroughly compromised their own creatures and those who were for sale on the art market. Less pliable artists of maverick courage had to bear the full brunt of clumsily schoolmasterish pressures the political custodians of state culture brought to bear on the independent and the stubborn.

From the beginning of the sixties, the same officialdom liked to cast itself into the role of a gentle fatherly figure, or even into that of a knowing accomplice. This coincided with the appearance of a new trend in

Hungarian art, a school which dominated the sixties and became empty and depressingly anachronistic by the end of the seventies. Much mellowed now, cultural officialdom chose to favour this particular type of painting as its own "Hungarian" brand of progressive art.

This was the Vásárhely School, named after Hódmezovásárhely, a small town in Southern Hungary, where, at the turn of the century, a number of artists practised a realistic brand of painting, somewhat in the fashion of the Barbizon School. In the early sixties, the artist colony in the town was revitalised and a number of young artists, fresh from art college, moved there. They soon developed a common style that was a mixture of naïve art, Mexican mural monumentalism and a form of minutely careful realism, with its stress on being engagé and scrupulously observant of social type and "character". It was against this Hungarian "New Realism" (which, incidentally, had nothing to do with the French Nouveau Réalisme of the period) and, also, against the tradition of a more and more academic Post-Impressionism, that the third wave of Hungarian avantgarde Modernism had to wage its battles in the sixties.

The situation abounded in bizarre ironies. For instance, cultural officialdom selected the Hungarian Expressionism of the 1910's and offered it as a more or less compulsory model of "healthy" Modernism, while at the same time maintaining, and insisting on, total silence on what should have been the real point: the Abstractionist and Dadaist aspect of early twentieth-century Modernism (or "Activism", as it was called by its Hungarian practitioners) in Hungary. This led to near-farcical situations. For instance, Sándor Bortnyik, the master of Győző Vásárhelyi (who is better known abroad as Victor Vasarely), and the first Hungarian artist to paint an Abstract Constructivist picture, seems to have thought better and, in 1949, he started waging an all-out and total war on Abstractionist art in general and also on any sign of its resurfacing in Hungary.

Nevertheless, a number of young artists (some of whom were fresh graduates of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, while others had no formal art education) embarked on a course of what in the Hungarian terms of the times was regarded as daringly and challengingly experimental. They studied the monuments of "Activism" in an entirely unofficial spirit and considered the work of those members of the forties generation (including earlier participants in the avantgarde European School and in the Group of Abstractionist Artists) who were still around and approachable. In terms of personal psychology, their efforts were motivated by a desire of catching up with new developments in contemporary European and American art, and, from an art historical and

theoretical point of view, they represented an attempt to restore the continuity which was repeatedly and violently broken by the dictatorship of Socialist Realist cultural officialdom. Accordingly, their project was rather multifaceted: they had to "naturalise" artistic procedures and devices in an environment that was rigidly constrictive; they had to re-tie threads that had been cut, and they had to produce their own autonomous oeuvres of internal consistency and value.

Their sudden appearance on the art scene of the sixties was both a revelation and a revolution. Still, within a few years, their generational group disintegrated and was seen as a generation only from the outside, in the form of hostile attacks on them (it was only much later that this hostility was replaced by pious remembrance). Their homogeneity and their impact was thus a post festum myth. When they appeared on the scene, they had no common ideals or shared aesthetic principles. The only thing they had in common was their perception of their situation: they all aspired to the autonomy of artistic creation, advocated pluralism in art instead of official exclusiveness, and were very much like each other in their general attitude to life. All this made them an object of scandal at that time, while later, in the second half of the seventies, a new generation of young artists decided to forget about almost all of them in a sweeping gesture of ingratitude.

This lamely ambitious and nervously liberated generation can be seen, with some crude simplification, as clustering around three nodal points. These were of equal value and significance despite the fact that, later, their impact and influence took different forms, and regardless of the fact that some of the artists gravitating towards one or another of these nodal points later ceased to have any significant role in the art scene. They are useful as a convenient scheme of classification, even if allowance is made for certain important young artists who belonged to none of these clusters.

The first of these clusters was formed around Tibor Csernus (b. 1927), a well-established artist by that time, with some significant work and with equally voluminous, though highly ambivalent, critical notice of his name. Together with Ákos Szabó (b. 1938), László Lakner (b. 1938) and others, Csernus combined sensuous painting with trompe l'oeil naturalism, and this curious mixture, when applied to weirdly unusual subjects and surrealist themes, resulted in a unique brand of realism. Their paintings contain groups of objects or views of cluttered landscapes traced in minutely precise detail, where the sight of these apparently unstructured assemblies of things stands in contrast with the rigour and precision of the pictorial representation suggesting, as it does, the basic dilemma of the possibility vs. impossibility of knowing, as well as the despair attending that

dilemma. Their mode of painting and their technique included the introduction of certain techniques that were, at that time, virtually unknown in Hungary: they employed frottage, décalcomanie and scraping. Thus, their method had something to do with Surrealism, which had no significant roots in Hungarian painting; among contemporary trends, they had some affinity with Nouveau Realisme and, in a less immediate way, with later Pop Art and Hyperrealism. With Csernus leaving Hungary for Paris, this very informal company of friendly masters and disciples that was only later imagined as a coherent group, disintegrated by the mid-sixties, but, due to the influence of Lakner and others, it made its own distinct contribution to the "renaissance" of the Modernist impulse in the Hungary of the late sixties.

The second of these groups, the Zugló Circle, was a more tightly organised affair. The initiative was provided by Sándor Molnár, and from 1963-64, the members (who included painters, sculptors and graphic artists) shaped their artistic principles and values by studying the theoretical writings of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and, later, Jean Bazain. They made up for the lacunae in their art college education by interpreting critical texts and analysing paintings, and endeavoured to acquire some idea of what was going on in contemporary art abroad by means of books and reproductions.

In its first phase, the orientation of the Zugló Circle was threefold. It absorbed the Lyrical Abstractionism of the École de Paris, took account of the tradition of Constructivism in Hungary (Moholy-Nagy, Kassák and others), and aligned itself with the European School, with which it felt a particularly close affinity. Furthermore, it drew inspiration from the sources of esoteric and metaphysical thought in Hungary.

The Circle disintegrated in 1964 as the interests of its members changed and became divergent. Their common denominator was soon lost: the original French orientation was replaced by the more topical interest in American and, a little later, in German developments, and emphasis shifted from theory to praxis in a general way. While Csernus and his friends never had a group exhibition, members of the Zugló Circle had a number of joint exhibitions in 1965 and 1966, following the disintegration of the Circle. Far from being the records of a single trend or some commonly held idea, these shows represented a wide range of experiment and, with the inclusion of the work of older artists, stressed continuity as well. For exhibition venues, the artists had to make do with local community cultural centres, university and company clubs and studios, as cultural officialdom would not have tolerated anything less modest than these.

In 1966, Gábor Altorjay (b. 1944) and Tamás Szentjóby (b. 1944) organised the first happening-like event in Hungary in a Budapest cellar, which was followed by another happening in December of the same year, with Altorjay and Miklós Erdély (1925-1986) as performers. These events highlighted the presence of a third group in the progressive art of the period, artists who, while having very little in common in matters of style, shared a number of intellectual concerns. While without any formal organisation, they were held together by the magnetism of Miklós Erdély, this singularly versatile genius excelling equally as artist, poet, architect, filmmaker and theoretician, and playing a vital and formative role in contemporary Hungarian avantgarde art with his radical gestures, sensitivity and openness. His group was the first to introduce current ideas of dematerialization and impoverishment into Hungarian art in the form of adopting and practising Action Art, Arte Povera and Conceptual Art.

The significance of these events of the sixties was accentuated by a number of important exhibitions in the closing years of the decade, where the new progressive art in Hungary was finally able to present itself to the public in its true dimensions. (Most of these exhibitions were, however, organised in a semi-illegal fashion, without formal permission from the panel of official jurors.) Perhaps the most significant of these exhibitions included the two exhibitions in 1968 and 1969 (the latter was held in an architects' office) where the works of, among others, Imre Bak, András Baranyay, Miklós Erdély, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, László Lakner, Sándor Molnár and István Nádler were shown.

In the early seventies, similarly important exhibitions were held at the Budapest Technical University and in a disused chapel in Balatonboglár, Western Hungary. At that time, officially approved opportunities for group exhibitions were scarce: these included the 1966 and 1967 exhibitions of the state-sponsored Studio of Young Artists, a few exhibitions that were banned and closed down by official decree almost immediately after their opening, and the New Works exhibition of 1971 in the Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle) Budapest.

The situation was tragicomically ambivalent. In the late sixties, Victor Vasarely was celebrated as an artist of Hungarian extraction, and had a monumental exhibition in Budapest. A few years later, Henry Moore's work was shown in Budapest, and a number of Hungarian artists, living abroad and playing an important role in international avantgarde art, were invited to present their work to the Hungarian public. While these artists of international renown were lionised and adulated by Hungarian cultural officialdom, Hungarian artists were under restrictive pressures that

occasionally included police intervention, as was the case with the closing of the Balatonboglár chapel.

These exhibitions in the late sixties and early seventies presented a range of works representing as diverse trends and tendencies as Informel (Informal Art), Hard Edge and Kineticism, and current trends like Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Arte Povera and Hyperrealism were also shown in their Hungarian versions. While, undoubtedly, some of these pictures and objects were distorted echoes of their misunderstood originals, most of the works responded to the international art issues of the day in a sincere and intelligent fashion. Politically motivated art criticism, however, refused to give these artists a fair hearing. Sometimes in an insensitive and crudely ideological way, sometimes with a charade of being competent and technically well-versed in the background of Modernist tendencies, art criticism opted for wholesale rejection, and attempted to write off all these new trends as both useless and pernicious. This rejection had its adverse effect, as at least a dozen artists left Hungary in the period 1970-75, while others abandoned their art, in a few cases, for good. At the same time, "official", state-sponsored and state-approved artists adopted, in a diluted and devalued form, some of the stylistic features and mannerisms of avantgarde art and, with the approval of the cultural-political establishment, started producing a co-opted, harmless and commercialised version of avantgarde art.

At the same time, bona fide avantgarde art, always fraught with constant and uncreative misunderstandings, entered a phase of uncertainty and confusion in the mid-seventies. This uncertainty was aggravated by the impact of Conceptual Art, which was both liberating and confusing. Added to this, there was a noticeable loss of confidence on the part of the artists, as many of them realised now that what they were doing was after all a misunderstanding, however creative in their case. General isolation, restrictions on travel and lack of first-hand information on the international art scene made vital and fruitful contact with the wider world all but impossible. As their impressions were formed by reproductions, and their conclusions were drawn from journalistic reports, their own versions of these international tendencies turned out to be always at some remove from their models. Thus hard edge in Hungary became much harder than its American original or its German version, because its Hungarian advocates misunderstood the stronger contrasts of photographic reproductions for the original quality; Signal Art became independent from Pop Art in Hungary and was turned into a descendant of the utopian Constructivism of the 1910's; Pop Art, which originally emphasised endless reproduction and an ironical rejection of the idea of unique value, was absorbed into serious

painting that went on stressing individual value and uniqueness; Minimal Art was detached from its philosophical and conceptual background and inserted into the tradition of Hungarian Constructivism; a similar, and very Hungarian, misunderstanding motivated the appearance of an avantgardistic folk art in the late sixties and early seventies; and as a very vital result of this creative misunderstanding, Hyperrealism in Hungary acquired philosophical and satirical overtones that were missing from its original.

Self-knowledge, the pains and masochistic pleasures attendant on self-knowledge, the poverty and drabness of the art environment, the constantly changing art context, the provocative "anti-materialism" and daring of Conceptual Art in an infinitely petty and narrow-minded world -- all this made for a very painful and unpleasant situation for the avantgarde artist in the Hungary of the 1960's.

By the mid-seventies this situation had significantly changed. Political control became less stringent, restrictions on travel were eased, more opportunities were allowed for officially approved exhibitions. Artists, who had been in the "banned" category, were now tolerated or, in certain cases, officially approved and given commissions for public art projects. In general, indifference replaced earlier hostility, and even the term Socialist Realism went out of currency, cropping up only occasionally in public speeches and politely worded doctoral dissertations.

There was a veritable proliferation of newer art groups. In 1974 the Budapest Workshop was formed, with Imre Bak, János Fajó (b. 1937), Tamás Hencze, Ilona Keserű (b. 1933), András Mengyán (b. 1945) and István Nádler as its members, and a number of artists of a younger generation established the Rózsa Circle that included Orsolya Drozdik (b. 1948), András Halász (b. 1948), Zsigmond Károlyi, András Koncz (b. 1953), Károly Kelemen (b. 1948), András Lengyel (b. 1952) and Ernő Tolvaly. These groups, however, did not have the stamina and inventiveness of their predecessors. This was partly due to the general uncertainty and confusion that affected avantgarde art on a global scale at that time, partly to the fact that by that time avantgarde art had lost its heroic aura (also?) in Hungary. Similarly, numerous values were lowered and had their emphases shifted.

In the mid-seventies and towards the end of the decade, photography, film and performance were added to the still strong Conceptualism as major techniques and forms of expression. Erdély had an important role in this, as many young artists, whether encouraged or challenged by Erdély's example, attempted to inject some new vigour into the avantgarde movement in

Hungary. In this they found support in the growing number of exhibitions and publications and the widening of contacts abroad, particularly with Germany and Austria. The most important works of the period were performance events that disregarded traditional generic boundaries; here the activity of Tibor Hajas (1946-1980) was extremely valuable, while Erdély's creativity group for young artists also contributed. These were times for the extravagantly personal touch as much as for ice-cold objectivity, for the opening of wounds as much as for the classicisation of oeuvres.

For the Hungarian avantgarde art of the late seventies, the last refuge was found in the heroic individualism of body art, performance and action art, and in the philosophical rigour or rigorous philosophy of Arte Povera. Everything else became suspect, as every other trend had been co-opted and absorbed by the increasingly streamlined "official" art of the period, which now employed a slickly painless mixture of Pop Art and classic Expressionism, offering it as its own version of the Modern and supplementing it every now and then with reasonably fresh stylistic scraps from the avantgarde table. Therefore, avantgarde art found itself in a predicament of helpless impasse. Its isolation was gone, but so was its elitist mystique, while its utopianism grew more and more tired and was unable to offer new alternatives to conformism.

Remedy for this impasse came from the United States. In 1979 there was an exhibition of American cultural history in Budapest, and in 1981 a comprehensive exhibition of contemporary American art was shown. These were the first times in decades that, instead of showing historical material, exhibitions of this kind presented something truly contemporary and relevant. Here, in these exhibitions, Hungarian artists had the opportunity to encounter the unconstrained new expressionism that was to present itself in its true dimensions at the Aperto of the Venice Biennale. Hungary was thus introduced to what came to dominate art in the eighties in the forms of Postmodernism, transavantgarde, New Subjectivity, Neue Wilde, heftige Malerei and Neo-geo.

The impact of this whole new climate of art, known in Hungary under the label New Sensibility, was liberating: its intellectual and stylistic eclecticism, together with its total rejection of limits and inhibitions, made it possible for Hungarian artists to endorse the dictum that "avantgarde art is dead". As a result, several artists, who had abandoned painting for Conceptual Art and photography, now resumed their old art form. (Coincidentally, there were artists who, repelled by what they saw as the false ecstasy of the New Painting, gave painting up, if only temporarily.)

The Hungarian advocates of this new trend exploited the changes in the internal and external political situation with much good sense and skill. Including members of an older generation like Imre Bak, Ákos Birkás (b. 1941) and István Nádler, some younger painters like László Fehér (b. 1953), Károly Kelemen and András Koncz, as well as students and fresh graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts, like Zoltán Ádám, András Bernát, József Bullás (b. 1958), István Mazzag (b. 1958) and László Mulasics (b. 1954), they joined in the effort of making this tendency dominant in the Hungarian avantgarde art of the eighties. As a result of their concerted effort, contemporary Hungarian art was able to present itself outside Hungary as contemporary Hungarian art the first time in its history, even if this represented only one particular artistic stance among several others that contemporary Hungarian artists adopted.

By the end of the eighties, things had come full circle. "Official" art and "progressive" art approached the point of coincidence, while in another sense "official" art ceased to function as "official". It would be perhaps too flippant to say that now every misunderstanding can freely bloom and bring its wonderful fruits; instead, let me conclude by saying that Hungarian art has finally managed to achieve autonomy from its own resources and for its own sake.

May -- June 1990

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In the turmoil of political and social changes, especially at the time of writing, or perhaps due to the unexpectedness of the task I was charged with, some of the contributing elements were left unexplored: aspects and gestures which could have, on the one hand, provided a more accurate and fitting explanation for some phenomena which occurred at the turn of the eighties and nineties; while on the other hand, they would have sharpened awareness of trends and tendencies around the corner.

As its instruments such as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, ministries, local councils, companies or civil organisations were liquidated or transformed, or lost their financial and ideological might, state influence on art ceased to exist. With it sank, for good, traditionally official painting based on a diluted mixture of Post-Impressionism and Post-Expressionism as well as visual Abstractionism, whose practitioners still held prominent positions on the faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts, or various art associations. While sponsorship by cultural officialdom involved less and less funding from the early eighties as Hungary's economy took a steady

downward spin, participation in exhibitions, awards, position in the cultural hierarchy and social reputation were still matters of importance -- witness the incomprehension of painters and sculptors living on Party commissions over the loss of their role as court artist, to this day (in 1998), a role they were desperate to retain even if it necessitated a new ideological and moral coat. A typical course for turning coat and character during the nineties was to swap internationalism for nationalism. Anti-liberalism functioned as a pivotal point but rather than pursuing a practical or mythical utopia of proletarian equality, ideology sought its roots in the fatalism of irredentism. (The tragedy of this turn was marked by the fact that some of those accused of cosmopolitanism in the sixties became conspicuous by their chauvinism by the mid-nineties, following a long period of hibernation -- this time as critics, or even ideologists.)

Similarly to visual art in other former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Hungarian art, sensibly and expediently, became apolitical. Its points of reference and alignment coincided with those of Western European and American art. This meant, despite all appearances to the contrary, an emergence of homogeneity in the artistic scene where matters of style were for a long time dwarfed by issues of art sociology. Instead of the old emblematic questions of "region and centre", "cultural nomadism" and the like, what mattered was the chance to be integrated into *Weltkunst*, and at what stake. From another perspective, the real problem to be tackled was whether and how an identity could be acquired within *Weltkunst*. (Incidentally, the oeuvre of many artists seen as important and influential in the sixties and seventies fell victim to this aspiration. The work of Béla Kondor (1931-72), an artist who established a school in Hungarian graphics and art ethics, lost its relevance, or at least its timeliness, with the exception of his series of photographs, pieces the artist himself labelled as mere by-products, because they sought to formulate a peculiarly Hungarian answer, detached from time in an era which put aesthetic and moral integration on its banner.)

From a different approach, we can safely say that Hungarian art became apolitical to the extent of detachment from its own age. At the turn of the sixties and seventies, or even as late as the eighties, there was a tendency which was sensitive to "fate" and responded, directly or indirectly, to political impacts, albeit its output was not of the greatest importance. Followers of this tendency used Conceptual Art and performance; for instance, in the early seventies, Tamás Szentjóby, Gyula Konkoly (b. 1941) and Gyula Pauer (b. 1941); followed by traditional graphic technique based on socio-photography in the middle of the decade (mainly in the work of former social worker-priest Győző Somogyi (b. 1944) in his urban and

apocalyptic scenes); then later the Hungarianised banalities of Pop Art (Sándor Pinczehelyi, b. 1946). At the turn of the seventies and eighties, artists belonging to Vajda Lajos Studio of Szentendre, most of whom were autodidactic, offered a persiflage of the prevalent Hungarian environment through their particular camp art (primarily Imre Bukta, b. 1952, who implanted requisites and elements of “hard-working” agricultural life in his performances and assemblages). Indeed, very few artists chose to “visualise” the tools of more active political resistance -- and those who did, perhaps following the Polish pattern, waited until the mid-eighties (Inconnu Group). In Hungary, political criticism was manifested primarily in documentarist films and sociographic literature. (This is why Hungarian visual artists were accused, in the nineties, of not assuming an active role in the political changeover. This not entirely unjustified statement had its repercussions as to the material recognition of this branch of art.)

The path leading to Socialist art (soc-art) in the Soviet Union or the one trodden by the Czech artist Milan Kunc remained largely unknown in Hungary. This had the advantage of allowing artists to be measured by artistic criteria rather than in terms of political alignment, as their work referred to nothing but the art itself. On the other hand, apolitical art had clear drawbacks. In the drastically changed structure and medium of communication, the sixties and seventies generation stood out as anachronistic with their orthodox respect for image and their cherished untouchable and ethereal honour². In other words, their apoliticalness -- stemming itself from political consideration -- left them and their followers insensitive of the current state of affairs which, if not demanding a direct political approach, was all but crying out for a sociological one.

Artists and artworks emerged as respectable and “highly significant” while becoming (the artists themselves included!) mere fossils, brilliant yet less interesting pieces of art history³. One of the haunting characteristics of contemporary Hungarian art is a symbiosis of professional intelligence and pathos-ridden belief, dewy-eyed respect for style and craftsmanship, tools and technique, which gave birth to a whole range of ancient gestures alienated from life in their wisdom, as in a wax museum. An odd consequence, for that matter, is the minuscule size of Hungarian paintings. Their smallness is a first-hand indicator of the perpetual fate of the stepchild, even though times have long changed for the better. The words

² Members of this generation reiterated in interviews that they received the most important mental, moral and aesthetic initiatives from novels by Albert Camus, freshly translated into Hungarian in the mid-sixties. An in-depth analysis of this would be an extremely exciting project.

³ The Hungarian career of the notion “art-as-art-as-art” would also be worthy of studying.

of Dezső Korniss, mentor of the sixties' generation and prominent representative of the European School, seem to have left an indelible print: "You can't make art under whip and saddle!"

The sixties and seventies generations seem to have become classic⁴ by the early nineties. Let us suppose that this indeed is the case; let us accept what is suggested by vacillating publications and representative exhibitions such as, for instance, *Oil and Canvas* (1997), one of the largest exhibitions of contemporary Hungarian painting in recent years; let us, as it were, come to terms with the consequences. In this case, the main trend in Hungarian painting stretches from the dry theoreticalness of Conceptualist postmodernism (Imre Bak), Optical postmodernism (Tamás Hencze), or Geometrical postmodernism (Dóra Maurer, b. 1937) to the apology of the paintbrush, with the justifiable proposition that the excessively measured and persistent movements of Bak, Hencze and Maurer are in effect unparalleled in universal contemporary art -- unprecedented, hence unique and idiomatic. Such didactic (in the most positive sense of the word) representation of the potential outcome of each painter's historical attitude and resolve could only have developed in this culture, self-analytical ad infinitum and deprived of its natural control mechanism (or, in the most optimistic case, developing that control). It is also reflected in the "pedagogical" monochromatism of Zsigmond Károlyi, who belongs to the next generation of painters; or by Ernő Tolvaly's tautology of facture inspired by Conceptualism. What they demonstrate is how principles can make extreme something that has always been only an evanescent course of volatile sensitivity.

During the nineties, the best of the sixties and seventies generations formulated a sensual materialisation of Conceptual Art. Zsigmond Károlyi's series of pictures explores the relationship between the environment surrounding a painting (the active and noticed vision), the motivated object and the elements depicted on a painted surface. Every momentum analysed by Károlyi's procedure is conceived as a sign; the painted canvas on a stretcher metamorphoses into an abstract idea, as does the layer of paint depicting minimal movements and recognisable structures, as well as the whole environment "supporting" it -- the wall, the painter and the viewer. All this is conveyed by a kind of "didactic" illusionism and a monochrome, monotonous and, at the same time, hazily sentimental painting -- painting in the true sense of the word -- with a rich material and ideological structure despite its inherent conceptual minimalistic "inclination".

⁴ This is thought by many in today's Hungary. Some say it ironically, others are dead serious.

The method adopted by Ákos Birkás is apparently similar. Károlyi's denuded signs represent painting, i.e., visual expression itself, where movement is a constituent element of the picture, carrying the "action" manifest in the serial concept. The work of Birkás, in contrast, is based upon anthropomorphous symbolism. For him, motion is just as important, but it springs from a different source. His pictures of heads, well-known since the mid-eighties, reflect the purified-simplified, almost automatic gestures of painting, the strength of perpetuated motion. Their empty faces, seemingly ultimate effigies of an indecipherable content and duration, are the syntheses of the impossibility of cognisance; desire, which persists, if in an automated form; and the irony of form generation.

The same applies to the spindle-like statues of Ilona Lovas (b. 1948), made of gut. The large, sensually attractive pieces, yet unappealing in terms of their associative sphere, are expressions of the ultimate form of figure as a notion. They spell out an extreme, unstable static, a decisive lack of motion, which is made infinitely exciting by the suspended bodies of rotation. While the works of Ilona Lovas and Ákos Birkás capture the reflection of an object which became metaphorical by assuming special significance, Zsigmond Károlyi catches the image-making structure, and through it, distilled, metaphysical craftsmanship. György Jovánovics' consummate plaster pieces or stunning parchments analyse the transformation of view into image in a way which seems to be a more traditional, albeit extremely sensitive, pursuit of art. The fine patches of Jovánovics' colourful "plaster paintings", mellow and yet full of tension, sometimes reminiscent of those of Mark Rothko, are manifestations of the incalculable, yet seemingly calculated mysterious anonymity of artistic skill.

Vision -- in this case not physical but psychological (inasmuch as there is such a thing as psychological vision, though its existence should be taken for granted, otherwise the feat would fail) -- undergoes analysis by the hands of András Baranyay and Péter Gémes (1951-1996). Both chose the Self as their subject matter; both wrap themselves in the guise of a role. There is a difference in terms of the roles chosen. Baranyay uses himself and his own dampened, soft and diffuse image as a mask and role to hide behind, flying from himself only to return (?) to the place where he began. In contrast, Gémes enclothes himself in different skins, trying them on--trying them out: he inhabits statues and friezes of antique heroes, figures melting into death; and depicts himself as some kind of reverse astral body in photos kept in the negative. While Baranyay plays for himself, Gémes is an actor of the world, or at least these are the roles they play. The picture is mere conveyance, a tool, however adequate, rather than a result of the process. In this sense, pieces by Baranyay and Gémes are little

communicated documents of personal existence in sad archives where the picture may or may not perish but is certainly growing more painful. Alongside Post-Conceptualism, painter and performer Róbert Swierkiewicz (b. 1944) evolves a singularly sentimental, romantic expressiveness in his work. His paintings and assemblages are marked by Arte Povera, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Fluxus at the same time. The artist has taken an increasing interest in Oriental, primarily Indian, culture during the nineties, which is the source of a characteristically syncretic system of forms enriching his work.

The names and works of Károlyi and Swierkiewicz raise another question highly peculiar to the eighties: did the departure of Modernism mean the fading of the avantgarde in Hungary (similarly to other countries); or was it a case that “the end of art history” was given a temporary respite for current political and art sociological reasons?

In Hungary (with Poland perhaps the only other country which worked in a similar manner), the avantgarde and reference thereto was an ideological act: it became “auto-ideological”. The avantgarde is at once a symbol and tool of artistic autonomy and opposition to the prevalent political system. Its function and meaning is entirely different in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe or the United States. From the mid-eighties, however, thinking about the avantgarde involved a certain remorse in Hungary, as elsewhere in the region. Artists starting their career in the sixties who claimed to be avantgarde⁵ either felt contrite over the pure memory of their one-time past bearing the stamp of that trend, or, driven by current aspirations or an anticipated future, tried to obliterate the very thought that might allude to their former ideals or role. Postmodernist art with the emerging new subjectivism noisily buried the avantgarde with the double-dealer's charm and cynicism. Some say the avantgarde only comes back to haunt as the “money-bags avantgarde”, to use the horrific phrase coined by painter Tamás Hencze in 1988, until someone drives a stake through its heart. (This, incidentally, was at least attempted towards the end of 1992 at Sotheby's abortive Budapest auction to sell pieces by contemporary Hungarian artists -- a surrealistic effort reminiscent of a screenplay for a film by Altman.)

Quite a few of the artists who neither received nor expected (some of whom did not even flirt with) an official role within the new sensibility, either ignored or simply did not believe or were unaware of the fact that the

⁵ The art critics of their time tended to term them neo-avantgarde, to indicate their secondary rank in communicating political intent. The obvious purpose of this label was to turn them against the classical avantgarde of the 1910's and 1920's, thereby discrediting them.

avantgarde was now defunct. They did not experience it as a scandal, as those who read the obituary but did not believe it, and persevered in their activities, loudly proclaiming the contrary. These artists defiantly undertook some kind of mental radicalism while the world bypassed them and revolved around an entirely different idea: that of pluralism. Perhaps due to their naïve radicalism, these artists were less gentlemanly than those whom the disquieting rumour of the brutal death of the avantgarde left cold or who saw a business opportunity therein; that is, they longed rather for a post-avantgarde situation, which they intended to cash in on in peace, instead of suffering from or getting passionate over.

Rather than enhancing its shades and hues, the situation received a grey overtone by the fact that compared to a bustling cultural-artistic official policy in the preceding period, in the era at hand, it was all but in-active(ist), or even non-existent, and if anything, it barely paid attention to anything outside its own scope. (According to some opinions and reports, precisely this contributed to the prolonged dying of the avantgarde.)

Things had changed somewhat by the early nineties. The new sensibility and in general, Postmodernism, lost its strength in the visual arts, giving way to the reformulated values of the sixties and seventies on the one hand, and to a strangely pragmatic post-conceptual thinking and visualisation on the other. While the dominant artist groups and circles of the eighties, such as the art-punk band AE Bizottság (Committee); the rural avantgarde group MAMÜ, which came to settle in Hungary from Transylvania; or XERTO, established by Róbert Swierkiewicz, disappeared or were dissolved, others were formed, such as Hejettes Szomlyazók (The Substitute Thirsters), Block, or the Újlak Group. They no longer fostered the romantic desire to retain a new identity and integrity, however. Instead, they set out to be representatives of a peculiar “post-camp” spirit. The same occurred in performance, which played a leading role at the turn of the eighties and nineties: the present-time happening was replaced by video actions. Perhaps László Fe Lugossy (b. 1947) and János Szirtes (b. 1954) were the only artists who remained faithful to their original creed.

On the other hand, widely known achievements of the well-managed new sensibility brought the visual arts into vogue, surprisingly enough. This despite the fact that the reputation of visual expression, traditionally underrated in the Hungarian cultural structure, did not improve in the least bit. Moreover, electronic tools, which were rapidly gaining ground in Hungary by the nineties, did away for good with the boundaries of genres. As its manual toil was no longer necessary, the process of creating forms became of secondary importance, subordinate to concept. But this led to a

technique which generates contradiction. While electronic imaging boosts the intellectual charge of art, the artist has (willingly or not) to subordinate individuality to virtual collectivism, as if evoking the memory of modern has-beens). In the end, personal touch, sensitivity and sensibility are likely to be lost.

In any case, electronic imaging had made a major influence on Hungarian art by the mid-nineties. The Academies of Fine and Applied Arts contributed to substantial achievements in this area, as did the Soros Foundation and some IT research institutes.

In recent years, a shocking alternative emerged with bombastic force as opposed to the rephrased values of the sixties and seventies, but also to the new "technological culture": hyper-kitsch. It had nothing to do with the excessively sophisticated intellectual aestheticism of Postmodernism; nor did it bear any relationship to the aggressive sentimentality of the eighties.

Sweetness was not alien from French New Realism and American Pop Art. Even the sixties often produced chocolate-box art nurtured on some traditions of the Dadaists. But honey was mixed with venom; and the icing veiled thorns. What appeared to be sugar candy denoted a sugar candy appearance: that the world, the universe, was consumable goods and consumption was sweet; but also that this colourful spree was essentially material, hence unspeakably temporary and crass. Rather gross.

Neither the French, nor the Americans -- at that time -- were concerned about intellectual consumerism. A realistic or pop version of ideology, let alone the consummation-consumerisation of religious belief, were not yet seasonable. (It is hard to say whether all this was already on the agenda, or whether it only became an issue at a later stage. In any case, dribbling of the mind was nothing new.)

Intellectual icing attained its true thickness on canvases, statues and installations in the eighties. It no longer depicted life qualified for and in terms of objects; it represented spirit itself. The irony of New Realism and pop was replaced by sweet satisfaction which took itself very seriously and which was mingled with a curious, eclectic, candy-sweet view of the world. A sentimental, often superficially charming, doll-eyed view of the world became a peculiar product of trans-avantgarde hedonism. Its interpretation was not simply a matter of seeing kitsch as the product of a kitschy mind. What mattered was the way in which we wanted to interpret it; for the only reference of a piece was to itself. Irony gave way to a pathetic caricaturesque attitude: it was up to the spectator whether to take a piece

(and through it, art) as a joke or as a religious object. One extreme was the side-splitting, at the same time perversely infantile world of Kenny Scharf; the other was held by the Italians, who made a point of the anachronism of classical Classicism in the eighties. By the end of the decade, sugar-sweet reached its ultimate heights of charm and gracefulness, with work by Jeff Koons, or Jonathan Borofsky's eight-metre, sad clown-faced ballet dancer.

This syrup was fed by different springs: folklore rediscovered; pathetic, empty ornamental forms of grand art; an absurd, end-of-century horreur vacui. (Sometimes also, admittedly, from genuine kindness.)

From another perspective, this can be conceived as a tragic play: ballet on the razor's edge. Sincere sorrow gained a sugary coating, in Central Europe mainly in the ateliers of artists who stayed, and of those who had emigrated. Paintings by the Czech artist Jiri Georg Dokoupil seemed to be doing the pretty in a rather embarrassing way; the satirical caricatures by Kunc were in no way merry despite their best efforts. And so it goes for the works of Lóránt Méhes (b. 1951) and János Vető (b. 1953) in Hungary in the mid-eighties.

By the nineties, the tendency had split in two. The manifest candy art industry squeezed itself into the framework it had determined for itself. Its ever bigger sugary bits agleaming to perfection rose to the standard of the giant Disneyland characters until all they were able to convey was that the whole world was candy floss.

In contrast, makers of settings and props for gloomy, metaphysical adventures of the spirit embarked upon more sophisticated endeavours.

Similarly to other countries, Hungarian exhibition halls were glittering with the colourful articles of unified devotion of East and West at the turn of the decade, spiced with a pinch of Conceptualism. The piety of East and West beamed from moral pictures and sculptures, radiating the sweetness of faith. In these colourful installations, the bombastic Catholicism of Salvador Dalí's late religious paintings was further dramatised. But here, pure dogma and the canonicity were replaced by an eclecticism of mingling religious beliefs, in mental as well as formal terms. For instance, paintings by Lóránt Méhes embrace elements with a seemingly simplistic gesture, which, from a theoretical point of view, are in fact, highly complicated and unusual combinations of Op Art, Kraftwerk computer graphics and decorative new wave elements.

Naturally, there were mid-ways. István Nyári (b. 1952) was probably driven by a desire to formulate a new, end-of-century symbolism rather than by religious faith when he dressed age-old and brand new patterns in gold and silver, satin and lace. His quodlibetz composed of roses, instrument dials, badges, mysterious dead heroes, everyday objects with multiple interpretation, and glittering ornaments radiate the contemporary ideal of beauty with such clarity as an illuminated jewellery shop-window at Christmas or in the Istanbul bazaar. Nyári's shot is right on target but painless -- just like acupuncture or ear-piercing, or a witty, well-rounded maxim. Almost a generation younger, Gábor Gerhes (b. 1962) uses similar methods of expression with a touch of Conceptualism of archaic and folk origin, first in his wallpaper-style pieces, later in his pseudo-naïve, "media critical" slogans reminiscent of Barbara Kruger.

Sweet icons take on a more intellectual shape in the transformation of the photographic and video image. Nyári's more recent pieces draw from his earlier hyperrealist technique to capture videoclips. The forlorn amateur picture becomes a topos as a home altar (László Fehér), as does the metaphysics of an empty or ill-exposed picture (Attila Szűcs, b. 1967).

What points beyond the two alternatives is perhaps the (self-)ironic use of "traditional" installation, the tendency to restrain the uninhibitedness of Postmodernism by mixing it with the seriousness of Modernism. Time which has been stopped but which, in fact, has never been; and space, neither virtual nor real, are depicted in Attila Csörgő's (b. 1967) clever machines, Ágnes Szabics' (b. 1967) photo-installations and Mária Chilf's (b. 1966) "biologist" collection of objects. A critical attitude towards lifestyle appears anew (Antal Lakner, b. 1969).

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From the angle of art sociology, the past ten to fifteen years brought rather curious relations for the "user", that is, for spectators, as well as for art critique. Distinction became more difficult, as the former convenient categories which had been used for interpreting (and often absolving) work and artists had disappeared. Sociological and ideological explanation lost its relevance. What remained was the naked piece of art, which, however, wished to find no context apart from itself and perhaps, money. This could even ring true and justifiable if the avantgarde had not been, among other things, an attitude, an ethical preparedness, a progressive and utopistic vision which did not wince at every gust of wind in the face of the storm.

Whether it winced at officialdom and at the prospect of its own official status was a matter for ample discussion in the early nineties. This, not only because of the events that took place in Central and Eastern Europe, but also because of the way in which they occurred. As a result, the avantgarde (allegedly) lost one of its vital constituents: its political content, and while it gained invulnerability, it stepped onto the path of full legality, and even official acceptance.

This paradox was only analysed by small groups of experts. An accurate and professional investigation of the process has not begun to date. Abortive attempts at analysis mostly went no deeper than the level of phenomenon, and no effort has been made to set a systematic analysis within a Central European context. Some debates on the chances of avantgarde art becoming officially accepted were focused primarily on defining key notions; experts on art spoke in rather sceptical terms about the time-related nature of categories, volatility of descriptors and the “covetous” intent of officialdom. They explored the relationship between the avantgarde and official art, and dispelled a few misconceptions as to the connection between art, academia and power.

There were, of course, scattered attempts at examining the above issue on the level of practice, which employed comparative analysis as well. These explorations shed light on the peculiar courses which had been hidden behind the Potemkin-like walls of Communism. It was revealed, for instance, that the Romanian avantgarde of long-standing tradition had been split since the early or mid-eighties, and while the branch of Orthodox artists had been adopted by cultural officialdom, the school nurtured on the traditions of German Expressionism of the twenties was tolerantly overlooked; groups pursuing Conceptualism and Actionism were considered liberal and forced into deplorable circumstances; thus they were in no way threatened of having to become official⁶. In Bulgaria, in

⁶ As regards Romanian art, Orthodoxy seems to have indeed become an important element of the “reconsidered” visualisation. Three major exhibitions were staged in Budapest over the past two years displaying contemporary Romanian art. They were interesting, among other reasons, because I had thought (until I went to see the exhibitions) that Hungarian and Romanian art would be in the same heat in the competition for world-wide recognition.

Two of the three exhibitions were -- for me -- totally inaccessible examples of a spiritual will of art. In contrast, the exhibition staged in Ludwig Museum in the autumn of 1997 was charmingly “enlightened” with its irony and sociographic Post-Conceptualism. While I believe that respect for pictures in the 20th century goes back to metaphysical as well as traditional and sociological reasons, this direct, elevated and pious respect for the sacred seems to be entirely anachronistic. It may be, of course, that the essence holds a dual paradox: the autonomous nature of this oriental iconolatry is fed on its very anachronism; or at a different level, it is also possible that with its strictly guarded rules, canonised icon painting, which originally negated individuality, has survived all attacks by “alien ideals” and, as a fossil of a bygone age, it suggests its own timely essence:

contrast, the uniquely mystical performance was increasingly gaining ground and official recognition to the point of support. Several noteworthy events took place in the country in recent years, surrounded by keen attention devoid of all suspicion. Vilnius shows a picture similar to Romania: Lithuanian avantgarde had been oppressed since times immemorial, so much so that geometric abstraction had been banned as late as the second half of the eighties. The consequent "gut reaction" was that Lithuanian progressive art became excessively cosmopolitan, relying lamentably little on old popular traditions. Thus, artists such as Fluxus founder Maciunas, or the Mekas brothers, the grandfathers of experimental film, find little to attract them to return from the United States.

These debates petered out on the elusive note that the avantgarde has always been the art of opposition; consequently whatever becomes officially accepted, can no longer be considered as avantgarde. On the other hand, changes in artistic work have an impact on the assessment thereof, thereby making any assessment valid only in relative terms...⁷

All these events and their lopsided or contradictory evaluation may be interpreted and comprehended within this region. Political and administrative notions which influenced the very existence and analysis of the local history of art in the region have been non-existent in Western Europe or the United States, or have been substantially transformed over time. Although (centralised) cultural policy ceased to exist in Central and Eastern Europe, no new tracks emerged in their stead. There was no money, nor structure which could serve art which had become pluralistic art (even in political terms) to find its way into the museums, exhibition halls and collections following market principles. Similarly to previous decades, everybody was gathered round the same pot, the only difference being that now there were more hands holding a spoon, and the players in the waiting line changed place very rapidly until one or two of them (for example, most of the sculptors of public statues and monuments) fell out of the queue, at least temporarily.

collective autonomy. Despite its original intent, its archaic peculiarity evoked greater interest in Western Europe than the average Weltkunst product.

⁷ At an international art forum of lesser importance organised in 1992, the attending deputy secretary from the Ministry of Culture showed signs of haemorrhage when he was informed that left-wing ideals are tenets of the avantgarde.

The veritable dilemma of the late eighties and early nineties was whether Central and Eastern European art was gaining equal status in its own right, or by virtue of being an exotic political phenomenon.

The answer struck swiftly: in about 1990, Western art trading collapsed for a thousand reasons (such as the Gulf War, to name but one -- though the cause and effect relationship has yet to be unveiled around this neck of the woods). Western artists watched their "Eastern" counterparts with nervy, unfriendly eyes, wary of "price-setting", of Chinese and Russian dump art, of the uncalled-for rivalry on the part of artists and art historians from the Eastern block (witness the Europe-Europe Exhibition). All this dispelled whatever illusion had remained. As a result, there has not been a single representative exhibition of contemporary Hungarian artists in Western Europe since 1991-1992.

In the mid-to-late nineties, Hungarian artists are jumpy, dissatisfied and impatient. Not only because the euphoria of freedom no longer appeased anybody (those times were gone with the eighties), but rather because they felt deceived in their hopes. They craved for equity, for equal rank, for -- let's face it -- world-wide renown. But in vain.