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Central and Eastern European Sense of Identity in Hungarian Neo-avant-garde and Contemporary Art

Master's thesis

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I hereby declare that the thesis titled **Central and Eastern European Sense of Identity in Hungarian Neo-avant-garde and Contemporary Art** that I have submitted for assessment is entirely my original work, and that no part of it has been taken from the work of others unless explicitly cited and acknowledged within the text of my thesis.

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Abstract

The thesis explores the presence of the Central and Eastern European sense of identity in Hungarian neo-avant-garde and contemporary art. The Western narrative of East-Central Europe, which therefore defines the region in relation to the West, raises a number of questions: how did the Soviet occupation affect the region, what were the traditions of modern art movements under communism, how did they change after 1989, is there a kind of East-Central European identity in the visual arts. These questions have, however, been the subject of numerous publications and studies. Therefore, the main aim of this work is to study this topic not by means of general processes and trends, but by examining the art of selected neo-avant-garde and contemporary artists.

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Introduction

Art critic and historian Bojana Pejić has spent more than 20 years researching what typical Eastern European art made before 1989 is really like, and finally came up with the question of whether we are still suffering from the "who made it first" syndrome.[1] So there are two problems: firstly, whether before 1989 there was really only second-rate art on the eastern side of the Berlin Wall, or whether this label was just slapped on the region and has remained there ever since; and secondly, whether after the fall of communism, when the world opened up to the West and we are theoretically living in a global "new world", we still feel the need for the Eastern European label.

I must admit that, at the beginning of writing my thesis, I myself felt the need for this label, especially when I take self-historicization into account. The topic of my work and the research into Central and Eastern European identity was inspired by a conversation I had with the painter Imre Bak (1939–2022) in the summer of 2021, during which Bak answered my question about what nationality in art means to him by saying that it is something difficult to describe, something that one experiences every day and that seeps into his work. He cited the 1977 Berlin exhibition of art from the 1920s as an example: Dutch, Russian and Hungarian artists worked with a limited and essentially identical range of tools, but there was still a clear local difference, even if the works were very similar in form, and the folklore was later added to the formal characteristics, thus emphasising the national character of the works. He added that he had learnt from Dezső Korniss that one should strive to synthesise internationality and local traditions, because everyone can copy, and therefore one should relate to international art in a particular way, adding something extra to it.[2]

This statement by Bak made me wonder whether art in certain areas could really be so distinct, even though the same formal language is used by artists. I started reading literature on the subject when I came across Deimantas Narkevičius's statement that he was tired of being a Lithuanian artist and wanted to be "just" an artist.[3] This statement made me think that if there is a national essence (at least according to Bak), yet the Eastern European adjective is the most commonly used frame today, then it is possible to visually decode Eastern European identity, and what Central and Eastern European identity really means in the visual arts.

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[1] Bojana Pejić, 'The Dialectics of Normality', in: Bojana Pejiić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 18.
[2] Private interview with Imre Bak on 21 July 2021
[3] Bojana Pejić, 'The Dialectics of Normality', p. 19.

As will become clear in the next chapter, there is a rich literature available to explore this question from as many different angles as possible, and so I decided to try to examine the problem through the work and specific artworks of selected Hungarian artists. For the sake of a more nuanced picture, I have chosen two case studies from the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, which explore the artistic attitudes of the pre-1989 communist regime, namely the art of Endre Tót and Ilona Keserü, and two artists, Ilona Németh and Zsófia Keresztes, who defined the Hungarian and international art scene after 1989 and still do today.

The central question of my thesis is whether a certain Eastern European identity can be traced, and if so, to what extent it has changed in the creative attitudes of artists active before and after the regime change. This requires first a clarification of the labels Eastern European, Central European and East-Central European, and some comparison of the region's art-historical development with that of the West, and then I will turn to the specific artists and the works chosen to concretise the notion of Eastern European identity.

Review of Literature

Defining the geopolitical borders of East-Central Europe has been the central theme of many studies and essays in recent years, and a recurring problem that researchers have returned to. Most of these studies have not examined the issue from an art theoretical point of view, but rather have sought to define what Central and Eastern Europe is. Of course, there were also some art theoretical papers which were an organic consequence of the fact that the post-Soviet countries of the region were more interesting to the West as "exotica" than if they had not been hidden behind an iron curtain for decades. Perhaps the most cited scholar of this interest is Piotr Piotrowski, who has researched the artistic traditions of the region in several volumes and writings, with a strong focus on the communist regime. Piotrowski, who did the most research on the subject and who himself came from a post-Soviet country, did not perceive the complexity of the region as an outsider, but also showed a self-reflexive attitude in his publications. This attitude has probably set an example to other researchers, since, in general, although Western institutions have published and continue to publish on the art history of the region, there is a tendency to invite authors from Central and Eastern Europe to participate in research. Another reason why the art of the region is mostly written about by people who have a connection to it is offered by Matthew Rampley, who argues that language plays a key role in this. After all, most of the languages of East-Central Europe are little known elsewhere, drawing an automatic boundary between the art of different nations and making it difficult to find sources. As Rampley points out, this is reflected in the fact that the majority of international scholars writing on Central and Eastern European art in English or German are still either from those countries or descendants of emigrants.[4]

Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and Avant-garde in Eastern Europe* (2009) is a comprehensive historical overview of art in the region between 1945 and 1989, and of the trends in the individual countries. Piotrowski tries to cover the individual countries, rather than presenting the reader with a single communist narrative. The author delimits the region between the former Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union, i.e. the part of Europe that came under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence thanks to the Yalta agreement between the Western powers and the Soviet Union.[5] After geographically defining the area he starts with the

[4] Matthew Rampley, 'Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies: On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe', *Umění,* Vol. 69, No. 2, 2021 (URL: https://craace.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Umeni-2_21-Rampley.pdf, accessed: Oct 2, 2023), p. 146.
[5] Petr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989,* Poznan, 2009, p. 7.

avant-garde and traces, chapter by chapter, the common or contrasting artistic practices in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland. It is an indispensable volume, the perfect starting point for those unfamiliar with Central and Eastern European art, the artistic attitudes of the socialist regime and the boundaries of the system. Piotrowski provides a comprehensive historical insight into the dominant trends in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, taking care to write separately about each country and its practices. Nevertheless, the volume ultimately simplifies to a certain extent the art that flourished under the socialist regime, presenting a narrative where the artist can only assert themselves through rebellion.[6]

Perhaps the most comprehensive publication after Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta* is *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* (2018), edited by Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci and Ksenia Nouril, which aims to be a critical anthology of art in the region after 1989. For my thesis, perhaps the most important questions that the book addresses are: what is Eastern European art, can it be simplified to art that encompasses the activities of artists from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, or is it an art practice that emerged in the context of the existing state socialism? The editors point out that over the past decades, a number of project initiatives have attempted to define Central and Eastern Europe using different comparative or critical methodologies. What the editors see as a mistake is to explain the art of the socialist era with a popular and simplistic narrative based on the figure of the brave dissident artist fighting for freedom of expression in a totalitarian regime. However, as the editors point out in the introduction to the volume, this treats the countries of the former Eastern bloc as a homogeneous entity and ignores their uniqueness.[7] The anthology therefore seeks to offer a new reading of the region, not as a comprehensive historical overview, as Piotrowski has done, but as an exploration of artistic practices that underpin the processes that are taking place in the particular socio-political context and the significance of the region's shared socialist heritage. After all, East-Central Europe can still be seen as a dynamic concept, not as a static phenomenon that can be clearly defined spatially.[8]

Another of Piotrowski's seminal and often cited texts is *On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History* (2008), in which he writes about the history of modernism in Eastern and Central Europe, and often returns to the metaphor of horizontal art history. According to Piotrowski,

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[6] Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 13.
[7] Ibidem.
[8] Petrică Mogoș, 'Nous sommes des barbares', *Kajet*, No. 1, 2017, p. 18.

the art historical canon currently focuses on art created in the cultural and political centres of the West (e.g. Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, New York). Art that is marginalised from this perspective is mentioned as an additional example, such as South America, Asia, Africa or even Central and Eastern Europe. This is what the author calls "vertical art history".[9] In contrast, he offers the alternative of "horizontal art history", in which every narrative needs to be identified and placed in relation to the particular environment in which it was produced. In order to produce special creative and cultural forms, we must look at the trends and phenomena that are unique to a certain historical time and how these interact with the unique cultural traditions, socio-political circumstances, and institutional systems of each place. This attitude, as Piotrowski writes, sees art and the region in which it is created not as something stable and not fully established, but as a dynamic process influenced by constant change.[10]

After 1989, when the physical boundary – in this case literally understood – between East and West disappeared, Western art institutions had to "discover" regions and their art that had been marginalised from the perspective of international art history. It was an organic part of the change of regime that the geopolitical division of Europe also changed, and a kind of *New Europe* emerged in which art, hitherto inaccessible from a Western perspective, took centre stage. The term *New Europe* has replaced the term *Eastern Europe*, following the accession of the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland to the European Union in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007.[11] Piotrowski's essay initially sought to address how "horizontal art history" could be understood and challenge traditional art historical practice, but it also examined the place of the Central and Eastern European region in European modernism. As the region was not part of the countries and cities that dominated early modernism, such as Paris, it was often characterised in the art world as having a "borrowed" or "copied" attitude.

Edit András deals with a similar problem in her essay *What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989* (2016), where she examines the region's art practices, with a particular focus on how political events after 1989 have affected art. András's focus is mainly on contemporary Hungarian art and the

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[9] Petr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History', *Umění,* Vol. 56, No. 5 2008, pp. 378–383. (URL: https://kramerius.lib.cas.cz/view/uuid:3f8468f7-4eff-11e9-bdb5-001b21187a68?article=uuid:88c6c2cc-9117-6813-7d83-ee4126e34535, accessed: Nov 3, 2023), p. 378.
[10] Ibid., p. 380.
[11] Claire Bishop, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 70.

problem of exploring the specific regional perspective of the area at a time when nationalism is trying to prevail over globalism at all costs, for example in Hungary, where the state consistently shapes institutions to incorporate a national attitude.

Returning to Piotrowski, in his book *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe* (2012), he again deals with art in post-Soviet countries, but using a different research methodology. Piotrowski himself admits that his book *In the Shadow of Yalta* was in fact far from a historical overview of post-1945 art in Central and Eastern Europe, but rather helped the author to organise a vast amount of historical material. Which, by the way, I think is an excellent first step for those who know nothing about Central and Eastern European art trends. *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, however, focuses on the contemporary culture of the region and problematises the artistic practices within it. In this way, it is in some ways an organic continuation of the book *In the Shadow of Yalta*, which was set in the period 1945–1989. In this research project, Piotrowski attempts to assess the culture of living in post-communist countries, which cannot be stylised at all, given the dynamic and ever-changing processes that characterise all contemporary culture. Thus, the author does not want to present the post-1989 artistic culture, but to map out the problems it is facing.

Globalizing East European art histories: past and present (2018), edited by Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, is another example of an experiment in writing East-European art history. The collection includes essays that provide a different transnational perspective on the art of the region. The volume offers insights into the art of the Eastern European region by attempting to view it not from a universal perspective, but through a kind of local lens. Thus, it does not take for granted that the countries in the region share a collective identity due to a common geopolitical past, which gives local art a kind of common and, according to the universal art history writings, specific attributes, but treats the region as a heterogeneous territory that shares certain markers. The essays in the volume focus on the artistic relations in Eastern Europe, their interaction with global phenomena, and trace the debates and discourses that have taken place between the countries in the region.

A relatively opposite attitude to this spirit is represented in Otilia Dhang's book *The Idea of Central Europe: Geopolitics, Culture and Regional Identity* (2018), in which Dhang explores the factors influencing the identity of Central Europe, focusing on Germany, Austria-Hungary and Britain, and how the concept of Central Europe has been shaped in Germany, Austria, Hungary and the anglophone areas that are not part of the region. The author also explores

how the geopolitics of Central Europe took shape between 1880 and 1918. Dhand breaks down the historical periods of the 20th century into the following eras: 1919–1939, 1939–1945, 1945–1984, 1984–1989, 1989–2004, which have shaped the concept of the region in different ways. What has remained, however, is the practice of defining Central and Eastern Europe in relation to the West on the basis of a discourse of Us (*Self*) and Them (*Other*).

The above are just a few examples of attempts to define and explain the existing concept of East-Central Europe and its "specificities". In addition, however, more than one study has dealt with the geographical definition of the region. For example, István Majoros in his essay *Közép-Európa nyomában... Viták, vélemények a régióról* (2009), in which Majoros took into account several studies and tried to define which countries are part of Central Europe. Although these are important discourses, it is not the purpose of this paper to decide them. As my aim is to examine the artistic practices present in Hungary, which is considered by several different scholars as part of Central Europe, such as Bemard Lachaise,[12] George Castellan[13] and Csaba Gy. Kiss. Kiss, who is also a politician and economist, also argues that Central Europe was discovered in Hungary at least a decade before the debate on the region began, thanks to Milan Kundera's *Únos Západu aneb tragédie střední Evropy*. [14]

Milan Kundera, in his essay *Únos Západu aneb tragédie střední Evropy* (1983), writes that Europe was divided into two parts: the "western" part, which was "transformed" from the ancient Roman Empire, i.e. it used the Latin alphabet and the Catholic religion was the moral basis of society, and the second, the "eastern" part, which borrowed the Cyrillic alphabet and was based on the Orthodox religion and Byzantine traditions. According to Kundera, after 1945, the border between the two parts shifted a few hundred metres westwards, creating Western and Eastern Europe, and the dual territory that felt culturally Western and politically Eastern, that is, Central Europe.[15] He then asks whether it is possible to refer to Central Europe as a unified cultural whole with its own history and, if so, how can we geographically define where the boundaries are drawn?[16] According to the author, the region is an unstable

[12] See: Antonin Snejdarek – Casimira Mazurowa-Château, *La nouvelle Europe centrale*, Paris, 1986
[13] See: Georges Castellan, *Histoire des peuples d'Europe centrale*, Paris, 1994
[14] István Majoros, 'Közép-Európa nyomában… Viták, vélemények a régióról', *Közép-Európai Közlemények,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2009, (URL: https://ojs.bibl.u-szeged.hu/index.php/vikekkek/issue/view/1071, accessed: Nov 4, 2023), p. 57.
[15] Milan Kundera, *Únos Západu aneb tragédie střední Evropy,* 1983, p. 29.
[16] Ibid., p. 46.

area of small nations somewhere between Russia and Germany.[17] According to Kundera, the region is east in its political structure[18] – which we can attribute to the Soviet occupation – and west in its cultural history. It is precisely in this duality that it loses its identity, and in the eyes of Europe, Central Europe is thus equal to Eastern Europe.[19]

According to Larry Wolff, the discourse on Eastern Europe began in the Enlightenment, in which the region was discussed as a cultural construct and intellectual discovery.[20] Larry Wolf also explored this in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994). Although here Wolff used the term Eastern Europe, since at that time there were two poles, East and West, the aforementioned *Self* and *Other*. Wolff points out that the perception of Eastern Europe was shaped by the travelogues of French and English travellers during the Enlightenment, who described the region as uncivilised and the people as barbarians. Through the accounts, the study of slavery and changing borders, and the correspondence between Voltaire and Rousseau and Catherine the Great, this volume is in fact a theoretical mapping of a certain kind of "cultural colonialism", not of the conquest of an underdeveloped country or territory by a developing country, but of the civilising ideas of Western Europe. In Wolff's sense, the creation of Eastern Europe was born out of a purely cultural concept.

Ezequiel Adamovsky in *Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern Europe in France, 1810–1880* (2005) refutes Larry Wolff's argument by arguing that although Eastern Europe (*Europe orientale*)[21] emerged as an idea during the Enlightenment, at that time the term did not have a connotation other than geography. Adamovsky points out that Wolff was inspired by Edward Said's publication *Orientalism*,[22] while Orientalism is a 19th century "invention".[23] According to Adamovsky, the notion of Eastern Europe (*Europe orientale*) only entered the French political lexicon in the mid-1830s, only to become commonplace in the 1840s, and although it was widespread in the 1940s,[24] the discourse on

[17] Ibid., p. 50.
[18] Ibid., p 64.
[19] Ibidem.
[20] Larry Wolf, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment,* Stanford, 1994, p. 356.
[21] Ezequiel Adamovsky, 'Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern Europe in France, 1810–1880', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2005, (online: jstor, accessed: Nov 5, 2023), p. 595.
[22] See: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* New York, 1979
[23] Ezequiel Adamovsky, 'Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern Europe in France, 1810–1880', p. 592.
[24] Ibid., 599.

Eastern Europe was still not operational.[25] It was only in the 1870s that the discourse that Adamovsky calls Euro-orientalism began to emerge.[26] In her essay, *How the New Left Invented East-European Art* (2014),[27] Éva Forgács argues that the concept of East-European art did not exist until the 1960s, when it was first developed through Western perspectives.

Konstantinos Megaponos's publication *The 'Eastern European' Grey Zone: 'Works and Words'* explores the cultural and socio-political processes that took place between Western Europe and East-Central Europe. Although the countries concerned from East-Central Europe are Hungary, Poland, the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, the reason for this is that Megaponos's case study is the 1979 *Works and Words* exhibition at De Appel in Amsterdam, where the Dutch curators wanted to showcase Central and Eastern European art. The exhibition ended up provoking no small outcry from the exhibiting artists, who sought to label their art as Central and Eastern European, and to make it interesting because of their opposition to the political regimes of the time, a point I will return to later. Megaponos uses the term "grey zone" to describe the region, suggesting that even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, its consequences are still felt to some extent today, and that Central and Eastern European art history does not fit into the traditional art historical narrative, nor does it have a specific shared history or art history. In fact, what Piotroski labels as Others[28] is what Megaponos uses the term "grey zone" for.

In *Former West: Art and Contemporary after 1989* (2016), edited by Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, the essays do not focus on the specificity of the former Eastern bloc, but on the West, especially what happened to the West after 1989. The volume is part of a research project that took place in Utrecht between 2008 and 2016, and is based on the statement by Igor Zabel that there is a constant discourse about "the former East" as a region that used to be a different world, while after 1989 this distinction disappeared, but there is never talk about "the former West".[29] According to the editors, the purpose of the book is to propose a former west, and thus a formering of the West.

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[25] Ibid., 607.
[26] Ibid., 608.
[27] Éva Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East European Art', in: Cornelia Klinger (ed.), *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit: Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, München, 2014, pp. 61–84.
[28] Piotr Piotrowski, *Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde. In Europa! Europa?,* Berlin / Boston, 2009, pp. 49–58.
[29] Igor Zabel, 'Dialogue', in: Zdenka Badovinac – Peter Weibel (eds.), *2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe: A Selection of Works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana*, Bolzano, 2001, p. 30

1. Central and Eastern Europe as Constructed Concepts

As can be seen from the above, East-Central Europe, Eastern Europe or Central Europe is a popular topic not only for researchers of the recent past, but also for publications problematising the region. However, before the region became the subject of art history writing, researchers were primarily concerned with the question of how the area could be defined geographically. Which of the three labels above is used is a matter of choice, influenced by the connotation in which the area is to be referred to. Central Europe basically has a positive connotation, while Eastern Europe has a more negative one, with implications of barbarism behind it.[30] Otilia Dhand poses the question that Central Europe is not a place but an idea, but an idea of what?[31]

At the end of the 19th century, when the leaders of the German Empire did not like the idea of an international Europe in which the interests of all the nations within it had to be taken into account, they saw the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, with the German Empire as the main point of reference and cultural supremacy, as a more acceptable alternative.[32] From the beginning, and especially in German public discourse, the Central European character was attributed to the political and military alliance of the German Empire and Austria-Hungary in 1879. This concept was followed by the German attitude during World War I, as when on 9 September 1914 the German Empire Chancellor Theobald Bethmann announced the advance of German troops into France, he mentioned the government's vision for Central Europe as a key phrase. This was to create an economic union in Central Europe between France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria-Hungary and Poland.[33]

Peter Bugge sees Central Europe as a discursive landscape rather than a physical one, oriented differently depending on the circumstances.[34] The scholar treats Europe as the cradle of civilization, like Wolff, as a concept with two poles from the beginning, originally divided

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[30] Peter Bugge, 'The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa', *European Review of History Revue*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1999, (URL: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13507489908568219, accessed: Oct 30, 2023), p. 16.
[31] Otilia Dhand, *The Idea of Central Europe: Geopolitics, Culture and Regional Identity,* London, 2018, p. 1.
[32] Jiří Kořalka, 'Mitteleuropa Friedricha Naumanna jako plán německé hegemonie v Evropě za první světové války', *Dějiny a současnost, Vol. 25, No. 1,* 2003 (URL: https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2014/HIA112c/um/Mitteleuropa_Friedricha_Naumanna_Koralka.pdf, accessed: Nov 1, 2023)
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Peter Bugge, 'The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa', *European Review of History Revue*, p. 16.

into north and south, marked by Catholicism and Protestantism,[35] then transformed into west and south poles during the Enlightenment, when the imagined or real ideas of travellers to Europe rewrote the division of barbarian-civilised space.[36] By the early 19th century, the counter-pole to the civilised West was thus Eastern Europe (*Osteuropa, Europe orientale*), whose backwardness was often explained by ethno-cultural differences.[37] Bugge argues that, since European civilisation was located in France, Germany inevitably had to appear peripheral, even if not eastern, and thus the aforementioned *Mitteleuropa* was formed, which served as a middle way between the civilised and the barbarian world.[38]

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, on the other hand, saw Central Europe as a unity of small states and small nations, not a cultural unity. His vision of the cultural division of Europe divided the region into several cultural zones: a western zone, which was Germany; a central zone of small nations between Scandinavia and the Balkans; and an east-west division, in which Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic were in the west, while Russia, Galicia, Hungary, Romania and the Balkans were in the east.[39] Milan Hodža, like Masaryk, also defined Central Europe as the area between Germany and Russia.[40]

After these discourses, the concept of Central Europe was "forgotten" for a long time, but then resurfaced in the 1980s, for example in Milan Kundera's essay *Únos Západu*, which dealt with the identity crisis of the region. By the 1980s, Central Europe had already rejected the idea of any connection with German *Mitteleuropa*,[41] which certainly had something to do with the trauma of the Second World War, which had until then deprived Europe of the label of civilised. At this time, thanks to the Cold War, the idea of Central Europe had been replaced by Eastern Europe, which turned the Soviet dominance of the Eastern bloc into a view that the territories east of the Elbe and from the Baltic to the Balkans "belonged" to Russia.[42] This symbolic geographical division helped to embed Cold War ideologies in

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[35] Hans Lemberg, 'Zur Entstchung des Osteuropabegriffs im 19. Jahrhundert: Vom "Norden" zum "Osten" Europas', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas,* No. 33, 1985, p. 51.
[36] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, 1994, p. 90.
[37] Peter Bugge, 'The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa', *European Review of History Revue*, pp. 17-18.
[38] Ibid., p. 18.
[39] Peter Bugge, 'České obrazy Evropy za první republiky', in: Eva Hahnová (ed.), *Evropa očima Čechů*, Praha, 1997, p. 102.
[40] Peter Bugge, 'The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa', p. 22.
[41] Ibid., p. 26.
[42] László Kontler, 'Introduction: Reflections on Symbolic Geography', *European Review of History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1999, (URL: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13507489908568218, accessed: Nov 9, 2023), p. 11.

society and, as László Kontler writes, this political connotation led to Central Europe becoming the subject of literary and academic research, which ultimately had important political consequences, for example in the climate of 1989.[43]

This does not mean, however, that Central Europe has been completely replaced by Eastern Europe, but that this is when the differentiation that came from the different names really came into play. According to Otilia Dhand, being Central European at the time of regime change brought with it a new identity: authoritarianism, centralised economy, occupation were identified with the East, while the Middle brought with it democracy, the possibility of free markets and full sovereignty. So to be Central European was the second best thing after being Western,[44] because it meant that the state in question was, so to speak, in the waiting room of becoming Western.[45] Academics, politicians and publicists treated Central Europe as a concept that existed in the countries in transit, that is, countries that wanted to leave behind the communist past and become Western instead of Eastern.[46] To be considered Central European meant that a country was on the right track for rapid accession to the West.[47] Overall, then, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Central Europe marked a territory that functioned as a counter-pole to authoritarian regimes, a denial of the Eastern character, a narrative of cultural rapprochement with the West, a means of emergence from the Eastern European past.[48]

I have already talked about Eastern and Central Europe and how these concepts have evolved over the past centuries. But perhaps more commonly used today is the term East-Central Europe. Matthew Rampley, in a study, writes that the term originated with Polish historian Oskar Halecki, who first used it in 1943 to support his claim for a more inclusive European community.[49] This assertion was based on the fact that the division of the Central and Eastern European region into many small nations implied the presence of multilingual and multi-ethnic cultures, avoiding the designation of one or more specific countries, which might indicate a monolingual culture based on ethnic purity and nationalism.[50]

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[43] Ibid., p. 12.
[44] Otilia Dhand, *The Idea of Central Europe: Geopolitics, Culture and Regional Identity,* London, 2018, p. 4.
[45] Merje Kuus, *Geopolitics Reframed: Security and Identity in Europe's Eastern Enlargement,* Basingstoke, 2007, p. 16.
[46] Dhand, cit. 44, p. 182.
[47] Ibid., p. 188.
[48] Ibid., p. 193.
[49] Matthew Rampley, 'A New Journal and the Meanings of "East Central" Europe', *Art East Central*, February, 2021, (URL: https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/handle/11222.digilib/143598, accessed: Nov 1, 2023), p. 6.
[50] Ibid., p. 7.

According to Otilia Dhand, however, the concept of East-Central Europe appeared in the late 1930s in the works of authors of Polish origin who sought to counter the concept of Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) as it was being developed in the German discourse of the time. All this in order to give Central Europe an identity of its own, of which Germany was not a part. This notion was then, in her view, revived by the Cold War, when it referred to the countries that had fallen under the Soviet regime.[51] Despite all this, Nataliya Antonyuk points out that for the 21st century, a precise definition has still not been found that would distinguish between the categories of Central, Eastern and East-Central Europe in a meaningful way.[52]

For me, as perhaps in everyday language, Central Europe and Eastern Europe are now seen more as purely geographical concepts, even if the territorial delimitation may be different when seen from different perspectives. The concept of East-Central Europe, however, acts as a counter-pole to the West, a territory that is already part of the European Union and therefore theoretically equal to the West. In practice, however, it is a region with a strong imprint of the Soviet regime, a "grey zone", as Megaponos has alluded to. However, I am not saying this from an artistic point of view, but from a socio-political one. This raises the question of whether the art of a region can be influenced by the same influences in a region where fundamentally different social processes are taking place in different countries. I very much doubt it. At the same time, can Western countries, which today are endowed with the same values – tolerance, inclusion, openness – bear the same cultural traits as a result? And, if so, whether the same applies to the countries of East-Central Europe. Or, more generally, is this distinction necessary, and are we not insisting on it simply because Western thinkers and researchers have been desperate to find the traits that maintain a kind of "nylon curtain", a phrase used by György Péteri to indicate that although the iron curtain has fallen, a transparent barrier remains in place,[53] which continues to be an obstacle to the influx of Western or European ideas.

[51] Dhand, cit. 44, p. 166.
[52] Nataliya Antonyuk, 'Central, Eastern and East-Central Europe', *Politeja* , No. 57, 2018, (online: jstor, accessed: Oct 10, 2022), pp. 9–10.
[53] György Péteri, 'Nylon Curtain – Transnational and Transsystematic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe', *Slavonica,* Vol. 10, No. 2, 2004, p. 115.

2. Art history Writing and East-Central European Art

Piotrowski writes in an essay that, because the borders of Central and Eastern Europe were closed under communism, art history developed more or less within them, and the regime wanted art to be presented in one way or another, but certainly according to the state narrative.[54] Apart from that, there is no single homogeneous historical framework that can be applied to the whole region, even in the same period. The separate countries were bound together by Soviet political rule and mainstream Marxist ideology, but fundamentally the countries had different cultural policies, so that the art of Central and Eastern Europe itself was pluralistic, polycentric and dynamically changing.[55]

According to Piotrowski, art in East-Central Europe had a different meaning than in the West, but developed within the framework of Western culture. Moreover, this endeavour also served as a political counterweight to the official cultural policies of the communist regimes. The task was therefore not to present a "different voice in art history", but to create a different paradigm of art history writing in the region.[56]

The Eastern Bloc was made up of eight satellite states that joined the Soviet Union at the Yalta Conference, which determined the division of the world after the Second World War. Geographically, the Eastern Bloc linked Europe and Asia as a political entity. Vít Havránek points out that the Soviet Union, as a colonial power, never sought to create a completely homogeneous culture.[57] This is mainly reflected in the fact that, although socialist realism was widely discussed, it was not a unified artistic movement, but rather offered certain dogmas to be represented (for example, the image of the happy worker, the glory of great Soviet leaders, the image of the perfect state), but the artistic formal language was already different in each country.

In their anthology *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe*, Janevski and Marcoci ask the question: what is Eastern European art, perhaps that which encompasses the artistic activity of the post-Soviet states, or the artistic practices that emerged in the context of

[54] Petr Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', 2009, (URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820902786586, accessed: Nov 22, 2022), pp. 7–8.
[55] Ibid., p. 14.
[56] Petr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History', *Umění,* Vol. 56, No. 5, 2008, (URL: https://kramerius.lib.cas.cz/view/uuid:3f8468f7-4eff-11e9-bdb5-001b21187a68?article=uuid:88c6c2cc-9117-6813-7d83-ee4126e34535, accessed: Nov 3, 2023), p. 379.
[57] Vít Havránek, 'The Post-Bipolar Order and the Status of Public and Private under Communism', in:Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 185.

existing state socialism? Or perhaps art that thematises the socialist or communist legacy, with particular reference to the fate of the individual under totalitarian regimes?[58] In the latter case, Central and Eastern European art would function as a large block, in which the artist appears as a brave dissident "fighting for freedom of expression in a totalitarian regime".[59] This image may still be so strong because artists living and working under communist regimes who wanted to move towards modern tendencies were forced to search for their own historical and interpretative contexts. Since the local institutions that were supposed to systematise neo-avant-garde art and its traditions either did not exist or looked down upon such art, artists themselves were forced to become their own art historians and archivists. This self-historicization involves collecting and archiving documents, whether of their own artistic actions or, in some spaces, of broader movements that were generally marginalised by local politics and invisible in the transnational artistic context.[60] In Hungary, this task is carried out by *Artpool*, an online archive of Hungarian neo-avant-garde art, which was founded by the artists György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay. This image of anti-regime dissidence is not only problematic in retrospect, however, but was often appropriated by contemporary artists, especially if it meant framing, say, an exhibition featuring artists from the Eastern Bloc, simply because they were all under Soviet political occupation.

In September 1979, an exhibition entitled *Works and Words*[61] was held at De Appel in Amsterdam, the central concept of which was to give the "Western" public an insight into the art behind the Iron Curtain. In the words of the curators, the aim of the exhibition was "to create a conversation between Hungarian, Czechoslovak, Polish, Yugoslav and Dutch artists who shared a common understanding (of art); it was a manifestation of the dialectical interplay of reflection, action, works and words".[62] Artists from several Eastern European countries were invited, but their participation ran into bureaucratic obstacles. In the end only four countries – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia – were represented, and the exhibition also featured Dutch artists, but the exhibition catalogue focused on Eastern

[58] Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 13.
[59] Ibidem.
[60] Zdenka Badovinac, 'Interrupted Histories', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 145.
[61] Jelena Vesić, 'Works and Words – Early critiques of the discourse of Eastern European Art', *Tranzit Hungary Public Benefit Association* (URL: http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/works-and-words-early-critiques-of-the-discourse-of-eastern-european-art/ , accessed: Jun 8, 2021)
[62] Frank Gribling – Josine van Droffelaar, curatorial-editorial introductory text, *Works and Words,* exhib. catalogue, De Appel, 1980

Bloc art. This kind of political collectivism displeased quite a few artists. Mladen Stilinović demonstratively gave a lecture only in Croatian, thus calling into question the possibility of dialogue. In a letter to the organisers, Goran Đorđević, also from the former Yugoslavia, stated that such an exhibition had only political and not artistic meaning, because the participants were not focusing on their own artistic issues, but on their local oppositional or underground position. In the light of this criticism, the organisers refrained from defining the term "Eastern European" in the final title and theme of the exhibition. In her essay, Zsuzsa László writes that the criticism of the exhibition emphasised that the art movements of the period were not linked to national cultural institutions and therefore cannot be seen in such a context – which is what the exhibition was intended to suggest.[63]

This kind of framing only increased with the fall of the Iron Curtain, as American curators hunted for great discoveries in the newly opened territory, bringing artworks home from the region as trophies. In 1995, two exhibitions opened, both devoted to Central and Eastern European art. In Pittsburgh, at the Mattress Factory under the title *Artists of Central and Eastern Europe*, and in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art under the title *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe*. The latter featured artists from Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.[64] A curiosity with Eastern Europe's experience of an alternative ideological system-one that "to the West is mysterious and rarely characterised" – is revealed in the *Beyond Belief* catalogue.[65] In her catalogue for *After the Wall*, Bojana Pejić quotes Lithuanian artist Deimentas Narkevičius as telling her, *"I'm a bit tired of being a 'Lithuanian artist'. I just want to be an artist."*[66]

Raluca Voinea noted that all the exhibitions of the 1990s were concerned with the concept of Eastern Europe as a legacy of the 1945 Yalta Convention.[67] In his text for the *Manifesta 2* catalogue, held in 1998, Robert Fleck says that after 1989, the widespread emergence of Eastern European artists in the West was a wave until about 1992, followed by subsequent

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[63] Zsuzsa László, 'Párhuzamos kronológiák Kelet-Európában – a kulturális ellenállás paradigmájának dilemmái: A gyűjteményeken innen és túl', in: Péter Apor – Lóránt Bódi – Sándor Horváth – Heléna Huhák – Tamás Scheibner (eds.), *Kulturális ellenállás a Kádár-korszakban: Gyűjtemények története*, Budapest, 2018, pp. 60–61.
[64] Claire Bishop, 'Introduction', chapter: Exhibiting the "East" since 1989, in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril(eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 67.
[65] Director's foreword, in: Laura J. Hoptman (ed.), *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe,* Chicago, 1995
[66] Bojana Pejić, 'The Dialectics of Normality', in: Bojana Pejić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-communist Europe*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 19.
[67] Raluca Voinea, 'Geographical Defined Exhibitions: The Balkans, Between Eastern Europe and the New Europe', *Third Text,* Vol. 21, No. 2, 2007

artistic fads.[68] Eastern and Central Europe was interesting because it was characterised by differences.[69] The place of the "near" *Other* in contemporary culture is on the margins of European culture, beyond the centre, in the provinces, but still within the same sphere of European civilisation, but Piotrowski argues that this "real" *Other* is not a consequence of marginality but of colonialism.[70]

However, the trend changed after 2000. Two tendencies emerged: the first focused on the Balkans, while the second, largely led by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, aimed to provide a historical perspective on Eastern European art from an Eastern European perspective, thus encouraging the creation of new institutions and collecting practices.[71] Following the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Baltic States to the European Union in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the concept of Eastern Europe was replaced by the notion of "New Europe".[72]

Boris Groys wrote that *„it would be neither wise nor fair to demand of Western art institutions that they perform a task which instead is actually the duty of Eastern European artists, curators and art critics: to reflect upon the specific context of contemporary art in Eastern Europe through its own art. Those who refuse to contextualise themselves will be implanted into a context by someone else and then run the risk of no longer recognising themselves."*[73]

According to Piotrowski, the reason why Central European curatorial strategies made local art accessible to Western scrutiny (and vice versa), and why the West was interested in these exhibitions framed by geopolitical character, was the aporetic nature of European borders. He also argues that this attitude persists, knowing that invisible borders, such as the invisible Berlin Wall, are drawn between centres and peripheries. Invisible borders also exist within the "new" peripheries, which are even more aporetic in nature.[74]

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[68] Ibid., p. 107.
[69] Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, London, 2012, p. 43.
[70] Ibid., p. 29.
[71] Claire Bishop, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, pp. 89–90.
[72] Ibid., p. 70.
[73] Boris Groys, 'Back from the Future', in: Zdenka Badovinac – Peter Weibel (eds.), *2000+ ArtEast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe*, Wien, 2001
[74] Petr Piotrowski, 'Central Europe in the Face of Unification', *Artmargins,* 2001, (URL: https://artmargins.com/central-europe-in-the-face-of-unification/?option=com_content&view=article&id=264:the-conference-geast-european-art-and-architecture-in-the-20th-centuryq-mit-5-6-october-2001, accessed: Nov 27, 2023)

Hans Belting himself writes of "two different voices in art history", the Western and the Eastern voice.[75] According to Belting, Eastern European art, especially art created after 1945, is fundamentally different from Western European art.[76] Piotrowski reflects on this when he asks whether there is a non-Western modern art. As he writes, modernism and its mutations – anti-modernism and postmodernism – were inherently Western phenomena and therefore of universal relevance to modernism.[77] According to Igor Zabel, modern forms and artistic values are Western and as such "universal".[78] But if all forms are universal in modern art, why would the works of Eastern artists be seen as exotic spectacles? To continue Zabel's line of thought, apart from being made under, for or against oppression, if a neo-avant-garde artist used the "universal" neo-avant-garde formal language, it was in fact Western art.

In his essay, Gerardo Mosquera formulates a critique of cultural asymmetry based on the assumption that the West offers models that the rest of the world adopts.[79] Marginalised art is made up of small, fragmented systems that, according to Zdenka Badovinac, map national histories outside any broader international relationship – or map small histories of individuals and groups that shape the informal mythologies of particular spaces.[80] Piotrowski, however, argues that art created in individual countries can never be "national" in either an ethnic or political sense, since to accept it would be to oppress other groups in the country dominated by that "nation".[81]

So, to put the above together, modernism equates to the West, which is merely adopted over time by peripheries and semi-peripheries, but because the values of modernism are universal, this process is not in fact forced. I cannot agree with this statement, however, because it would imply that art history, in the sense of a single collective narrative, exists only in the West, that other spaces, be they East-Central Europe, Asia or Africa, cannot be assembled into a larger meaningful whole on the basis of a single set of norms, and that we cannot speak of local modernism. Although my perspective is that I am looking back from the digital age, which by its very nature offers a very different opportunity for inspiration, knowledge

[75] Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism,* Chicago, 2003, p. 61.
[76] Ibid., pp. 57–58.
[77] Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, London, 2012, p. 27.
[78] Igor Zabel, 'We and "The Others"', in: Eda Čufer – Viktor Misiano (eds.), *Interpol*: *The Art Show which Divided East and West*, Ljubljana / Moscow, 2000, p. 132.
[79] Gerardo Mosquera, 'The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism', in: Zoya Kocur – Simon Leung (eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, London, 2005, pp. 218–25.
[80] Zdenka Badovinac, 'Interrupted Histories', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 143.
[81] Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, p. 37.

transfer and exchange. If I try to distance myself from that, I feel that the writing of art history has failed at the point where it has set up its own hierarchy based on artistic centres, and however much it tries to rewrite it, it still does so from the same angle from which the West comes first and everything else follows.

Meanwhile, in the region, according to Eda Čufer, there is a kind of cultural amnesia, which refers to the inability of post-communist countries to democratise themselves through their own historical, intellectual and creative resources, and to the exclusivity and ideological nature of Western perceptions, historical narratives and discourses of modernism and avant-garde movements.[82] This sense of powerlessness, to which Čufer refers, may also stem from the fact that the main goal of post-Communist countries was to "catch up with the West".[83] This in turn went hand in hand with the process of merging the second world (the Eastern bloc) into the first world (the democracies). So, as Vít Havránek continues, the Second World ceased to exist because the First World became part of it, transforming its structure, because with the merger the colonial past, the post-colonial present and the traumas that came with it all became a common burden.[84] The process of catching up with the West, however, meant that the region was so intent on forgetting its post-Communist past that it did so without any confrontation with it. In the meantime, visual artists, on the one hand, have sought to unravel the resulting traumas and, on the other, to reconstruct local historical narratives, something the West has failed or been unable to do.[85]

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[82] Eda Čufer, 'Enjoy Me, Abuse Me, I Am Your Artist: Cultural Politics, Their Monuments, Their Ruins, in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, pp. 29–30.
[83] Vít Havránek, 'The Post-Bipolar Order and the Status of Public and Private under Communism', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 185.
[84] Ibidem.
[85] Klara Kemp-Welch, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski – Roxana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 20.

3. The Concept of Identity

Before I turn to the key question of my work, it is important to clarify what the concept of identity means. Identity is a source of meaning and experience for people.[86] As Craig Calhoun writes:

"We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made . . . Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others."[87]

Identity as a term is a central concept in Western philosophy, appearing in contemporary analytic philosophy from the ancient Greeks onwards.[88] Identity is both a practical and an analytical category. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper characterise it as a practical category, as used by "laic" actors in certain everyday situations to make sense of themselves, their activities, what they share with others, and how they differ from others.[89] Identity, understood as a specifically collective phenomenon, thus denotes a fundamental and consistent identity between members of a group or category. This identity can be understood objectively (as identity "in itself") or subjectively (as experienced, felt or perceived identity). This identity is likely to manifest itself in solidarity, shared dispositions or awareness, or in shared action.[90]

Although identity as a concept has almost become part of our everyday vocabulary with the increasing popularity of current identity politics, Brubaker and Cooper point out that it should not be seen as something that all individuals have and all are concerned with. Or rather, to use the term identity to cover "all kinship, all forms of belonging, all experiences of similarity and connection, all self-understanding and self-identification, gives us a dull, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary".[91]

The publication *Three Faces of Identity* (2010) identifies 4 main sources of its characterisation: personal or individual identity, role-based identity, category-based identity

[86] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity,* Chichester, 2010, p. 6.
[87] Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity,* Oxford, 1994, pp. 9–10.
[88] Avrum Stroll, 'Identity', in: Paul Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* New York, 1967, pp. 121–124.
[89] Rogers Brubaker – Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 2000, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2000, (online: jstor, accessed: Feb 13, 2023), pp. 4–5.
[90] Ibid., p. 7.
[91] Ibid., p. 2.

and group membership-based identity.[92] If we consider the artist as the subject whose identity we are examining, we should realise that he or she can be placed in any of the categories listed. Individual identity is determined by individual narratives, but it is also shaped to a large extent by the social institutions in which the individual lives. Role identity can be understood as a social position that is shaped by the position an individual occupies within a larger social structure.[93] Category-based identities are born according to the categories created by society,[94] for example, if I say someone is Hungarian and if I say he or she is a visual artist, I am already marking an identity based on group membership.[95] Another type of identity construction, the identity of resistance, according to Etzioni, leads to the formation of communities.[96] It constructs forms of collective resistance to identities that seem to be clearly defined by history, geography or biology.[97]

Identity is thus used to facilitate self-understanding, to delineate identity or even opposition between persons; to capture the supposedly central, fundamental aspects of selfhood; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to emphasise the complex quality of the experience of the "self".[98]

A fundamental feature of self-identification is the definition of ethnicity. As Castells writes, this is not only because of a common historical practice, but also because it is common practice to emphasise the differences between groups or individuals who are separated by identity. This generalised "otherness", whether defined by skin colour, language or any other external attribute, characterises the reality of our multicultural world.[99]

Brubaker and Cooper asked good questions when they wrote: *„If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallise? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible*

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[92] Timothy J. Owens – Dawn T. Robinson – Lynn Smith-Lovin, 'Three Faces of Identity', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36, 2010, (URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20151123031113id_/http://majorsmatter.net:80/gender/Readings/Three%20Faces%20Of%20Identity.pdf, accessed: Oct 22, 2023), p. 479.
[93] Ibidem.
[94] Ibid., p. 480.
[95] Ibidem.
[96] Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, New York, 1993
[97] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, p. 9.
[98] Rogers Brubaker – Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2000, p. 8.
[99] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, p. XXV.

singularity that is often striven for – and sometimes realised – by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups?"[100]

3.1 Self-identification in Central and Eastern European Art

Piotr Piotrowski in his essay *How to Write the History of Central-East European Art* (2009) stressed "the need to make comparative studies, negotiating different meanings of local art produced around some focal historical point".[101] In his horizontal study of art history, mentioned above, Piotrowski was not looking for common denominators in the artistic practices of the Eastern bloc countries, but, on the contrary, for differences that dissolve the stereotypical approach to the region.[102] In Piotrowski's interpretation, the local is both more and less than the national.[103] In Daniel Grúň's deciphering, this means the ability to transcend national (or state) borders, to draw inspiration from national history and to avoid being confined to the "essence" of the country (from which nationalism derives).[104]

The desire to "colour" the area behind the wall, which was considered grey during the Cold War, was the driving force behind the discursive attempt to reject the idea of a homogeneous region and to break away from the idea of the Eastern bloc by creating sub-regions (such as the Balkans, the Baltic States, Central Europe, etc.).[105] The use of the term Eastern European art is not without problems. The ambiguity is caused by the not sufficiently precise historiographical classification of the term, which results in the hybridity of the term itself.[106] Nevertheless, in practice, it is used with great preference, and has even become the central theme or title of several exhibitions. As a result, exhibitions that emphasised the homogeneity of the region have not received very positive reviews, as was the case with *Works and Words* at De Appel. The exhibition *After the Wall*, presented in 1999, was similarly criticised by the profession at the time of its launch.[107] However, reading the retrospective exhibition efforts

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[100] Brubaker – Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', cit. 98, p. 1.
[101] Piotr Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', *Third Text,* Vol. 23, No. 1, January, 2009, p. 8.
[102] Daniel Grúň, *Processes of Self-Historicisation in East European Art,* (URL: http://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/186/462, accessed: Oct 26, 2023)
[103] Piotr Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', p. 7.
[104] Grúň, cit. 102.
[105] Edit András, 'What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989', in: Christiane Erharter – Rawley Grau – Urška Jurman (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue*, Ljubljana / Berlin / Vienna, 2016, p. 57.
[106] Grúň, cit. 102.
[107] Edit András, 'What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989', in: Christiane Erharter – Rawley Grau – Urška Jurman (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue*, Ljubljana / Berlin / Vienna, 2016, p. 57.

and the subsequent reviews reveals a dynamic and unfinished process of historicization of the region's art.[108] These exhibitions, according to Jelena Vesić, propagated a number of post-socialist stereotypes and, in their contemporary appropriation of the avant-garde communist heritage, often neglected its original social meaning.[109]

In the 1970s, a new trend was emerging in Western institutions, based on a policy of multiculturalism, which sought to adopt a more inclusive attitude towards non-Western art.[110] On this basis, there were several opportunities for artists from the region to exhibit in the West, such as the IAM international manifestation in Warsaw in 1978, the much-mentioned *Works and Words* in Amsterdam in 1979 and the exhibition *Europa Europa* in Bonn in 1994. All of these exhibitions focused mostly on presenting Central and Eastern European art as outside the canon and thus exotic.[111] The MOCA's exhibition *Out of Actions* in Los Angeles in 1998 and *Body and the East* at Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana in the same year paved the way for academic interest in Eastern European performance art. The first example presented a highly distorted picture of Eastern European art, which the exhibition discussed mainly in relation to Europe and North America.[112] In the second case, a transparently critical reaction to these oversimplifying distortions was made: an exhibition format was created that gave equal voice to each of the sites of the former Eastern bloc, thus creating a platform for comparative studies.[113] It is interesting to note that the Central and Eastern European framework did not only appear in Western institutions. Ilona Keserü, while she was the director of the Kunsthalle in Budapest (1992–1995), initiated an exhibition on the theme of nature, specifically in the context of Central European art, which was then entitled *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*, and was held in 1994 at the Ernst Museum with the participation of Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, Polish, Macedonian, Romanian, Hungarian, Serbian and Slovak artists.[114] According to the introduction to the catalogue, the event was

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[108] Grúň, cit. 102.
[109] Jelena Vesić, 'The Annual Summit of Non-aligned Art Historians', in: Christiane Erharter – Rawley Grau – Urška Jurman (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue*, Ljubljana / Berlin / Vienna, 2016, p. 34.
[110] Anne Ring Petersen, 'Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld', *Third Text*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2012, URL: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09528822.2012.663977?needAccess=true, accessed: Dec 19, 2023), p. 201.
[111] Konstantinos Megapanos, *The 'Eastern European' Grey Zone: "Works and Words", Amsterdam 1979*, 2019, p. 43.
[112] Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in: Paul Schimmel – Russel Ferguson (eds.), *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79*, London, 1998, p. 306.
[113] Zdenka Badovinac (ed.), *Body and the East*, Cambridge / London, 1998
[114] Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes, 'Decolonizing Central European Nature', *Ars Hungarica,* Vol. 43, No. 4, 2017 (URL: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10068505/1/arshungarica.pdf, accessed: Oct 23, 2023), p. 445.

motivated by Central European art itself.[115] Nature emerged as a common unproblematic and apolitical moment in the exhibition, as it was one of the first examples of comparative curatorial initiatives in the region that sought a common voice with other post-communist countries.[116]

From the above exhibitions, it is clear that the West had a demand for Eastern European art, but that its "commodification was driven from the outset by attributes such as exoticism, archaism and irrationality".[117] The adjective "Eastern European" was taken to mean the "near Others", who differed from the "real Others" in that their worldview and cultural models were similar to those of the West, but not the same.[118] So artworks from the socialist countries of the Cold War era became polished museum artefacts, art treasures, just as works of the revolutionary Russian avant-garde, which embodied radical social ideals, were incorporated into the collections of various leading museums.[119] Igor Zabel argues that the West has redefined and thereby constructed the identity of the region by exoticising and orienting Eastern European identities and traditions.[120] Merje Kuus argues that "today, Western institutions have the power to frame East-Central Europe in a certain way and to maintain that frame".[121]

According to Megaponos, the Eastern European countries are bound together by a communist past, but none of them want to associate themselves with it any more, so they are looking for an alternative identity in the European Union or in their pre-Cold War identity, which covers their separate national identities.[122] For many Hungarians, the West has been equated in their writing with "Europe" – an economically and socially advanced centre which is both a goal and a model to follow, while for others it is a superior, foreign influence against which

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[115] János Sturcz (ed.), *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe,* Budapest, 1994
[116] Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes, 'Decolonizing Central European Nature', *Ars Hungarica,* 43/2017 (accessed: Oct 23, 2023), p. 445.
[117] Grúň, cit. 102.
[118] Beáta Hock – Anu Allas (eds.), *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present,* London, 2018, p. 3.
[119] Edit András, 'What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989', in: Christiane Erharter – Rawley Grau – Urška Jurman (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue*, Ljubljana / Berlin / Vienna, 2016, p. 62.
[120] Igor Zabel, 'Intimacy and Society: Post-communist or Eastern Art?',in: Igor Španjol (ed.), *Igor Zabel Contemporary Art Theory*, Zurich, 2012, p. 92.
[121] Merje Kuus, 'Europe's eastern expansion and the reinscription of otherness in East-Central Europe', *Progress in Human Geography,* Vol. 28, No. 4, 2004, p. 483.
[122] Konstantinos Megapanos, *The 'Eastern European' Grey Zone: "Works and Words", Amsterdam 1979*, 2019, pp. 38–39.

national culture and national character must be defended.[123] The bipolarity between West and East implies that, on the one hand, life in the West was the desired goal and, on the other hand, in the case of Hungary, the East is what symbolises the ancient origins of the Hungarians.[124]

Consequently, national symbolism and its use, whether in the visual arts or more broadly in culture, can be understood as an exercise in searching for a pre-Cold War identity, reaching back to a past not yet touched by Soviet colonialism, and which distinguishes Hungary in a multicultural world. Although this process is not unique to Hungary, elements of peasant culture have played a crucial role in the cultural self-identification and national symbolism of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe since the 19th century.[125] Some anthropologists see in this fact one of the characteristics of Eastern European nationalisms.[126]

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[123] Tamás Hofer, 'Construction of the "Folk Cultural Heritage" in Hungary and Rival Versions of National Identity', in: Tamás Hofer (ed.), *Hungarians between "East" and "West": Three Essays on National Myths and Symbols*, Budapest, 1994, p. 158.
[124] Ibidem.
[125] Ibid., p. 145.
[126] John W. Cole, 'Culture and Economy in Peripheral Europe', *Ethnologia Europaea,* Vol. 15, pp. 3–26. and Péter Niedermüller, 'National Culture: Symbols and Reality', *Ethnologia Europaea,* Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 47–56.

4. Hungarian art before 1989

As I have already written above, Igor Zabel argues that modern art forms and values are Western but considered universal.[127] The question arises why Western forms and values are universal. Zabel's postcolonialist stance supports the very vertical art history writing that Piotrowski and many others are trying to rewrite.

As an example of this dilemma, let me cite Ciprian Mureşan's *Leap into Nothingness – Three Seconds Later* (2004), a paraphrase of Yves Klein's 1960 work of the same name (fig. 1). The image shows a small street in Cluj Napoca,[128] on which a man in dark clothes is lying, looking as if he has just thrown himself out of the building to his left. While Klein captures the leap (or fall) in progress, the outcome of which is unknown, Mureşan's work captures the landing. In Madina Tlostanova's interpretation, the space into which Mureşan's figure is plunged is the post-Communist geopolitical space itself, and the work thus represents the failure of Eastern European identity's own space and place.[129] According to Sándor Hornyik, the once Eastern, now post-socialist artist "cannot replicate the Western miracle" because it is a language of form that has been adopted. From this point of view, Muresan's work can be interpreted as a warning that there is no point in following Western tendencies, since "the miracle of the West only appeared to be a miracle from the East, if it had been a real miracle and not a clever montage, the artist would have suffered a great deal for his freedom".[130] In the following chapters I will look for this miracle, its existence or lack of it, in the work of selected Hungarian artists, such as Endre Tót and Ilona Keserü.

4.1. The Hungarian Neo-avant-garde in the Light of Global Trends

Before turning to the specific artists, however, it is important to examine the roots and traditions from which the Hungarian neo-avant-garde (as opposed to the American / Western) emerged. Although the Western avant-garde was born in opposition to tradition, Peter Bürger argues that instead of rejecting the existing canon in its entirety, it created a so-called

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[127] Igor Zabel, '"We" and "The Others"', in: Eda Čufer – Viktor Misiano (eds), *Interpol. The Art Show Which Divided East and West*, Ljubljana / Moscow, 2000, p. 132.
[128] Júliusz Huth, 'Ugrás a semmibe, tizennégy évvel később', *Artportal*, May 21, 2018 (URL: https://artportal.hu/magazin/ugras-a-semmibe-tizennegy-evvel-kesobb/, accessed: Feb 6, 2024)
[129] Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art. Resistance and Re-existence*, New York, 2017, p. 1.
[130] Sándor Hornyik, 'Túl a kétpólusú geopolitikai valóságon: A közép-európai neoavantgárd identitás konstrukciói', *ars* hungarica, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2017, p. 450.

counter-canon.[131] This, the author argues, marks the downfall of the avant-garde because it was originally a provocation that criticised institutionalised art, but eventually found a place in the museum institutions themselves.[132] According to Hal Foster, however, the institutionalisation of the historical avant-garde was achieved by the neo-avant-garde.[133]

Brüger interprets the neo-avant-garde as a weak imitation of the avant-garde, which abandoned the avant-garde's intention, namely "the utopian project of sublimating the institution of art".[134] He also criticises the fact that the techniques "discovered" by the historical avant-garde, which initially seemed revolutionary, have been emptied out under the neo-avant-garde and have become a medium and content that can be easily reproduced.[135] According to Charles Russell, Bürger criticises self-reflexive artistic experimentation itself, "which is a continuation of the radical innovations of the earlier avant-garde but which fails to develop a definite social critique or even a serious questioning of the institution of art."[136] However, Éva Forgács points out that, in contrast to all this, the neo-avant-garde carried out the artistic programme set out by the avant-garde, and did so with its own critical approach.[137] The neo-avant-garde itself aimed to maintain the radical innovative spirit of the avant-garde in art, but to innovate it further. In Charles Russell's view, it was in this way that he bore witness to the contradictions between his own statements and those of his social context, thereby encouraging critics to follow this critical attitude themselves.[138]

The avant-garde sought to break political, social and aesthetic bonds, to rewrite cultural paradigms and traditional forms.[139] Andreas Huyssen points out that while, according to Bürger, the aim of the European avant-garde was to undermine and transform "institutional art", this only made sense in countries "where 'high art' played a fundamental role in

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[131] Peter Bürger – Bettina Brandt – Daniel Purdy, 'Avant-garde and Neo-Avant-garde: An Attempts to Answer Certain Critics of "Theory of the Avant-garde"', *New Literary History*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2010, (online: jstor, accessed: Jan 19, 2024), p. 704.
[132] Ibidem, p. 705.
[133] Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', *The Duchamp Effect*, Vol. 70, 1994, (online: jstor, accessed: Jan 17, 2024), pp. 5–32.
[134] Bürger – Brandt – Purdy, cit. 131, p. 712.
[135] 'Introduction: Neo-Avant-Garde, Why Bother?', written by the editors of the OELN is an abbreviated version of the introduction to the volume *Neo-Avant-Gardes: Post-War Literary Experiments Across Borders*, Edinburgh, 2021, (URL: https://www.oeln.net/introduction, accessed: Jan 24, 2024)
[136] Charles Russell, 'Subversion and Legitimation: The Avant-Garde in Postmodern Culture', *Chicago Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1982, (online: jstor, accessed: Jan 19, 2024), pp. 54–55.
[137] Éva Forgács, 'Történeti jelenség-e az avantgárd?', *Laokoón*, No. 3, 2004, (URL: http://laokoon.c3.hu/dok/forgacs_avantgard.pdf, accessed: Jan 19, 2024)
[138] Russell, cit. 136, p. 59.
[139] Andreas Huyssen, 'The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s', *New German Critique,* No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism, 1981, (online: jstor, accessed: Jan 19, 2024), p. 27.

legitimising bourgeois political and social domination", such spaces being salons, theatres and educational institutions.[140] Consequently, neo-avant-garde or postmodernism emerged from different traditions in the two hemispheres of the world. An important aim of the Western neo-avant-garde was the maintenance of an autonomous art institution and the free use of artistic material.[141] As Thomas Crow explains in his 1996 book *Rise of the Sixties*, it was the product of a paradoxical development after the Second World War; as audiences and art galleries grew and avant-garde artists tried to cope with this unexpected critical and commercial success, the post-war young generation was disgusted. The avant-garde was accused of being institutionalised and sold out, and criticised for becoming part of the establishment.[142] In the East, however, they were rooted in the pre-war avant-garde and the desire to participate in the international art scene and break out of the isolation imposed on the region by the communist regimes. To some extent it was also linked to a conscious attempt by artists and intellectuals to protect art from political instrumentalisation imposed from outside.[143]

In East-Central Europe, avant-garde art had a different meaning than in the West, but it developed within the framework of Western culture. In addition, the incorporation of Western tendencies into the visuality of the countries under Soviet occupation also acted as a political counterweight to the official cultural policies of the communist regimes.[144] This insight led to the postmodern art of the Central and Eastern European region being treated as a means of resistance against the regime during and after the Cold War.

In Hungary, the communist takeover after the Second World War between 1945 and 1948 left avant-garde expression in a worse position than before the war, when the avant-garde was marginalised but not illegal.[145] By abandoning Stalinism, the younger generation expected to gradually overcome the state's resistance to avant-garde tendencies. In 1968, with the introduction of the new economic mechanism, a cautious economic liberalisation began, which resulted in Hungary becoming one of the most prosperous countries in Eastern Europe

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[140] Ibidem, pp. 30–31.
[141] Bürger – Brandt – Purdy, cit. 131, pp. 706–707.
[142] Éva Forgács, *Hungarian Art: Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement*, Los Angeles, 2016, pp. 189–191.
[143] Petr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945—1989,* Poznan, 2009, pp. 317–322.
[144] Petr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History', *Umění LVI,* Vol. 56., No. 5. 2008, (URL: https://kramerius.lib.cas.cz/view/uuid:3f8468f7-4eff-11e9-bdb5-001b21187a68?article=uuid:88c6c2cc-9117-6813-7d83-ee4126e34535, accessed: Nov 3, 2023), p. 379.
[145] Forgács, cit. 142, pp. 189–191.

in the 1970s, with a kind of social contract between society and the communist regime.[146] However, economic liberalisation did not have the same impact on the cultural sector. Artists had almost no, or very limited, access to the West, which the authorities could control by revoking or not issuing passports.[147] The emergence of conceptualism, which moved away from painting and sculpture and started to use other media such as installation, photography, performance, video or mail art, helped artists navigate this situation.[148] This gave Eastern artists the opportunity to break free from state-controlled art institutions and to reach audiences on a more direct and personal level.[149] And compact media have proved to be a great loophole to enable East-West artistic communication and international contacts,[150] even if the artist himself cannot go to an exhibition in person, but his work can.

From 1972, after the November 1972 party meeting of the Hungarian ruling party, the MSZMP (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt / Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party), avant-garde art was again pushed out of the public space after the partial liberalisation of the country, and neo-avant-garde aspirations could only spread underground.[151] This was followed by a kind of cultural stagnation in the 1970s,[152] although the Balatonboglár chapel exhibitions organised by László Beke and György Galántai took place during this period, which also played an important role in building international relations. According to Géza Perneczky, "the best artists of Eastern Europe resembled castaways, desperately trying to communicate with the outside world through messages in bottles,[153] but it was this very isolation that was indicative of the alternative network that was emerging in the region."[154] Despite the fact that the authorities regarded anyone with international connections as suspect, during this period "everyone was looking for foreign contacts, trying to ignore the reality of international borders and political divisions".[155] According to Václav Havel, a parallel culture was born in the region, which "for various reasons does not want to or cannot reach the public through the

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[146] Ibidem.
[147] László Beke, 'Tűrni, tiltani, támogatni – A hetvenes évek avantgárdja', in: Hans Knoll (ed.), *A második nyilvánosság. XX. századi magyar művészet,* Budapest, 2002, p. 235.
[148] Konstantinos Megapanos, *The "Eastern European" Grey Zone: "Works and Words", Amsterdam 1979*, 2019, p. 52.
[149] Laura Hoptman – Tomas Pospiszyl (eds.), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950,* New York, 2002, p. 123.
[150] Beke, cit. 147, p. 235.
[151] Éva Forgács, cit. 142, p. 158.
[152] Zsuzsa László, 'A fogalmak áramlása: A magyar neoavantgárd lehetetlen realizmusa a rendszerváltás előtt és után', *Enigma*, Vol. 26, No. 99, 2019, pp. 36–37.
[153] Géza Perneczky, *The Magazine Network: The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals 1968–1988,* Cologne, 1987, p. 127.
[154] Ibidem., p. 13.
[155] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta,* London, 2009, p. 242.

controlled media".[156] This parallel culture and art is, in the words of László Beke, "flexible and elastic, ironic, humorous and ambiguous, non-professional, communicable, always ready to become the social activity of a group of young people or even an alternative movement".[157]

According to Zsuzsa László, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Hungarian art scene underwent several regime changes: the modernist abstract art seemed to no longer be pushed out of the visible art scene and the fine arts institutions.[158] In 1977, Imre Bak had a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Budapest, and at the 1980 Venice Biennale, Hungary was represented by Endre Bálint, János Fajó, Tamás Hencze, Ilona Keserü, and Dezső Korniss,[159] the neo-avant-garde artists whose exhibitions had been closed down for political reasons a few years before.

In the early 1980s, the Hungarian art system was also undergoing significant changes. The socialist planned economy was in crisis, and the art scene also underwent reforms in response to this crisis: the organisations that brought together the visual arts were transformed, as was the system of state purchases, and artists' associations were once again free to operate.[160] These processes gave hope that the institutional situation would undergo fundamental changes in the longer term, and that it would finally be possible to develop autonomous spaces and institutions relatively independent of power.[161] However, the decade was rather characterised by a degradation of the social and political role of art, and although it was possible to create in a relatively free market, state art institutions could not be described as open to the artistic expression of the younger generation, which tended to move into smaller spaces, community centres, university corridors, private homes and studios.[162] Maja and Reuben Fowkes describe this period as chaotic, in which creative expression found an outlet through alternative channels of emerging subcultures.[163] However, systematic intimidation led to the emigration of many artists, with whom the neo-avant-garde seemed to disappear.[164] In December 1982, Ákos Birkás held a lecture entitled *Ki az áldozat? Ki az elkövető? Mi a*

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[156] Václav Havel, 'Six Asides about Culture', in: Jan Vladislav (ed.), *Václav Havel: Living in Truth: Twenty-two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel,* London, 1987, p. 127.
[157] László Beke, 'Conceptual tendencies in Eastern European Art', in: *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s,* exh. cat., Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, p. 42.
[158] László, cit. 152, pp. 36–37.
[159] Ibidem.
[160] József Mélyi, '„Rendszerváltás", 1983: A Továbbélő nyolcvanas évek', *Enigma*, Vol. 26, No. 99, 2019, p. 13.
[161] Ibidem., p. 14.
[162] Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes, 'Eastern Europe Can Be Yours! Alternative Art of the Eighties', (URL, https://www.afterall.org/articles/eastern-europe-can-be-yours-alternative-art-of-the-eighties/, accessed: Feb 8, 2024)
[163] Ibidem.
[164] Annamária Gosztola, 'Rabinec Galéria', *80: A Modern poszt-jai,* Budapest 1994, p. 255.

teendő? ('Who is the Victim? Who is the perpetrator? What to do?'), he said that while in the West the death of the avant-garde was caused by institutionalisation, in Hungary it was the attitude of the state that left the neo-avant-garde "isolated and paralyzed".[165]

As case studies for this era, I chose Endre Tót and Ilona Keserü – both key figures of the neo-avant-garde period, both internationally renowned artists, yet both representing two completely different attitudes. While Tót was more on the conceptual side, allowing for communication beyond the wall and a critical voice through his work, Keserü was more characterised by a disinterest in politics, and her works were made in a different spirit. It is precisely because of this contrast that I find their works interesting and illustrative examples, which perhaps answer my question as to whether we can talk about art with an East-Central European identity.

4.2. Endre Tót

Endre Tót was born in 1937, a Hungarian painter, performer and conceptual artist, known primarily for his mail art works, who survived the German occupation in 1944 and the Soviet occupation as well.[166] Tót studied at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, but from the beginning of his studies he came into conflict with the prevailing doctrine of socialist realism, and was expelled from the institution in 1958.[167] His work, as described by Krisztián Kukla, "reveals the momentum of the avant-garde, the rigour of concept art and minimalism, the playfulness of fluxus, and one can appreciate in it the politics masked as apolitical or the sacrality hidden in its profanity, but the emphasis is always on duality and repetition".[168]

Tót is a key figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, whose name is not only known locally, but who has also managed to build up a wide global network of recognition, which has greatly helped his international presence. Tót is therefore not an isolated Hungarian artist, although it would be wrong to say that the Soviet regime, however much it made it difficult

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[165] Ibidem.
[166] Alfred M. Fischer, 'Távol, mégis jelen. Bevezetés Tót művészetébe', in: Alfred M. Fischer – Krisztián Kukla – Géza Perneczky (eds.), *Endre Tót. Very Special Joys*, Debrecen, 2012, (URL: https://issuu.com/noralukacs/docs/endre_tot_very_special_joys_katalog, accessed: Feb 10, 2024), p. 44.
[167] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[168] Krisztián Kukla, 'Foreword', in: Alfred M. Fischer – Krisztián Kukla – Géza Perneczky (eds.), *Endre Tót. Very Special Joys*, Debrecen, 2012, (URL: https://issuu.com/noralukacs/docs/endre_tot_very_special_joys_katalog, accessed: Feb 10, 2024), p. 24.

for artists to travel, exhibit or even speak freely, was able to completely isolate them from the "outside world".

I have chosen Endre Tót as a case study because, compared to Ilona Keserü, another important figure of the neo-avant-garde, who I will deal with in the following chapters, he is perhaps more of a "global citizen", not only because he lived and still lives abroad, but in many ways I feel his work is more global. This is because the conceptual art movement, mail art or even the Fluxus movement all have a visual language that is, so to speak, born or adapted to the international scene: linguistically and formally. Furthemore, Tót was a key figure on the international scene, the first Hungarian artist to be invited to a solo exhibition at *Documenta* in Kassel.[169]

4.2.1. The Work of Endre Tót Before 1989

In the 1960s Tót turned to informel, which he said he discovered in Hungary and first encountered in a French magazine.[170] In 1964, he discovered abstract expressionism and became interested in monochrome painting, pop art and the work of Robert Rauschenberg, often resorting to collage techniques and the use of narrative elements.[171] According to Lóránd Hegyi Tót's paintings from 1966 to 1970 were inspired by the tradition of American action painting, and in these mostly small-scale paintings, "purely idyllic, non-representational gestures are mixed with certain mimetic elements, primarily portraits".[172]

Soon afterwards, he tired of the visual tools of abstract expressionism and, after he had the chance to visit London in 1968, the British pop movement replaced his painterly style with a colder, more austere visuality. In 1969–1970, Tót painted a series of works composed of clean geometric elements, stripes and the clichéd shapes of everyday objects, although initially the strong use of colour remained.[173] In 1970–1971, Tót broke with painting, partly

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[169] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[170] Szilágyi Róza Tekla, '"Ezt a periódusomat akkor egy kicsit intermezzónak érzem" - Interjú Tót Endrével', *Artmagazin Online*, Oct 21, 2019, (URL: https://www.artmagazin.hu/articles/interju/468e99e7eb5acba2d2b45192538123bc, accessed: Feb 12, 2024)
[171] Alfred M. Fischer, 'Távol, mégis jelen. Bevezetés Tót művészetébe', p. 44.
[172] Loránd Hegyi, 'Koherencia és érzékiség. Megjegyzések Tót Endre *Warum male ich?* – festményciklusához (1982–1985)', in: Kata Balázs – András Heszky (eds.), *Endre Tót: Warum male ich?,* Budapest, 2022, (URL: https://acbgaleria.hu/en/shop/publications/warum_male_ich_publication, accessed: Feb 19, 2024), p. 140.
[173] Krisztina Üveges, 'Tót Endre', in: Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst-Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Múzeum - Kortárs Művészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 2018, p. 132

because it had little resonance in Hungary,[174] and turned his attention to conceptual art, from which point he experimented with new media – telegrams, postcards, newspaper advertisements, typewriters, posters, graffiti, actions and artist's books.[175] From the beginning of 1971, he began to use 0 (zero) in his works, symbolising the emptiness of nothingness.[176] At the 1971 Venice Biennale, for example, he exhibited a postal money order made out to 0 forints, and a letter with all the data replaced by 0 except the sender's details and the name of the addressee.[177]

Tót used the zero motif throughout the decade, appearing on stamps and in the text of letters, becoming a dominant product of Hungarian mail art, able to reflect the current political atmosphere. Although at first glance the postcards of the *Zero-Post* cycle seemed completely apolitical, Bálint Szombathy argues that they documented the mechanism of the artist's intellectual activity, but the question of the need for freedom at any given time was often imbued in the seemingly innocent messages, which were published only thanks to illegal printing connections and circulated in underground circles.[178] Tót was fortunate that, as he was working in a printing school, he was close to the printers, who, although operating under a strict regime, were able to produce artist's books[179] thanks to their connections, which he could easily integrate into the international neo-avant-garde because of their portability.[180]

Tót's small works on paper, letters and postcards made it possible for him – and many other Eastern European artists – to present and represent their works internationally. He first presented his conceptual works to the public at the 7th Paris Biennale in 1971 in a group exhibition, which was made possible precisely because of the postal nature of mail art: he sent telegrams and letters written in the code zero to Paris.[181] According to him, it was at this

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[174] Alfred M. Fischer, 'Távol, mégis jelen. Bevezetés Tót művészetébe', p. 45.
[175] Andrea Bordács, 'Tót Endre', *Artportal*, (URL: https://artportal.hu/lexikon-muvesz/tot-endre-255/, caccessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[176] Alfred M. Fischer, 'Távol, mégis jelen. Bevezetés Tót művészetébe', p. 45.
[177] Katalin Tímár, 'George Maciunas és Tót Endre kiállítása az Artpool Művészetkutató Központban. 1993. március 19. – május 14.', press release, *Artpool,* (URL: https://artpool.hu/Fluxus/Tot_hu.html, accessed: Feb 12, 2024)
[178] Bálint Szombathy, 'A művészkiadványok anomáliái. Tót Endre: Printed Matter 1971–1981', *Új Művészet*, Nov 19, 2020, (URL: https://ujmuveszet.hu/kunszt/a-muveszkiadvanyok-anomaliai/, accessed: Feb 12, 2024)
[179] 1971: *Meg nem festett képeim; The States of Zeros; Semmi sem semmi / Nothing ain't Nothing*; 1972: *Nothing; Incomplete Informations*, I. A. C., Oldenburg; 1974: *Zero-Texts* (1971–1972); *Night Visit to the National Gallery; Zero-Post, Rainproof Ideas* (1971–1974); 1979: *TÓTalJOYS*; 1981: *Very Special Drawings*; 1990: *Evergreen Book*. Andrea Bordács, 'Tót Endre', *Artportal*, (URL: https://artportal.hu/lexikon-muvesz/tot-endre-255/, accessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[180] Kata Balázs – Daniel Kozma – Árpád Tóth, *Beszélgetés Tót Endrével, Köln-Budapest,* Oct 20, 2020 (URL: https://ujmuveszet.hu/szelesvaszon/printed-matter-1971-1981/, accessed: Feb 14, 2024)
[181] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, 2024)

exhibition that mail art itself was born, because it presented its precursors, such as Marcel Duchamp's telegrams or Yves Klein's blue stamp, which were placed in the "envoyer's room".[182] He then became a regular participant in international exhibitions and began corresponding with international avant-garde artists, including Swiss artists Benjamin Vautier and Daniel Spoerri, conceptual artist George Brecht, and Ken Friedman[183] and his dog.[184]

In 1975, he exhibited in Jerusalem when he was invited by the Israel Museum. During the Cold War, diplomatic relations between Israel and Hungary were severed, so there was no chance of a trip.[185] However, Tót travelled to Belgrade with a suitcase full of his works, where he posted the exhibition at the local post office – because he did not trust the Hungarian Post Office.[186]

In her book *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981* (2018), Klara Kemp-Welch explores how artists in the region managed to connect and organise exhibitions. Among others, she focuses on Endre Tót, who was part of the *Fluxshoe* travelling exhibition, which was shown throughout England, first in Falmouth in October 1972, followed by Exeter, Croydon, Oxford, Nottingham and Blackburn, and finally ending in Hastings in August 1973.[187] The exhibition was originally called the *Flux Show* but was renamed due to a typographical error.[188] The opportunity came to Tót through Dóra Mauer, who had met the German artist Klaus Groh through Imre Bak.[189] It was through this acquaintance that Mauer came into contact with David Mayor, who organised the Fluxus West movement[190] from London, "an open, more popular version of the original Fluxus

[182] *Tót Endre: 111 vers - állva és fennhangon olvasni*, Book launch with Sarolta Deczki and Roland Orcsik, Oct 9, 2023, Budapest, 49:32-53:00, (URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmDKvfAHXR4, accessed: Feb 12, 2024)
[183] Andrea Bordács, 'Tót Endre', *Artportal*, (URL: https://artportal.hu/lexikon-muvesz/tot-endre-255/, accessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[184] He sent a letter to Ken Friedman saying, "Ooooo. Ooo oooo oooooooooo, ooooo ooo ooo Oooooo." Friedman read this aloud to his dog, who, according to Friedman, indicated to his owner that he should read it further, who passed the interest on to Tót, who from then on corresponded with Friedman's dog. Ken Friedman, 'Tót Endre: Csend a fordulóponton', Alfred M Fischer, Krisztián Kukla, Géza Perneczky, *Endre Tót. Very Special Joys*, Debrecen, 2012, (URL: https://issuu.com/noralukacs/docs/endre_tot_very_special_joys_katalog, accessed: Feb 10, 2024), p. 35.
[185] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, 2024)
[186] Kata Balázs – Daniel Kozma – Árpád Tóth, *Beszélgetés Tót Endrével, Köln-Budapest,* Oct 20, 2020, (URL: https://ujmuveszet.hu/szelesvaszon/printed-matter-1971-1981/, accessed: Feb 14, 2024)
[187] Falmouth (23–31 Oct 1972), Exeter (13 Nov–2 Dec 1972), Croydon (15–26 Jan 1973), Oxford (10–25 Feb 1973), Nottingham (6–19 June 1973), Blackburn (6–21 July 1973), Hastings (17–24 Aug 1973).
[188] Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: experimental art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981*, 2018, p. 158.
[189] Ibidem.
[190] In addition to representing the Fluxus group's work in the West and its members, Fluxus West was founded in 1966 to support and nurture a wide range of concerns in contemporary art, which at the time was represented by a relatively small group of artists, including Georges Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Joseph Buys, Christo, George

concept".[191] It was from this meeting that both Mauer and Tót had the opportunity to participate in *Fluxshoe*, run by Ken Friedman and Mike Weaver.[192] Mayor himself claimed that Fluxus festivals and exhibitions such as this were intended to "create private meeting points for artists who were working very much alone or in isolated groups at the time".[193]

One of Tót's proposals for the exhibition was a *FLUXchessGAME*, which was impossible to play: Tót's proposed opponent would have been either the mayor or the professional American chess player Bobby Fischer, and all the pieces would have to be placed on the same side of the board, with no empty spaces, so that it would be impossible to move any of the pieces. The loser is the one who does not move a piece within an hour or does not show up. Tót's play is an ironic reflection on Fischer's defeat to Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union in the 1972 World Championships in Reykjavik. The immovable dummies symbolise the Cold War itself, during which nuclear weapons made it impossible for either side to take action. However, Tót manipulated his own game so that Fischer would not be informed and would not appear, and in his absence, two artists would play against each other and chance would decide who would lose, depending on who got the white piece.[194]

Thanks to *Fluxshoe* and his previous appearances abroad, Tót was able to build a strong network of communication with the West, so until 1980 living in Hungary he never had to leave Budapest to work and perform, and he kept up to date with current events through the daily letters, journals and books sent to him by his pen pals.[195]

4.2.2. *Joy* works (1971–1976)

Endre Tót abandoned informel and devoted himself to conceptual art, the first products of which were unpainted canvases from 1970, which were indeed completely blank, thus symbolically ending the previous era and beginning the next series of works based on linguistic signs, the *Zero* works, through which Tót explored reductionist painting.[196] In

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Brecht, and others. Ken Freidman, 'A Brief History of Fluxus West', ts., Fluxus Digital Collection, Fluxus West Collection, University of Iowa Special Collections, (URL: http://fluxus.lib.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/Friedman_Brief.History.Fluxus.West_.pdf, accessed: Feb 15, 2024)

[191] Dóra Mauer, 'SUMUS', in: Dóra Mauer (ed.), *Mauer, Gáyor. Párhuzamos életművek / parallel oeuvres,* exh. cat., Városi Művészeti Múzeum, Győr, 2002, p. 137.

[192] Kemp-Welch, cit. 188, p. 158.

[193] David Mayor, 'Something about the FluxShoe' (for the *Southern Arts Association Bulletin*, December 1972, 1, 3) typescript from Tate Gallery Archive, David Mayor Collection 815.2.2.6.6.

[194] Kemp-Welch, cit. 188, p. 158.

[195] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, .2024)

[196] Ibidem.

Dávid Kollár's interpretation, Tót's *Zero* works are manifestations of a paradigmatic deconstruction of universal ontologies, which he attributes to the fact that 0 etymologically means nothingness, emptiness, zero.[197] Indeed, this is what interested the artist, nothingness and emptiness, and the communication channels and possibilities that they offer, so that through nothingness the works can say everything about themselves.

This led organically to another series in which he gave voice to everything that concerned the Hungarian artistic milieu of the 1970s in half a sentence. His sentences beginning "I'm glad if…" are still used by Tót today, but I think they had their greatest weight under the Soviet regime, nevertheless they were not only critical of the regime itself. In 1973, his performance at *Fluxshoe*, entitled *"I'm glad to stamp"* (fig. 2), lasted for hours, during which he stamped the above sentence on a white piece of paper, which, according to Katalin Tímár, was an indirect irony on the pointlessness of office work.[198]

Tót's "joys" are, in his own words, a reflection of the dictatorial state of the 1970s, "a response to the subtle repression of censorship, confinement and the subtle means of oppression in all walks of life".[199] Around 1970–1971, he produced the first work of this cycle, the *TÓTALJOYS* series, printing on an A5 sheet of cardboard the sentence "I am happy to have printed this text."[200] In the spirit of the aforementioned rigour of the printing industry, this sentence is particularly eloquent: he could still manage the printing with his contacts, but the rubber stamp for the stamp was more challenging to make, as it also required a licence, which the printers refused, so he had it made in Zurich, with a happy face and the following sentence: "I am glad to stamp".[201]

A good illustration of this is a street action by Tót, which was the subject of a film made in Geneva, where he stayed for a year, courtesy of John Armleder and Ecart Gallery. At the time, Tót was already considering developing his essentially text-based series in the form of actions, but this would have been unthinkable in Hungary.[202] In this recording, Tót was

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[197] Dávid Kollár, 'Tulajdonságok nélküli 0000 és örömök. Tót Endre: TÓTaIZÉRÓK és TÓTaIÖRÖMÖK', *Új Művészet,* No. 9, Oct 2019, (available: researchgate, accessed: Feb 13, 2024), p. 16.
[198] Katalin Tímár, 'George Maciunas és Tót Endre kiállítása az Artpool Művészetkutató Központban. 1993. március 19. – május 14.', Press release, *Artpool,* (URL: https://artpool.hu/Fluxus/Tot_hu.html, accessed: Feb 12, 2024)
[199] Endre Tót, 'Joys (Örömök) 1971-78', *Tót Endre: Semmi sem semmi, retrospektív 1964-1994,* Exhibition plan, Cologne, 1993, October, Private publication
[200] Katalin Timár, 'Endre Tót', in: Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst-Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Múzeum – Kortárs Művészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 2018, p. 150.
[201] Endre Tót, 'Joys (Örömök) 1971-78', *Tót Endre: Semmi sem semmi, retrospektív 1964-1994,* Exhibition plan, Cologne, 1993. October, Private publication
[202] Katalin Timár, 'Endre Tót', p. 150.

walking the streets with a sign saying "I'm glad if this can hang on my neck" (fig. 3). This footage shows the confusion and surprise of the passers-by, which I think is a reflection of the sign. According to Timár, this artwork is an excellent reflection of the ambivalence between the two political systems that divide the West and the East: the free expression of private opinion in the West and the tight control of public spaces in the East.[203]

To mention one of the most critical of all, in 1978, Tót wrote "I would be happy to write something on the other side of the Berlin Wall" on the western side of the wall. Despite this, he did not consider himself a politically engaged artist, and by his own admission he reacted in a very indirect way to the times in which he was forced to live, mostly with humour, lightness, a kind of philosophical attitude, and therefore consistently avoided dark colours and drama.[204]

Tót's *Joy* works often depicted absurd situations and activities, which in my opinion, in retrospect, perfectly characterises the absurd situation of the 1970s, in which artists tried to move outside the state-designated framework. Examples of such images are *"I'm happy to read a burning newspaper"* (fig. 4), *"I'm happy to stare at the wall"* (fig. 5), *"I'm happy to look at you"* (fig. 6) or *"I'm happy to look at something beautiful"* (fig. 7). They are all banal, simple or even mindless activities that require freedom. With these, Tóth created his own freedom under, or even against, oppression, and by his own account, if he disregarded the oppressive influence of the ideology of the time, the "joys" were also joys of solitude, of being alone.[205]

A strong visual device in these works is the smile or laughter, which Tót often used, but as the examples above show, the artist's "joys" often included indifferent, even negative phenomena, in which case the laughing face attached to the photograph served as a special medium, to create a contradiction between the image and the title / description, and to create a kind of ambivalence that expresses the fact that laughter is not always an expression of joy and that there are emotions that cannot be expressed (fig. 8).[206]

The *Joy* works are both comic and heartbreaking in their absurdity, and it is this dichotomy and contradiction that makes them work so well. The repression, intimidation, confinement

[203] Ibidem.
[204] Endre Tót, 'Joys (Örömök) 1971-78', *Tót Endre: Semmi sem semmi, retrospektív 1964-1994,* Exhibition plan, Cologne, 1993. October, Private publication
[205] Ibidem.
[206] László Beke, 'örülök,ha…', *Fotóművészet*, 1976, No. 3, p. 39.

and propaganda of the communist regime were not comic features of life at the time, and although Tót uses humour as a device in his own work, it is perhaps this that makes the grotesque way in which the political system worked so clear. Tót turns his own reality on its head, which, whether seen from outside or inside the Iron Curtain, is terribly telling, yet he does so in the lightest possible form.

4.2.3. *Untitled* (1982–1985)

In the late 1970s, after repeated rejections, Tót was awarded a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Services) scholarship to Berlin and spent a year and a half in the German capital, then moved to Cologne in 1980, remaining artistically inactive, as he called it, until the second half of the decade: these were the "blackout years".[207] Tóth settled in Cologne at a time when the city was one of the most important centres of neo-expressionist painting, with exhibitions in European and North American venues dedicated to the rediscovery of painting, such as the Venice Biennale's opening exhibition *Aperto* (1980), London's *A New Spirit of Painting* (1981), and in 1982 the *Documenta* and Berlin's *Zeitgeist*.[208]

Tót himself began to paint during this period, but kept it a secret for decades until the acb Gallery in Budapest organised an exhibition in July 2022 entitled *Warum male ich?* ('Why do I paint?'), an exhibition of this unknown expressive period of Tót's work, similar to his work of the 1960s (fig. 9). As Loránd Hegyi pointed out that 20 years later, Tót revisited the characteristic and subtle tones of the early 1960s, with a return to silver-grey-pink-brownish-red shades, which also strongly separates his painting from that of the young German painters working in his environment, such as the *Mülheimer Freiheit*[209] and the *heftige Malerei*.[210][211]

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[207] *Central European Art Database: Endre Tót* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/49 (accessed: Feb 28, 2024)

[208] Loránd Hegyi, 'Koherencia és érzékiség. Megjegyzések Tót Endre *Warum male ich?* – festményciklusához (1982-1985)', in: Kata Balázs – András Heszky (eds.), *Endre Tót: Warum male ich?,* Budapest, 2022, (URL: https://acbgaleria.hu/viewing_room/miert_festek, accessed: Feb 19, 2024)

[209] Also known as the Cologne "Neue Wilde" (Young Wild Ones), they put their neo-expressionist works on exhibition in a studio they shared under the address Mülheimer Freiheit no. 110 in Cologne-Mülheim. Artists: Hans Peter Adamski, Peter Bömmels, Walter Dahn,, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Gerard Kever and Gerhard Naschberger.

[210] "Heftige Malerei" (Vigorous Painting) is an alternative description of the German neo-expressionist tendencies of the 1980s which seeks direct contact with the work.

[211] Loránd Hegyi, 'Koherencia és érzékiség. Megjegyzések Tót Endre *Warum male ich?* – festményciklusához (1982-1985)', in: Kata Balázs – András Heszky (eds.), *Endre Tót: Warum male ich?,* Budapest, 2022, (URL: https://acbgaleria.hu/viewing_room/miert_festek, accessed: Feb 19, 2024)

The artist, who had consistently not painted for a decade, in the early 1980s seems to have put all his accumulated inspiration on canvases made during this period. In a sense, he returns to his roots, yet he draws a strong line between his work of the 1960s and the 1980s. His decisive yet chaotic oil paintings and the combination of strong and pastel colours evoke an emotion as if he were trying to make up in this cycle for the whole decade when he did not pick up a brush. Thanks to the conceptual line of the 1970s, which became a global trend, it is perhaps no wonder that Tót concealed these works, as they are something completely at odds with what he had been creating up to that point (although, from today's perspective, they do not stand out from his oeuvre). The vehement gestural brushstrokes contrast strongly with the clean, almost minimalist look of the 1970s, to which the use of colour adds.

A frequent subject in this period of his work is the human figure, which may represent the painter himself, but this is not clear from the composition. Take, for example, the painting of a male figure in blue, red, white and mauve, outlined in black, in which the male body is absent, but the right hand gestures mockingly at the viewer (fig. 10). To whom is this gesture addressed? If we take it as a fact that this canvas "should never have seen the light of day", the answer is clear: the painter. It is as if Tót were mocking himself for having taken up the brush again, having transcended the formal world of painting. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that not only the gesture of the figure, but also its face, seems to mock him. Tót's "mocker" is not a static figure; the brushstrokes over the man's fingers indicate a sense of movement, as do the black lines on the chin of his head. Hegyi points out that the pronounced, powerful hand movements are a recurring motif in the series, as is the clown-like articulation seen here.[212]

Judit Szabadi explains Tót's artistic innovations and his changing formal language by the fact that on the one hand his form-creating inventions played a major role in them, and on the other hand the effort "with which he evaded the dilemma of an oppressive anachronism, the dilemma of the eternally 'delayed' Hungarian artist".[213] This seems to resonate with Sándor Hornyik's idea of the post-socialist artist trying to replicate the "Western miracle".[214] But is this not a degrading statement? What would have happened without the Soviet Union? What would have happened if Hungary had not been part of the Eastern Bloc? Would it have

[212] Ibidem.
[213] Judit Szabadi, 'A gesztus mint művészi öneszmélés', in: Endre Tót (ed.), *Tót Endre: Semmi sem semmi, retrospektív 1965-1995.*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle, Budapest, 1995, pp. 7–9.
[214] Sándor Hornyik, 'Túl a kétpólusú geopolitikai valóságon: A közép-európai neoavantgárd identitás konstrukciói', *ars hungarica*, No. 43, 2017, p. 450.

developed in line with global trends or would it have been a local form? Is it even possible that local traditions do not blend into international trends? In the case of the neo-avant-garde artists of the Eastern Bloc, I rather feel that the West was such a "miracle" because it was forbidden, but I disagree with Szabadi that Tót's art embodies the dilemma of the "artist being too late". I think that his search for identity is an inward process, naturally influenced by external experiences, and this is well reflected in this series, but it does not feed exclusively on it.

I often feel that whatever Eastern European artists have done at any given time, because of their Eastern Europeanism they are not seen as relevant, especially if we look at the trends before the regime change. We tend to look at artistic trends as processes that are born in a specific point of reference (in the West), which are later adopted by marginalised actors. Although there is clearly a certain progressiveness in the areas where the creators and theorists are concentrated. However, it is precisely the view that sees these as more significant than any outside field or trend that I find degrading.

4.3. Ilona Keserü

As the other neo-avant-garde artist I chose Ilona Keserü, who comes from the same generation as Tót, yet her artistic career has been shaped by completely different influences and trends. Keserü, born in 1933, is also a leading figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, who began her artistic career in the 1960s, mainly associated with Hungarian abstract art. She began her studies at the Pécs School of Fine Arts in 1946, and later attended the Secondary School of Fine and Applied Arts in Budapest.[215] In the mid-1960s, she turned from the traditional painting tradition to a new way of creating images and using materials based on individual inspiration.[216] Keserü was not affected by the spirit of 1970s conceptualism in the same way as Endre Tót or other members of the Iparterv generation.[217] The political overtones do not appear in her work either, she claims, and she is not affected by them in her

[215] *Central European Art Database: Ilona Keserü* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/1368 (accessed: Mar 5, 2024)
[216] Krisztina Üveges, 'Ilona Keserü', in: Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst-Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Múzeum – Kortárs Művészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 2018, p. 124.
[217] Léna Földes, 'Keserü Ilona', Virág Judit Gallery, *5th Post War and Contemporary Art Sale,* Auction Catalogue, Budapest, 2021,(URL: https://viragjuditgaleria.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/kortars-web.pdf, accessed: Feb 14, 2024), p. 36.

everyday life, including art, and she does not want to be in closer contact with them, even if this means that she becomes more vulnerable.[218]

Ilona Keserü, like Endre Tót, had the opportunity to travel abroad more, but her work was less integrated into the international scene, although this does not mean that she did not represent her work in exhibitions abroad, but Tót clearly gained more exposure beyond the borders and followed international developments more closely, while Keserü followed more local trends. It is precisely for this reason that I find it interesting to juxtapose the work of the two artists, because they were oriented in completely different directions, even if they are both members of the Iparterv generation.[219]

4.3.1. The Work of Ilona Keserü Before 1989

Ilona Keserü began her career in Pécs, Hungary, as a student of Ferenc Martyn (1899–1986), who was a leading figure of the *Abstraction-Création*.[220] She says that Martyn's teaching was a major factor in her starting to do something different from the rest of her generation.[221] The Pécs Studio was a defining school of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, and the city also became an important cultural centre of the region after the 1956 revolution.[222] The Pécs Studio deliberately avoided open criticism of the communist regime, but the members of the group were interested in new European trends and their art was driven by their knowledge of them, and the creative community operated in a constantly experimental spirit.[223]

Keserü travelled to Poland in 1959, when the political climate in Hungary had thawed, and the artistic freedom she experienced there, the possibilities and the publicity of modern

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[218] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[219] Péter Sinkovits, an art historian, organised the shows *Iparterv* in opposition to the strict socialist culture policy of the 1960s. The exhibitions showcased the newest trends in both figurative and abstract painting. However, the "Iparterv phenomenon" refers to more than simply the two shows; it also denotes a time frame and a larger intellectual scene. (URL: https://monoskop.org/Iparterv, accessed Mar 2, 2024)
[220] From 1932 till 1936, Abstraction-création: art non-figuratif was an avant-garde cahier published yearly in Paris. The journal became a vehicle for open self-promotion and a kind of resistance against the expanding influence of figurative surrealism, in addition to formalising a new linguistic movement in visual art. To become a member of the association, an individual needed to fulfil two requirements: they needed to be an artist and work in a non-figurative manner. (URL: https://monoskop.org/Abstraction-cr%C3%A9ation, accessed Mar 2, 2024)
[221] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[222] Štěpánka Bieleszová, Ladislav Daněk, 'Sonda do jednoho specifického jevu maďarského akčního umění', in: Štěpánka Bieleszová, *Místo činu: maďarské akční umění ze sbírek Balázse Szluky a Muzea umění Olomouc,* Olomouc, 2019, p. 13.
[223] Ibidem, p. 14.

artistic experiments in museums and exhibition halls, was, she says, a great surprise.[224] After that, a shift towards abstraction was noticeable in her art.[225] Kinga Bódi describes the period between 1956 and 1964 as a kind of "split of consciousness," during which Keserü "sought a way back to the abstract artistic environment of the mother tongue and to explore intellectual autonomy".[226]

Perhaps one of the most important periods in the artist's career was her subsequent stay in Italy from November 1962 to November 1963,[227] where she originally went on a three-month scholarship to attend courses at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. During her stay there, calligraphic handwriting and monochrome colouring were replaced by gestural painting, full of strong contrasts and red-orange-black colouring – a transformation that is centred in the series *Numbered Paintings* (fig. 11 and 12).[228]

From the mid-1960s, inspired by her stay in Rome, instinctive gestures and individual motifs have played a constant role in her art.[229] It is during this period that Keserü's particular approach to her work emerges: a conscious use of different strategies, both in the diversity of her style and in her work with materials, but also in her interest in collages, the relationships between colours and textures.[230] This interest is reflected in her stitched paintings from 1968 onwards, in which plasticity appears in the form of canvas embossing and textile applications.[231] Keserü, like her contemporaries at the time, was striving to create something new and seeking alternative artistic solutions;[232] a fundamental characteristic of the decade was the way in which artists worked in a variety of fields, experimenting and crossing over

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[224] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[225] *Central European Art Database: Ilona Keserü* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/1368 (accessed: Mar 5, 2024)
[226] Kinga Bódi, 'Ilona Keserü', in: Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst-Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Múzeum - Kortárs Művészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 2018, p. 122
[227] Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,* doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2014, p. 33.
[228] *Central European Art Database: Ilona Keserü* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/1368 (accessed: Mar 5, 2024)
[229] Kinga Bódi, 'Ilona Keserü', p. 122
[230] *Central European Art Database: Ilona Keserü* [online], URL: https://cead.space/Detail/people/1368 (accessed: Mar 5, 2024)
[231] András Zwickl, 'Keserü Ilona', *Artportal*, (URL: https://artportal.hu/lexikon-muvesz/keseru-ilona-130/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[232] Rebeka Erdélyi, 'Keserü Ilona', Virág Judit Gallery, *11th Post War and Contemporary Art Sale,* Auction Catalogue, Budapest, 2022, (URL: https://viragjuditgaleria.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/k-43-tan.pdf, accessed: Feb 14, 2024), p. 121.

between them, combining them in their work,[233] thus creating intermedia works. In 1965, Keserü already claimed to paint in anger: in the mid-1960s, her work began to include compositions based on dynamic gestures, in the form of spots, shapes and scratches.[234] According to Dezső Tandori, the fundamental importance of Keserü's work is that his move forward in Hungarian painting around 1965 was "the" necessary move forward at that moment in time.[235]

According to Katalin Aknai, Ilona Keserü's lack of knowledge of the contemporary world played a major role in her artistic development, as, apart from her travels to Poland, Prague and Italy, she had little contact with Western trends compared to some of her contemporaries. Aknai goes on to say that she was nevertheless aware that the "present of art is not the same as what is happening in Hungary", which she was confronted with at the Victor Vasarely mini-exhibition[236] at the Budapest Kunsthalle on 18 October 1969, one of the first abstract non-figurative exhibitions to be officially held in Hungary.[237]

By 1971, thanks to the dynamic and experimental "fermental years" of the 1960s,[238] when she simultaneously produced collages, asamblages, her first stitched-formed paintings and drew on the domestic "formal canon" (see the gravestone motif, which I will discuss later),[239] Keserü had a "mature" painterly language.[240] The 1970s were therefore characterised by a slower-forming and evolving creative work, at least as far as the shaping of motifs was concerned.[241] The 1960s were about "exploring, revealing and breaking into the emotions of gesture, form and the nature of matter, the new phase beginning in the 1970s being a decade of immersion in colour as a painterly archetype".[242] Keserü's focus at this time was on the study of colour, the beginnings of which can be traced back to her work at the Moravany Artists' Camp, where she was able to work in a dedicated studio, with a variety of materials

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[233] Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,* doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2014, p. 130.
[234] Ibid., 53.
[235] Dezső Tandori, 'Variation on the Works of Ilona Keserü I-II., 1980', in: Ilona Keserü (ed.), *Ilona Keserü Ilona Work 1982*-2008, Debrecen, 2009, p. 29.
[236] Aknai, cit. 233, p. 92.
[237] Noémi Szabó, „A hetvenes évek művészete – neoavantgárd tendenciák itthon", *Kultúra.hu,* (URL: https://kultura.hu/neoavantgard-hetvenes-evek/, accessed: Nov 14, 2021)
[238] Aknai, cit. 233
[239] Ibid., p. 74.
[240] Ibid., p. 94.
[241] Rebeka Erdélyi, 'Keserü Ilona', Virág Judit Gallery, *11th Post War and Contemporary Art Sale,* Auction Catalogue, Budapest, 2022, (URL: https://viragjuditgaleria.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/k-43-tan.pdf, accessed: Feb 14, 2024), p. 121.
[242] Aknai, cit. 233, p. 136.

and in industrial workshops.[243] According to Keserü, the fact that she was able to place greater emphasis on colour allowed her to break away from his familiar surroundings and, after a long period of time, she was not surrounded by her familiar motifs, so she did not feel the pressure to pursue them at all costs.[244]

Before I turn to the analysis of the specific works, I think it is important to mention her relationship to her womanhood. Not so much because of the clearly male-dominated art scene of the time, but because of how often Keserü spoke about it. She herself said:

"It's a miracle of God that I was born a woman, that's how I started to do art and that's how I've done it all my life. I can say that I could not have been in a better position. In Hungary, the distinction between men and women is present, in many different spheres of existence. But I have been able to do what I wanted to do all my life because no one thought it was important to pay attention to what a woman does."[245]

She herself claimed that until 1988 she had created art with a female personality and character, but she never emphasised this, always taking her own femininity for granted.[246] At that time, to call anything feminist in Hungary was unthinkable, and Keserü, as I mentioned above, did not know enough about the contemporary world outside the country.[247]

4.3.2. *Approach 1* (1969)

Ilona Keserü divides her own work into different categories: approximation, tombstones, figures, shapes, representation, free movement, tangle, labyrinth, canvas embossing, relief, afterimage, sequences, colour-mébius, cangiante (colour-changing), 3D – none of these categories are completely clear-cut, as the artist moved between them, but until the 1980s Keserü's work can be relatively distinguished on the basis of these. [248] I have chosen as one of these case studies the theme of the gravestone: the late Baroque folk gravestones of the Balatonudvari cemetery, which appeared in Western Hungary in the 18th century,[249] became

[243] Rebeka Erdélyi, 'Keserü Ilona', p. 121.
[244] Ilona Keserü, 'Szivárvány és bőrszínek, szín-mőbiusz', in: Júlia Szabó – Péter Nádas – Ilona Keserü – Judit Radák (eds.), *Közelítés - Gubanc - Áramlás. Oknyomozás Ilona Keserü Ilona munkásságában*, Budapest, 2004, p. 32.
[245] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[246] Aknai, cit. 233, p. 151.
[247] Katalin Aknai, 'Csoportkép hölggyel: Keserü Ilonáról', *Jelenkor,* No. 3, 2016, p. 297.
[248] Léna Földes, 'Keserü Ilona', p. 36.
[249] Zsófi Barabás – Borbála Tarján, 'Sírkőmotívumok Keserü Ilona festészetében', *Artlocator Magazine,* (URL: https://artlocatormagazine.hu/sirkomotivumok-keseru-ilona-festeszeteben/, accessed: Mar 4, 2024)

the central motif of her visual world[250] (as does the theme of "I am glad if…" in Tót's oeuvre) in their geometry and the organic duality of their silhouette.[251] This form, according to Aknai, opened up the horizons of application and variability of scale in her work.[252]

The motif was inspired by a trip to Lake Balaton, where she visited the cemetery at Balatonudvari, where she encountered the heart-shaped gravestones, and then began a series of paintings of this motif (fig. 13).[253] According to her own words, "*I immediately felt a strong impulse to paint these forms, with all their variations, in all their sizes, in beautiful, weathered, perishable limestone, in such a way that suddenly nothing in the world was closer to me, more important to me, than these curved, two- or three-ringed, large, buried stone cakes.*"[254]

In the late 1960s, the grave form has developed to the *Gravestones* cycle, but also to the *Approximation* series – as I mentioned above, Keserü's work can be divided into categories, but they often intersected. Perhaps the most iconic of these is *Approach 1*, a 120 x 170 cm oil painting on canvas painted in 1969 (fig. 14). On the pink background, two fragments of the heart-shaped gravestones of the Balatonudvari cemetery, or rather the motif inspired by them, are clearly visible, approaching each other from the upper and lower parts of the painting. The lower, beige pastel-pink tombstone motif covers the entire lower half of the painting, while neither side of the upper orange one extends to the edge of the painting, to the frame. Although it is a static painting, the undulating heart shape creates a sense of movement, which is reinforced in the viewer by the artist's choice of title. This motif of proximity has already appeared in *Gravestones 1*, made in 1969 (fig. 15), in which even the colours used echo the shades of orange and pink. Keserü's claim to monumentality really takes hold in the gravestones, which, according to Tandori, have the mapping and thought-communicating power of colour, but are increasingly moving away from minimal art.[255] In the cycle, geometry and gesture prevail at the same time: the forms, especially with the strong use of colour, slide into each other or even move away from each other, interpenetrating each other,

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[250] Aknai, cit. 233, p. 69.
[251] Ibid., p. 133.
[252] Ibid., p. 73.
[253] Júlia Szabó – Péter Nádas – Ilona Keserü – Judit Radák (eds.), *Közelítés Gubanc Áramlás – Oknyomozás Ilona Keserü Ilona munkásságában,* Budapest, 2004, p. 80.
[254] Ibid., p. 38.
[255] Dezső Tandori, 'Variation on the Works of Ilona Keserü I-II., 1980', in: Ilona Keserü (ed.), *Ilona Keserü Ilona Work 1982*–2008, Debrecen, 2009, p. 23.

whereby the originally flat image not only evokes the illusion of movement, but also indicates landscape and space.[256]

At the II Iparterv exhibition held in Budapest in 1969, Keserü exhibited *Approach 2* (fig. 16), which differs from its predecessor only in colour, as instead of vibrant orange and pink Keserü uses sand and grey, but formally it is the same composition. According to the artist's recollection, when she brought the painting into the exhibition space, László Lakner, when he saw it, asked, *"Ilona, what is this that you are doing?"* – something she was extremely proud of, because she didn't know what she was doing, it was just a feeling that had taken shape.[257] Keserü's intuitive art at the II Iparterv exhibition was indeed different from the other works, as works exhibited by other artists[258] drew on hard-edge, informel, conceptualism, pop art and arte povera, all of which were a thorn in the side of Hungarian cultural politics at the time, and Keserü's work would be difficult to associate with them. In later years, when Keserü worked the motif with a reproductive graphic process, she gave some of the pieces the title "érzet" (*feel*), which had not existed (at least wasn't used) as a separate word in Hungarian public language until then – according to Keserü, this way, linked to this thematic and visual subject, the possibility opened up for a new use of an old word, which is less definitive, thus creating a lot of associative potential and encouraging further research.[259]

There is something "feminine" in Keserü's work, although I don't like the adjective myself, but the fact is that *Approach 1* concentrates everything that is socially considered feminine in her choice of colours, her organic shapes, her soft brushstrokes. All of this is precisely what Lakner has called into question in his comment quoted in the paragraph above. In Keserü's generation, hard-edge painting in abstraction was much more popular, represented by Imre Bak, Dóra Mauer or István Nádler, and which indeed began to engage Hungarian artists thanks to Western trends. Perhaps this is the focus of her particular quest, in which colour plays a much greater role and form is secondary in a sense: although several forms appear in her art, she explores and shapes them all for longer periods, then switches to a new one, which she similarly lingers over, but this shift does not vary from work to work.

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[256] Ibidem.
[257] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[258] Imre Bak, András Baranyay, Miklós Erdély, Krisztián Frey, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, Ilona Keserü, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, János Major, László Méhes, Sándor Molnár, István Nádler, Ludmil Siskov, Tamás Szentjóby, Endre Tót
[259] Ibidem.

4.3.3. *Pasted forms* (1971–1973)

Ilona Keserü's creative journey goes from gesture to painting more homogeneous surfaces to the need for synthesis and back, but at every detour there is a hint of *space making* – which Tandori considers a reduction, an asceticism, compared to colour.[260] The 1971–1973 work *Pasted forms* (fig. 17) is a further reflection on her canvas embossing works. This art form and *terminus technicus* she created derives from her spatial exploratory attitude. She herself has described these works as denoting not three dimensions, but rather the other half.[261]

In *Pasted forms*, however, Keserü does not use the canvas as a medium, but the landscape. As a member of the Pécs Studio, this is not a surprising artistic choice, as the group was close to an ecological approach, not only in the respect for nature, but also in the contemplation of it, in her work, but not in an extreme intervention, not in the way of "landscape-wounding land art projects".[262] According to Attila T. Doboviczki, the specificity of the Pécs and Central European land art endeavours lies not in their Western artistic antecedents, but outside them: they were not based on the traditions of minimal art and pop art, but on the geometric-neo-constructivist tendencies that were more prevalent in this region.[263]

The wave form appears in Ilona Keserü's work as early as the mid-1960s, but by the end of the decade it begins to emerge formally, for example in the 1969 *Splitting*, which was made with the aforementioned canvas embellishment. In the 1970s, Keserü continued to play with the patterns of the canvas embossing and it became a recurrent motif in her paintings, prints and reliefs. This undulating motif appears in *Pasted forms*, a 1000 x 685 x 53 cm land art work of marble and limestone wave forms, which are actually three stone waves of different textures (one of rusticated cracked stones, two slightly more worked but not entirely smooth) laid side by side, all following the same curve.

Keserü's need for monumentality and mapping really makes sense in this work, as the artist takes the motifs she uses for this purpose, enlarges them and then places them in the real space, in the landscape. All this in a way that, although in the 1960s land art was already widespread in the West, she was, as I have already pointed out in Aknai's words, no less informed about Western trends than the rest of her generation. This does not mean, of course,

[260] Dezső Tandori, 'Variation on the Works of Ilona Keserü I-II., 1980', p. 29.
[261] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[262] Attila T. Doboviczki, *Lokalitás-olvasatok, médiahasználat a Pécsi Műhely munkásságában,* doctoral thesis, University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities, Pécs, 2013, p. 84.
[263] Ibid. pp. 85–86.

that she had not seen land art by the early 1970s, but I feel that the landscape composition of forms is less the result of an external influence than of her inner work to conquer three-dimensional spaces, which she says she struggled with.[264]

This is why I find her work interesting: because she obviously had artistic influences during her travels abroad, but they flowed organically into her art, there are no major milestones or turning points (except perhaps her stay in Rome) that would have led to a straight turn in her art. Ilona Keserü creates her art step by step, her next cycle always echoes the previous one, and if we look through her oeuvre, it is like a great coherent study of colours, forms and their relationship.

4.4. The East-Central European Sense of Identity in Tót's and Keserü's Work

In the course of writing my thesis, one question kept recurring to me: is Western art truly universal? Igor Zabel writes that this artistic leadership that the West occupies has come about because the capital and the institutions and the concepts that are created within them are all created in the West.[265] From this, artists and theorists, including Hungary, have been separated by a completely different authoritarian system and literally a wall. And the domestic artists either aligned themselves behind the system in the hope of a secure livelihood or, following foreign trends, developed their own creative language, which in many cases was not purely Eastern or Western, and in many cases was resistant, reflecting the current atmosphere of the time, and taking its cue from what surrounded the artists.

In the case of Endre Tót, we can speak of just such an attitude of resistance, which is perfectly concentrated in his *Joy* works, which I have cited as an example. Apart from the subject matter, however, these works use the same artistic tools that are used in the West, albeit for different reasons. Whereas in the West mail art was an alternative and novel medium, within the Soviet Union it was the perfect way to get the work of Tót abroad. In this sense, he organically merges Western and Eastern European trends and possibilities. Does this make him a typical Eastern European artist? In a sense, yes.

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[264] Artist statement with the participation of Vilma Sára Nagy from 2022, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/, accessed: Mar 1, 2024)
[265] Igor Zabel, 'Otherness, Again. "We and "the Others" (1997)', in: Bojana Pejiić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 110.

According to Boris Groys, the figure of the dissident, oppositional artist was appealing because it had, and still has, ideological value, which "circulated in the Soviet-style symbolic economy like money circulates in the Western market economy", and this, he says, is the specificity of Eastern European art, which has as much of an ideological charge today as it did before the fall of the Berlin Wall.[266] Groys further argues that Eastern European art has a complexity and depth that utopian abstraction lacks, so that if these artists and works are to be globally disseminated, they update the socialist past, which is why the author considers the use of the term post-communist art as an adjective justified.[267] Returning to Tót himself, I think that he has indeed added a layer to mail art and Fluxus pieces through his own experiences, which he has transposed in his work, sometimes more directly, sometimes more indirectly. In contrast, the aforementioned "dissident attitude" is no longer present in his *Untitled* series from the 1980s. In this phase of his creative life, we can perceive more the influences surrounding Endre Tót, or an instinct that inspired him to paint after a decade of absence.

In contrast, Ilona Keserü's art was less rebellious seen from the West, but in the East, abstraction was often more than sufficient for rebellion. I would refer back to Szabadi's and Hornyik's comments about the "delaying" Hungarian artist and the "Western miracle". In her generation, Keserü represented a much more localised attitude, within which she tended towards a non-figurative visuality. I'm sure Ferenc Martyn as her teacher, who also followed Western abstract tendencies, had a lot to do with this, but I don't sense a delay in Keserü's work either, fundamentally. Keserü's art, as I wrote above, developed organically, influenced of course by impulses from outside – experiences abroad, what she saw there, her contemporaries, her own intuitions or the traditions of Hungarian abstraction. It was Lajos Kassák's circle that began to re-engage with avant-garde ideas in Hungary.[268] Even before World War II, there had been abstract tendencies in Hungary, to which Lajos Kassák's generation returned between 1945 and 1949. Then, after the end of World War II, in 1945, the European School was founded with the aim of reaching as many people and artists as possible in order to spread the ideas of modernism and to promote a pluralism of styles.[269]

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[266] Boris Groys, 'Haunted by Communism', in: Phoebe Adler – Duncan McCorquodale (eds.), *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, London, 2010, p. 20.
[267] Ibidem.
[268] Jaroslava Pašiaková, *Lajos Kassák: Vývojové problémy a tendencie maďarskej avantgardy*, Bratislava, 1973, pp. 10–14.
[269] Gábor Dobó – Merse Pál Szeredi, 'Hungarian Culture +/- Europe: Positions and Self-images of Avant-garde and Modernist Movements in Hungary, 1915 – 68', in: Edit Sasvári – Sándor Hornyik – Hedvig Turai (eds.), *Art in Hungary 1956 – 1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, London, 2018, p. 46.

However, she has always filtered these, and in my opinion, her work is not influenced by the West, nor can it be reduced to Hungarian specific art, nor can it be said that she does not work with universal forms, since abstraction and the stylization of tangible shapes can indeed be observed in the peripheries and centres alike.

According to Boris Groys, while it is true that the impulses that led to the emergence of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde in the 1950s and 1960s came from the West,[270] they did not develop in the region on the basis of Western cultural heritage. The Hungarian neo-avant-garde would certainly have developed differently if the country had not been under communist occupation, but I do not think that it would have been a better or more universal art. Boris Buden summed it up well: at the time of the regime change, the region was the "cultural Other", the "not yet West", expected to catch up with the West, with the modernist development that it had "missed" because of communism.[271] Groys points out, however, that the modernist canon was not as well established in the region as it was in the West because, on the one hand, it was not backed by the same level of financial support, and on the other, modernist art in the East could never be fully depoliticized, precisely because the space in which it was born was always controlled, and modernist forms remained politically charged.[272]

[270] Boris Groys, 'Haunted by Communism', p. 23.
[271] Boris Buden, 'Introduction', in: Ana Janevski—Roxana Marcoci—Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 2018, p. 178.
[272] Boris Groys, 'The Contemporary Condition: Postmodernity, Post-Socialism, Postcolonialism', in: Maria Hlavajova—Simon Sheikh (eds.), *Former West and Contemporary after 1989*, Utrecht, 2016, p. 39.

5. The Hungarian Art Scene After 1989

Significant institutional changes had already begun in Hungary before the change of regime in 1989, which, thanks to the crisis of the socialist planned economy and its reforms, also affected the institutional background of the fine arts: for example, the right of the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts to set prices was abolished, a decision was taken to improve the art trade of the Art Fund, and to develop its art management activities.[273] In 1984, the Soros Foundation was established, initially in conjunction with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, then with the Kunsthalle,[274] and finally completely independently, to support and promote Hungarian culture until the fall of communism.[275]

These changes reflected the domestic intellectual trend of the decade, which was to move closer to European culture,[276] perhaps also because Western Europe had previously, in the 1970s, paid attention to Hungarian aspirations that were linked to Western trends, but this began to change in the 1980s, when Western critics began to appreciate regional phenomena as well.[277] The Soros Foundation played a decisive role in Hungary's rapprochement with European culture, as there were hardly any contemporary art institutions in operation at the time, and state institutions were unprepared.[278] After the Soros Foundation, other institutions following Western trends appeared on the scene: the Ludwig Foundation in 1987 (Ludwig Museum from 1989) or the Knoll Gallery in 1988/1989.[279] So, following Western models and connecting to the global world in the cultural and art sector had already started before the change of regime, but this connection did not result in equal positions, the Hungarian art field was in a kind of subordinate, semi-peripheral position, and its own institutional system was formed accordingly.[280]

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[273] József Mélyi, '"Rendszerváltás", 1983: A Továbbélő nyolcvanas évek', *Enigma*, Vol. 26, No. 99, 2019, pp. 13–14.
[274] Katalin Néray was appointed head of the Műcsarnok in 1984, and thanks to her, artists who had not had the opportunity to exhibit at the institution before were given the chance to. (Interview with Júlia Klaniczay, Budapest, Feb 20, 2013, URL: http://fordulat.net/pdf/21/F21_Nagy_Kristof_Soros.pdf, accessed: Mar 2, 2024)
[275] László Beke, *Neoavantgárd és posztmodern a képzőművészetben*, 2009, (URL: https://irodalom.oszk.hu/villanyspenot/#!/fejezetek/GCdG064-SfW9U96q7kqk6w, accessed: Feb 7, 2024)
[276] Lóránd Hegyi, 'Új helyzetben új identitás', in: Han Knoll (ed.), *A második nyilvánosság: XX. századi magyar művészet*, pp. 271–272.
[277] József Mélyi, '"Rendszerváltás", 1983: A Továbbélő nyolcvanas évek'
[278] Kristóf Nagy, 'A Soros Alapítvány képzőművészeti támogatásai Magyarországon. A nyolcvanas évek második felének tendenciái', *Fordulat,* Vol. 24, No 1, 2024, (URL: http://fordulat.net/?q=huszonegyedik, accessed: Jan 24, 2024.), p. 202.
[279] Ibid., p. 203.
[280] Ibid., p. 212.

According to László Beke, from an artistic point of view, the change of regime was not particularly relevant, as the linguistic breakthrough had already taken place.[281] However, Éva Forgács argues that after the 1989–1991 transition, the art scene in the post-Soviet countries had to start building a national narrative from fragmented and contradictory storylines, while keeping up with trends and concepts in the global scene.[282] Despite this, we cannot speak of a marked "before and after" story,[283] on the one hand because, as I have already described above, certain transformations had already begun in the 1980s. Apart from that, according to Edit András, the artistic integration of the region was not painless, and the change and the expansion it brought – whether in terms of information, language or values – caught Hungarian art life unprepared, because, despite the processes that ended in the 1980s, it was still a hermetically sealed world that had barely seen the world beyond the wall.[284]

There is a certain similarity in the artistic development of the post-Soviet countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which, according to Boris Groys, most probably stems from the socialist experience: all these countries entered the international cultural and artistic scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[285] In the first decade after the fall of communism, Eastern European artists tended to react to the West,[286] but in the absence of a power shift, artists were relegated to the role of the "Cold War Other" rather than becoming equals with their "global counterparts", according to Maja Fowkes.[287] By the 2000s, local art-historical introspection had come to the fore, as local narratives in the region settled, regional institutions began a kind of transnational expansion and began to look beyond their own spheres.[288]

András sees the desire of post-regime Hungary (and the Eastern bloc as a whole) to integrate into the international art scene as those military troops who did not let it be known that the

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[281] László Beke, *Rendszerváltozás - művészeti változások*, URL: https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00003/00012/beke.htm, accessed: Mar 8, 2024)
[282] Éva Forgács, 'Between Local and Global: Double Bind Challenge', paper given at the conference 'East European Art Seen from a Global Perspective', Galeria Labirynt, Lublin, October 2014
[283] Ibidem.
[284] Edit András, 'A Painful Farewell to Modernism (1997)', in: Bojana Pejiić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 125.
[285] Boris Groys, 'The Contemporary Condition: Postmodernity, Post-Socialism, Postcolonialism', in: Bojana Pejiić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 37.
[286] Zsuzsa László, 'On East European Art: Positions We Can Stand Behind and Speak From. Interview with Maja and Reuben Fowkes from Translocal Institute', *mezosfera.org*, Oct 2017, (URL: http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-behind-and-speak-from/, accessed: Mar 8, 2024)
[287] Edit András, 'Orientációváltások a közép-kelet-európai művészetelméletben 1989 után. Nemzeti, regionális vagy globális művészettörténet (a posztszocializmus, posztkolonializmus vagy dekolonitás jegyében)?', *ars hungarica*, 2017, p. 395.
[288] László, cit. 286

war was over: this translates in the art discourse as the disappearance of the compass for the East with the end of central rule (the West), to which the marginal culture longed to integrate and adapt.[289] Moreover, after regime change, it became clear that the focus on the region during the Cold War had been primarily on the political and cultural curiosity caused by the Soviet occupation, but once the opposition behind the Iron Curtain ceased, the exoticism of the region faded and the distinct attention of the West also diminished.[290]

However, a kind of cultural globalisation began, which brought with it what András called the "de-Sovietization" process, which aimed at deconcentrating the dominant cultural force, the Soviet.[291] This transitional period, however, coincided with the globalisation process and the spread of capitalism, which thus caused a kind of cultural turbulence in the region.[292] Perhaps it was this hectic transition that caused the locals to try to come to terms with the change by immediately forgetting their own socialist past. But this also meant that trauma was not dealt with and the socialist legacy became taboo.[293]

But what happens when, overnight, we want to forget decades of the past, while just as suddenly we want to define our own identity that distinguishes us, and finally we are searching for a place where we belong? – this is the question that comes to mind when I think of regime change. There is the socialist past that the former Eastern Bloc no longer wants to have as its own, there is the "Western civilisation" to which it wants to belong, but there is the pre-communist national past that the various Central and Eastern European countries somehow want to revive. Boris Groys has also said that for these countries, moving on means returning to their own and different national cultural identities. [294]

For my case study I chose works of Ilona Németh, who began her artistic career in this turbulent period, her artistic programme moves across a broad spectrum, filtering through a kind of female gaze to create primarily conceptually driven works, often on the themes of

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[289] Edit András, 'The Ex-Eastern Bloc's Position in New Critical Theories and Recent Curatorial Practice', in: Ana Janevski – Rocana Marcoci – Ksenia Nouril (eds.), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology,* New York, 2018, p. 87.
[290] András, cit. 287, p. 395.
[291] Edit András, 'The Future is Behind Us. Flashbacks to the Socialist Part', in: Edit András (ed.), *Transitland Video art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009*, Budapest, 2009, p. 215.
[292] Ibidem.
[293] Ibid., p. 216.
[294] Boris Groys, „NSK: From Hybrid Socialism to Universal State", *e-flux Journal*, Vol. 67, No 11, 2015, (URL: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/67/60709/nsk-from-hybrid-socialism-to-universal-state/, accessed: Feb 11, 2024)

regime change and post-Soviet existence.[295] Next to Németh, the second artist is Zsófia Keresztes, a representative of the "millennial" generation, who represents a completely different formal language and artistic attitude, but is a dominant figure in the current Hungarian art scene, and like Németh, produces works of larger scale, often making sense in a specific exhibition concept.

5.1. Ilona Németh

Ilona Németh, born in 1963, is a Slovakian-born and based visual artist, professor and curator. However, Németh is connected to Hungary in several ways: on the one hand, she herself is a member of the Hungarian national minority, she studied typography and book arts at the Hungarian College of Applied Arts (graduated in 1981) and at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (2000–2003),[296] and she has been exhibiting regularly in Hungary since the mid-1990s.[297] After her studies she became known as the co-founder of the alternative and experimental festival Studio erté[298] in Nové Zámky. According to Gábor Hushegyi, this formation is significant because it has provided a way of thinking about art and values for the Slovakian population, but also for Hungarians living in a minority in Slovakia.[299] In addition to the festivals, the group organised exhibitions in Slovakia's municipalities that were well outside the art centre – the mail art exhibition of István Dúdor, a Hungarian painter from Slovakia, and Lajos Kassák, the "father of the Hungarian avant-garde", in 1988 in Marcelová and in 1989 in Fiľakovo.[300]

Németh started her career as a graphic artist and illustrator at the newspaper *Irodalmi Szemle* in Bratislava,[301] and entered the Slovak art scene in 1990 with her first solo exhibition *Notes from the Labyrinth* at the Cyprian Majerník Gallery in Bratislava.[302] Since the 1990s, a

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[295] Kriszta Dékei, 'A „többfunkciós nő" – Németh Ilona képzőművész', *Artmagazin*, May 7, 2012, (URL: https://www.artmagazin.hu/archive/1368, accessed: Mar 14,.2024)
[296] Web of the artist (URL: https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/biography, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[297] Kriszta Dékei, 'A „többfunkciós nő" – Németh Ilona képzőművész'
[298] In October 1987, Studio Erté was established as a non-profit organisation that specialised in the planning of art events, primarily pertaining to performance art. In addition to publishing multimedia CD-ROMs, catalogues, and video cassettes, it has been organising festivals, exhibitions, symposia, online conferences, and performances of contemporary music since 1998. (URL: https://monoskop.org/Studio_ert%C3%A9, accessed: Mar 10, 2024)
[299] Gábor Hushegyi, *Ilona Németh*, Bratislava, 2001, p. 20.
[300] Ibid., p. 21.
[301] Ibid., p. 21.
[302] Gábor Hushegyi, 'Ilona Németh', *artbase*, 2018, URL: https://artbase.kunsthallebratislava.sk/umelec/7220, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)

feminist aspect has been central to her art[303] and is often emphasised, but Kriszta Dékei says that her work is much more complex than that.[304] Németh's works often play with the furnishings of space, as well as the space occupied by the viewer within the exhibition.[305] According to her, art opens up a space of communication and dialogue: the viewer is a partner in the conversation, and Németh wants to influence the way they think.[306] Her works often deal with topical issues, while the artist formulates them in simple and accessible language, often addressing the intersection of private and public space and the erosion of intimacy.[307]

I chose Ilona Németh for the part of my work focusing on the new generation because although she is primarily active in the Slovakian art scene (she exhibited in the Czech-Slovak pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001),[308] she is also well known in the Hungarian art community, having studied here and still actively observing the scene. Furthermore, one of her particular themes, which she returns to from time to time, is individual and social memory and the relationship between them, as she herself grew up in a minority environment.[309] In several of her works, the condition of being an East-Central European appears, sometimes in a more poetic and sometimes in a more explicit way, the latter being exemplified in her large-scale work *Eastern Sugar* from 2018.

5.1.1. The Work of Ilona Németh

According to Lóránd Hegyi, three new trends emerged in the art of the 1980s: sensual, expressive and drastic painting (as we saw in the case of Tót); a kind of post-geometrical art, which takes shape in installations and objects; and individual mythology, which appears in painting, sculpture, installations and performances,[310] and which is also reflected in Németh's

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[303] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[304] Kriszta Dékei, 'A „többfunkciós nő" – Németh Ilona képzőművész'
[305] Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst–Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2018, p. 184.
[306] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[307] Ilona Németh – Gabriela Zigová, Electronic catalogue, Miloš Alexander Bazovský Gallery, Trenčín, 2017, (online: https://en.calameo.com/read/0031709335640fa532cc8, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[308] Kriszta Dékei, 'A „többfunkciós nő" – Németh Ilona képzőművész'
[309] Zsófia Nagy, 'Reprezentációs küzdelmek a szlovákiai magyar kulturális mezőn', *Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2020, (URL: https://forumszemle.eu/szemle-archiv/?szemle=2020-3#tab-2020-3 accessed: Mar 14, 2024), p. 99.
[310] Lóránd Hegyi, 'Hungarian Art of the Eighties', *Aspects / Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949-1999,* Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Wien, 1999, pp. 286–296.

work. Already towards the end of her academic studies, her work began to thematise history from a personal perspective: following the example of the contemporary Czech graphic artist Jiří Anderle, she reinterpreted photographs and written material from the World War I, focusing on the history of her own family, in her series of drawings entitled *Untitled*.[311] According to Hushegyi, the "act of stepping back into the past"[312] was a distinctive postmodernist movement and technique that was making a comeback in Hungarian art, but was also present in international trends.[313]

From 1985/1986 Németh began to paint large-scale tempera paintings, focusing on eroticism, male and female sensuality.[314] In Edit András's words, during this period of her career, as a woman artist, she was concerned with her own socially constructed, fetishised and idealised body, and through her work she forces the viewer to engage with the social phenomena associated with women as sexual beings.[315]

Then, from the 1990s, she turned to the use of natural materials, which she used in her first solo exhibition in Bratislava in 1990, mentioned above. The exhibition featured real straw bales in the exhibition space, complemented by a continuously projected performance.[316] After 1991, Németh moved into the sphere of environment and land art, favouring installations[317] that often depicted vulnerability in an almost dramatic way.[318] Since 1992 she has been included in every exhibition in Slovakia in which installation appeared as a medium.[319] A common element of her work was to contrast soft, delicate natural materials with something brutal and hard: for example, in the exhibition *Výstava 6+6*, knife blades were placed next to twigs.[320] According to András, such works cannot be narrowed down to the female-male relationship, but the "counterpointed use of materials" such as the natural

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[311] Gábor Hushegyi, *Ilona Németh*, Bratislava, 2001, p. 21.
[312] László Szigeti, 'Áramkörök', *Irodalmi Szemle*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1987, pp. 198–199.
[313] Hushegyi, cit. 311, p. 21.
[314] Ibid., pp. 21–22.
[315] Edit András, 'Nyitottan kell őrizni a sebet. Intézménykritika a szélekről, női nézőpontból', *Kalligram,* Vol. 22., 2013/9, (URL: https://epa.oszk.hu/03900/03985/00065/pdf/EPA03985_kalligram_2013_09_80-86.pdf, accessed: Mar 13, 2024), p. 84.
[316] Hushegyi, cit. 311, p. 26.
[317] Ibid., p. 28.
[318] Gábor Andrási–András Zwickl, 'Contemporary Art in the Nineties', in: Gábor Andrási–Gábor Pataki–György Szücs–András Zwickl (eds.), *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*, Budapest, 1999, pp. 264.
[319] Hushegyi, cit. 311, p. 30.
[320] Ľubica Pacanovská, 'Výstava 6+6', *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 5, No, 27, 1992, p. 15.

twig and the man-made knife, her work offers a reading of confrontation with the mechanisms of power.[321]

In the 1990s, her interest in the gender aspects of art re-emerges in her work.[322] This is not, however, the same as her work on female-male sexuality in the mid-1980s, which was more concerned with private intimacy, but rather focused on the social and artistic roles of women.[323] One of the most telling works from this period is *Polyfunctional Woman* (fig. 18), created in 1996: a red velvet-covered bed requires the audience to interact with it, whereby cries, laughter and sighs can be heard emanating from the bed (between 1995/1996 and 1998, she made extensive use of sound and action art in her work).[324] These sounds remind the viewer of what a woman can be and of the fact that being a woman transcends social stereotypes.[325] According to her, she was working with her own experiences this year, and at first she probably didn't even understand what feminism was about, but she saw it as a struggle for equality, a theme that recurs in her work in the 2000s.[326]

As an East-Central European, it is not surprising that we cannot speak of a conscious feminist programme in Németh's art, since the historical, political, social and cultural conditions in the region were completely different from those in the US, where radical feminism had already appeared in the visual arts at that time. Unlike in the US, the art of the post-communist countries in the 1980s and 1990s was not a radical confrontation of the feminine and masculine, but a revelation of women's experiences, perspectives and opinions.[327] In the 1990s, the body as a subject, medium and tool was integrated into the artistic toolbox, regardless of gender and country. András points out, however, that in Hungarian art the body is not depicted in its sensual, physical reality, but rather in a symbolic, metaphorical way, yet

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[321] Edit András, 'Vízpróba a kortárs (nő)művészeten, (nő)művészeken', Edit András, Gábor Andrási (eds.), *Vízpróba / Water Ordeal,* Budapest, 1995, p. 40.
[322] Gábor Hushegyi, 'Ilona Németh', *Artbase*, 2018, (URL: https://artbase.kunsthallebratislava.sk/umelec/7220, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[323] Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst–Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2018, p. 184.
[324] Hushegyi, cit. 311, p. 50.
[325] Borbála Kálmán – Kriszta Dékei (eds.), *Westkunst–Ostkunst. The Collection on Display,* Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2018, p. 184.
[326] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Feb 13, .2024)
[327] Jana Oravcová, 'Feministické umenie', in: Jana Geržová (ed.), *Slovník svetového a slovenského výtvarného umenia druhej polovice 20. storočia,* Bratislava, 1999, p. 82.

hidden sexual and erotic references and associations emerge[328] – which can be clearly observed in Németh's work.

From the 2000s onwards, her work follows logically from the themes and strategies of the past.[329] However, she not only addresses gender inequalities, but more generally, she mostly, or at least very often, touches on political themes.[330] In her works, she tends to illustrate rather than comment on a specific political theme, because art, unlike activism, should offer multiple readings, a complex picture.[331] Németh, however, often explores the roots of nationalism and populism and the reasons for their consolidation, which is reflected in her many works.

It should be remembered, however, that Ilona Németh also played a role in the public sphere, and was actively involved in politics from the fall of the socialist regime:[332] She was a member of the Dialogue Civic Movement and the Danube Circle Ecological Movement, which opposed the construction of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam, and of the Hungarian Independent Initiative (MNI), a Hungarian opposition platform in Slovakia.[333] Later, in 2019, she also worked as an advisor to Slovakian head of state Zuzana Čaputová on minority and cultural issues. However, her work also reflects Hungarian politics, for example in the 2011 *Dilemma Project*, which focused on social critique of public art in Hungary.[334] The touring exhibition, was intended to be presented in the four Visegrad countries,[335] but eventually held in the Ernst Museum in Budapest (and later in Košice and Brno), protested against attacks by the Hungarian government (Fidesz) on social scientists and artists, and against the fact that only those who obeyed the government's directives were allowed to sit in leading positions in the exhibition institutions.[336] The installation was a cordoned-off empty exhibition space,

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[328] Edit András, 'A Painful Farewell to Modernism (1997)', in: Bojana Pejiić – David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall*, Stockholm, 1999, p. 128.
[329] Hushegyi, cit. 322
[330] Edit Molnár, 'Easter Sugar Campaign / Interview with Ilona Németh, in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 21.
[331] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Feb 13, 2024)
[332] Edit András, 'Mental Geography and Imaginary Time Travel in East-Central Europe', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021 p. 251.
[333] Andrea Kleine, 'Ilona Németh bola pri vzniku Maďarskej nezávislej iniciatívy, vývoj po roku 1990 ju však sklamal', *Denník N,* March 30, 2019 (URL: https://dennikn.sk/1425911/vytvarnicka-ilona-nemeth-bola-pri-vzniku-madarskej-nezavislej-iniciativy-politicky-vyvoj-po-roku-1990-ju-vsak-sklamal/, accessed: Apr 22, 2024)
[334] Hushegyi, cit. 322
[335] Edit András, 'Foreword', in: Edit András (ed.), *Dilemma,* Bratislava, 2013, (URL: https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/dilemma-book, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[336] Hushegyi, cit. 322

complete with video projections of interviews in which viewers could hear Németh's own views on the state and events of cultural life in Hungary.[337]

In 2011, she returned to land art with *Floating Gardens* (fig 19.). The project was first shown at the OFF Biennale in Budapest – the first version used two examples from the history of garden design: the French and English styles.[338] The second version shown at the 15th *Documenta* in Kassel in 2022[339] presented two small floating gardens – one a healing garden with medicinal plants and organic vegetables, the other a garden of the future, with plants for the climate of the future.[340] The work, the plants in the gardens, grew or died according to the care given to them by the applicants, who were allowed to rent them for free in exchange for their care[341] – making this a participatory project that opened up opportunities for the public to participate in the care of the fragile ecosystem and to try their hand at maintaining the gardens of our future.

5.1.2. *Eastern Sugar* (2018)

Németh's artistic programme is cyclical, often revisiting old elements, forms and themes, using inter-media, which allows her to operate with a rich formal language and not to confine the themes he chooses to a specific medium.[342] This cyclicality is also reflected in the fact that, since the 1990s, her work has returned to the politics of history, and through her personal micro-histories she explores broader narratives such as the situation of semi-peripheries, discrimination, equality or the legacy of Eastern Europe after the fall of communism.[343]

The latter is presented in *Eastern Sugar*, a complete exhibition rather than a stand-alone work (fig. 20), which primarily explored the sugar industry in Dunajská Streda and later all over Slovakia, and its changes after the fall of communism. As a commodity, sugar has played a key role in the hierarchisation and organisation of centre and periphery, of extraction zones

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[337] Ibidem.
[338] Ibidem.
[339] See: https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/the-floating-gardens/
[340] Artist's web, URL: https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/the-floating-gardens/, accessed: Mar 18, 2014
[341] Ibidem.
[342] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Feb 13, 2024)
[343] Joanna Skołowska, 'Manufacturing Therapy', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 113.

and other zones that benefit from the goods produced.[344] This work, however, is not about sugar, but about the "experience of being left behind",[345] the trauma of the people's lives being wiped out by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent privatisation process. As an analogy, Németh removed the sign of the Juhocukor company[346] from the roof of an abandoned industrial building in Dunajská Streda (fig. 21).[347]

Highlighting the social aspects of the privatisation of the sugar industry, the project was first presented in Prague in 2017 under the title *Manufaktúra cukrových homolí* ('Manufacture of sugar jars'), and a year later at the Kunsthalle in Bratislava, where it was called *Eastern Sugar*.[348] Németh explored privatisation, values, work and memory, thematising the economic problems that have become metaphors for sugar factories in Eastern Europe.[349] Although the research focused primarily on sugar factories in Slovakia, and just later included the Kaba sugar factory in Hungary, I consider it a fundamentally relevant work for Hungarian art, since Poland was the only country in Central and Eastern Europe where 40% of the domestic sugar market remained in Polish hands, while in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, control of the market was in the hands of foreign investors.[350]

The exhibition included a sugar production line, where visitors made their own sugar jars (fig. 22), but had to wait 24 hours to get them, so they took away the sweets already made by others, which Németh said was a kind of "energy exchange" between strangers.[351] In addition, the exhibition space featured an archive of interviews about the current state of the sugar factories and a temporary sugar museum, as there is no such museum in Slovakia.[352]

According to Németh, the original focus or indicator of the work was to examine the roots of the growing nationalism and populism in the region, but during the course of the project,

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[344] Imre Szeman, 'Sugar Dreams; or How to Learn to Live With (and Without) Extraction', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 64.
[345] Ibid., p. 66.
[346] The Juhocukor sugar factory had been operating in Dunajská Streda since 1969, was privatised in 1993 and passed into the hands of the British-French company Eastern Sugar, which decided to close the company in 2006 and withdraw from Slovakia – losing about a third of its sugar production quota and thousands of jobs. (URL: https://dunstreda.sk/juhocukor-eastern-sugar, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[347] Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes, 'Planetary Trajectories of Eastern Sugar', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 13.
[348] Hushegyi, cit. 322
[349] Artist statement with the participation of Michaela Kučová from 2020, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-nemeth/, accessed: Feb 13, 2024)
[350] Edit Molnár, 'Easter Sugar Campaign / Interview with Ilona Németh, in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 27.
[351] Ibid., p. 36.
[352] Ibid., p. 37.

economic issues came to the fore.[353] Perhaps that is why the exhibition was so well visited, because it was primarily a non-art piece with its sugar museum, interviews and sugar production line. According to Németh, the aim of the project was to explore the history of sugar, both at home and internationally, and to find a place for at least some of the missing pieces of the sugar industry in Central and Eastern Europe.[354] The work is a manifestation of the locals' lost sense of security, a desire for collectivity on which nationalist and populist rhetoric is fond of building "the cult of tradition and the uncritical mythology of the past".[355]

According to Hushegyi, *Eastern Sugar* can be seen as a synthesis of Németh's previous work, emphasising the architectural elements of the space, the involvement of foreign artists and professionals, and the participation of the public in the project.[356] Németh herself was a curatorial documentarian, activist, initiator of political dialogue, investigative journalist and an archivist of the sugar industry's past.[357] Johanna Skołowska considers this to be her most complex memory-based project,[358] integrating the elements pointed out by Hushegyi in a way that evokes the "site of memory".[359]

Eastern Sugar is a complex work, or rather a project, which emphasises the specificity of the region in many ways: the social and economic changes that followed the regime change, the sense of security, the uncertainty that change brings, the trauma of the region, or rather the lack of dealing with it. In a work that archives, initiates dialogue and involves the public, Németh presents a utopian scenario in which public life functions quite ideally: it processes history, ensures open dialogue and allows people to be participants, not just observers.

5.1.3. *Public Art* (2006–2010)

Németh often uses public space as a platform for his artistic programme, both to criticise the appropriation of national memory and history and its use as an ideological billboard,[360] but

[353] Ibid., p. 22.
[354] Ibid., p. 39.
[355] Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', *Agora 8 art documents*, 2007, (URL: https://agora8.org/SvetlanaBoym_Nostalgia/, accessed Mar 12, 2024)
[356] Gábor Hushegyi, 'Ilona Németh', *Artbase Kunsthalle*, 2018, (URL: https://artbase.kunsthallebratislava.sk/umelec/7220, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[357] Edit Molnár, 'Easter Sugar Campaign / Interview with Ilona Németh, in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 27.
[358] Joanna Skołowska, 'Manufacturing Therapy', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 114.
[359] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire',* trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, No. 26, 1989, (available: jstor, accessed Mar 12, 2024), pp. 7–24.
[360] Hushegyi, cit. 322

also to address current issues such as xenophobia, racism and exclusion. As a second case study, I chose one such work by the artist herself, the *Public Art* project, which, according to Hushegyi, can be seen as just such a radical public space enterprise,[361] which has been put on the street (in the city) in several versions.

The 150 x 100 cm reflective metal panels were created in collaboration with sociologist Szilvia Németh,[362] using the Bogradus scale measuring mutual tolerance or the opposite of tolerance between ethnic groups living side by side,[363] i.e. would you accept a member of a given ethnic group as a partner, a child's partner, a relative, a neighbour, a neighbourhood, a city, a country? – questions to determine the strength of prejudice.[364] Németh placed the signs in her hometown of Dunajská Streda (SK) in 2006 (fig. 23), in Budapest (HU) in 2007 (fig. 24) and in Nové Zámky (SK) in 2010 (fig. 25), with different inscriptions in each case. The signs in Slovakia read "Would you accept a Vietnamese / Hungarian / Roma as a colleague / friend / family member?" and "Would you accept a Vietnamese / Hungarian / Roma as a resident of your town?" questions, while the Budapest version asks "Would you accept a Hungarian / Roma / Jew / Chinese as a resident of your country?," "Would you accept a Hungarian / Roma / Jew / Chinese as a spouse?," "Would you accept a Hungarian / Roma / Jew / Chinese as a neighbour?" On the boards, the questions were written in the language of each of the ethnic groups they mentioned.

It is interesting to note how these site-specific public artworks were received by the public in which they were placed: the signs in Dunajská Streda were received with relative calm, while the works in the VI and VII districts of Budapest were considered scandalous and dehumanising and were immediately removed from the streets.[365] Rather than opening a dialogue about what the questions meant and how they made people feel when they read them, they were removed, as was done with the communist past. The reaction evoked by the plaques reflects the challenge for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to overcome their own oppression and to come to terms with and emerge from the shadow of what has happened to them. The *Public Art* project points out that the coping strategy, at least in Hungary and Slovakia, is one of ignoring and erasing, of not facing uncomfortable questions, of not confronting our own limitations and prejudices, and of not engaging in self-reflection.

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[361] Ibidem.
[362] Web of the artist (URL: https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/ds-public-art, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[363] Hushegyi, cit. 322
[364] Kriszta Dékei, 'A „többfunkciós nő" – Németh Ilona képzőművész'
[365] Ibidem.

The works I have chosen by Ilona Németh demonstrate the politicising tendency of the artist, which is strongly on the activist / artist dividing line. *Eastern Sugar* sheds light on the taboo past that the region has refused to come to terms with, and in this way offers a way forward, while the *Public Art* project sheds light on the social challenges of the region today: how we relate to minorities, whether ethnic, gender or sexual. Németh herself promotes openness, both through her art and her public appearances.

5.2. Zsófia Keresztes

Next to Németh, I chose Zsófia Keresztest as the second artist, who was born in 1985, and is a visual artist living and working in Budapest, who has become one of the most internationally renowned artists of her generation in the last decade.[366] She has participated in numerous international solo and group exhibitions and biennials, and in 2022 she represented Hungary at the 59th Venice Biennale with her work *After Dreams: I dare to Defy the Damage*.[367]

Keresztes graduated from the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in 2010 as a painter, but her preference for textile and paper objects developed early on.[368] During her university years, she experimented with spatial displacement of the picture plane,[369] which in the last period has evolved into large-scale sculptural works and installations. The artist makes them from polystyrene and then covers the finished figures with small mosaic tiles, making them contemporary representatives of Catalan Art Nouveau.[370] Keresztes's colour palette tends towards soft pastel shades, giving his sculptures a playfulness, but he often uses rope and chains to loosen the childlike atmosphere.

Along with Ilona Németh, I also consider Zsófia Keresztes to be a good case study of the contemporary scene because both artists enjoy considerable international recognition, which was no different in the case of Endre Tót and Ilona Keserü. Yet they are two very different artists of different generations, working in very different formal worlds. However, just as

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[366] *Keresztes Zsófia: Fruits of Persistance*, exhibition at acb Gallery, Budapest, URL: https://acbgaleria.hu/exhibitions/keresztes_zsofia_egyeni_kiallitas, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[367] Portrait of the artist by Dávid Biró, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/zsofia-keresztes/, accessed: Mar 14, 2024)
[368] *Keresztes Zsófia: Fruits of Persistance*
[369] Portrait of the artist by Dávid Biró, *Secondary Archive*
[370] Maximilian Lehner, 'Zsófia Keresztes', *Artforum,* (URL: https://www.artforum.com/events/zsofia-keresztes-2-251219/, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)

painting served as a connecting link for Tót and Keserü, Németh and Keresztes used grandiose objects and installations.

5.2.1 The Work of Zsófia Keresztes

Keresztes often links sensuality and virtuality, digital also works with psycho-logical references and boldly uses trash elements[371] that often appear in the formal language of the "millennial" generation.[372] Dávid Biró describes her art as a complex and malleable system of iconographic figures that merge into one another.[373]

According to her own account, after university she experimented with the malleability of paper, and her installations were therefore ephemeral in nature, before switching to the polystyrene material she still uses today in 2016.[374] Her work using this new material has resulted in a complex installation, inspired by a chance stumble upon an open access Wi-Fi network called HOLYLAND.[375] The installation brought together "fictitious relics of the 21st century",[376] as Dávid Fehér imaginatively points out, as it operated with almost iconic objects of contemporary material culture – iPhone and MacBook boxes, hair strands and Wi-Fi routers (fig 26).[377]

Keresztes then covered her monumental and surreal sculptures, made of polystyrene, with glass mosaics, the use of which was inspired by the shiny membranes of human internal organs.[378] This attitude, which borrows bodily motifs, often appears in her works, sometimes in a less obvious way, like the former, sometimes more explicitly. Keresztes's anatomical fascination also appears elsewhere in her art: her sculptures are organic, often

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[371] *Keresztes Zsófia: Fruits of Persistance*
[372] Portrait of the artist by Dávid Biró, *Secondary Archive*
[373] Ibidem.
[374] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive* (URL: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/zsofia-keresztes/, accessed: Mar 13, 2024)
[375] Dávid Fehér, 'Fluid Iconography. Formlessness as the Principle Form in the Art of Zsófia Keresztes', in: Mónika Zsikla (ed.), *Zsófia Keresztes: After Dreams: I Dare to Defy the Damage*, cat. Hungarian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Museum Ludwig - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2022 (URL: file:///Users/noemiczinege/Downloads/Fluid_Iconography_Formlessness_as_the_Pr.pdf, accessed Mar 18, 2024), p. 44.
[376] Rikke Luna—Matias, 'Zsófia Keresztes: The Connection Between Virtuality and Actuality', *idoart.dk,* Nov 17, 2016, (URL: https://www.idoart.dk/blog/the-connection-between-virtuality-and-actuality, accessed: Mar 25, 2024)
[377] Dávid Fehér, 'Fluid Iconography. Formlessness as the Principle Form in the Art of Zsófia Keresztes', 2022, p. 44.
[378] *Zsófia Keresztes: Embracing Duality*, König Galerie, 30 October 2023, (URL: https://www.koeniggalerie.com/blogs/online-magazine/zsofia-keresztes-embracing-duality, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)

anthropomorphic forms, characterised by a horror and humorous deconstruction of biological existence.[379]

This is mitigated by the artist's choice of colours, which wraps the serious and morbid in a kind of icing with cheerful pastel shades, thus marrying the grotesque with sensitivity, pain with joy, strength with vulnerability, but also intimacy, empathy, femininity and the her self-image – all in the digital age.[380] Empathy is a central concept in her work, inspired by the work of science journalist Emma Young,[381] in which Young argues that empathy "can become a liability in an anonymous, modern world".[382] Apart from this, however, Keresztes mainly creates on the basis of her inner intuitions and emotions, which she gives meaning to during or after the creative process.[383]

An important recurring motif in her work is repetition, which for her is a kind of symmetry – she sees her interrelated forms as twins, which, although they have different qualities,[384] are almost identical in appearance. As Keresztes puts it, symmetry helps to represent the tensions and dualities that often preoccupy her.[385] It is never entirely clear to the viewer what dichotomy or theme is recurring in each work, because it is hidden in the form of suggestive allusions.

For the millennial generation, by adulthood and often as adolescents, online presence was taken for granted, a recurring element in her work: the duality of virtual-physical presence, as we become each other's twin in digital space, while sharing everything about ourselves, only to lose ourselves in the process.[386] Being in the online space brings with it the desire to be constantly connected to others, which only makes us more vulnerable, distancing us from our own inner selves in order to get the feedback we need from others and, as Keresztes summarises, to form a new, third type of hybrid existence.[387] It is in this process that the

[379] 'Zsófia Keresztes', *East Topics*, (URL: https://easttopics.com/artists/zsofia-keresztes/, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[380] *Zsófia Keresztes: Embracing Duality*, 2023
[381] Veronika Molnár, 'Zsófia Keresztes: *Glossy Inviolability', Brookynrail.org*, April 2020 (URL: https://brooklynrail.org/2020/04/artseen/ZSFIA-KERESZTES-GLOSSY-INVIOLABILITY?fbclid=IwAR0rpeCBe-X0H_qTnAtvHQCYA6jh5Dl4UF18_eMw4zbLDv02YeLzhybykvQ, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[382] Emma Young, 'I Feel Your Pain', *New Scientist*, May 2016, (URL: https://emmayoung.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Empathy.pdf, accessed: Mar 18, 2024), p. 34.
[383] Attila Sirbik, 'Tapasztalásaink megszilárdult bizonyítékai. Beszélgetés Keresztes Zsófiával Conquered Storage című kiállítása kapcsán', *Új Művészet*, Oct 9, 2020, (URL: https://ujmuveszet.hu/kunszt/tapasztalasaink-megszilardult-bizonyitekai/, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[384] Sonja Teszler, 'Zsófia Keresztes Interview', *This Is Tomorrow*, May 31, 2020, (URL: http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/zsofia-keresztes-interviewed-by-sonja-teszler, accessed: Mar 18, 2024)
[385] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive*
[386] Sonja Teszler, 'Zsófia Keresztes Interview', *This Is Tomorrow*
[387] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive*

artist's sculptures become totems of the 21st century, human and approachable in contrast to their archaic predecessors.[388] However, the archaic nature of Keresztes's works is also due to the fact that objects such as hair, rope, stars, shapes reminiscent of human organs, often allude to certain relic cults.[389]

In her earlier works, the mosaic surfaces of the sculptures were complemented by ropes, which she described as references to dependence or infinite interdependence.[390] The rope was later replaced by the chain, which she claimed was chosen because of its metallic properties, making it less fragile than rope – less likely to break free, more evocative of bondage.[391]

In her recent works, Zsófia Keresztes has moved from surreal bodies to different states of apples – in these works, femininity as a theme is given a more explicit place because of the apple motif, which for her embodies femininity, motherhood and maturity.[392] A new addition to these sculptures are the red water-sprinklers,[393] which can be supports, barriers or symbols of the pursuit of unity.[394]

5.2.2 *Tasty Selfie* (2018)

Keresztes said the following about her own forms:

"I would like to capture these forms as if they were constantly changing bodies, to capture a kind of fluidity that has no boundaries. I see these bodies as being able to absorb any object or other body around them through the reflective surface of the mosaic. They can flow into each other, they can consume, destroy and recreate themselves. There is something cannibalistic about this cycle, which can be traced back to the perpetual hunger for information, consumption and fear of passing that characterises our virtual existence, which makes us want to leave a constant trail in this easily malleable digital space."[395]

The sculpture, called *Tasty Selfie* (fig. 27), perfectly embodies the above quote. Her cross-shaped amorphous sculpture with the dimensions 137 x 62 x 145 cm is in the process of encapsulating another stretchy form, perhaps a hand. It is difficult to identify whether there is

[388] Sirbik, cit. 383
[389] Fehér, cit. 374, p. 50.
[390] Sonja Teszler, 'Zsófia Keresztes Interview', *This Is Tomorrow*
[391] Sirbik, cit. 383
[392] *Zsófia Keresztes: Embracing Duality, 2023*
[393] *Keresztes Zsófia: Fruits of Persistance*
[394] Ibidem.
[395] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive*

a specific object or shape from which the artist has taken as her starting point, although there is a certain phallos-like impression, and given Keresztes's creative method of preferring to anthropomorphise, the work can be formally traced back to the male genitalia. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the title of the sculpture, which means a racy self-portrait.

The work was shown in the travelling exhibition *Orient*,[396] curated by Michal Novotný, which was itself a large-scale project of around 40 Eastern European artists, within which Keresztes's piece was included in a section called *Carpathian Digital Meadows*.[397] The basic concept of the exhibition was "a meditation on Eastern European identity," a contradictory longing for pride and patriotism and a simultaneous sense of shame about our origins, but many aspects are presented.[398]

The name *Carpatian Digital Meadows* is indicative of the digital presence in Eastern Europe, of life within it, which, as I mentioned above, is a theme that Keresztes often uses. What is interesting about the artist's work, according to Fehér, is that she "gives physical form to virtual / digital entities that are by definition disembodied, and explores the processes that take place in virtual space as bodily experiences by creating hybrid organisms that evoke a world before or even after human civilisation".[399] In this connotation, the *Tasty Selfie*, as I understand it, reveals the phenomenon of the *dick pic*, which is most often a close-up photograph of erect male genitalia taken by men of themselves,[400] and then shared most often with women in online spaces.

Keresztes's *dick pic* in this form is not displayed through a screen, but is seen as enveloping the hand that may or may not have held the camera during its creation. The phallus-like part of the sculpture weighs like a heavy weight on the limp hand-like form, whose fingers reach out over the heavy figure. Keresztes illustrates the different shapes not only by the fact that they are two separate bodies, but also by their different textures: while the sculptural part

[396] Kim? Contemporary Art Center, Riga (April 20–May 20, 2018), BOZAR Center for Fine Arts, Brussels (June 20–August 19, 2018, at BOZAR the exhibition is presented as a part of Somewhere in Between), Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, Krakow, September 21–December 16, 2018, (URL: https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/194121/orient/, accessed: Feb 21, 2024)
[397] Michal Novotný, *Orient,* exhib. cat., Kim? Contemporary Art Centre Riga, 2018, URL: https://cdn.contemporaryartlibrary.org/store/doc/10975/docfile/original-4f1edcf95cf6c1c62edf51e078749aaf.pdf , accessed: Feb 21, 2024)
[398] Ibidem.
[399] Fehér, cit. 375, p. 49.
[400] Susanna Paasonen, 'Dick pics and the shifty meanings of porn', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, (URL: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09589236.2017.1394821?needAccess=true, accessed: Mar 22, 2024), p. 70.

resembling the male genitalia has been given the mosaic covering mentioned above, thus evoking a hard yet slimy entity, the form resembling a human hand has been given a less glossy skin texture. And although both parts play with shades of pink, the "hand" in pastel pink, the tiles of the "phallus" also show shades of pink, orange and grey. She also prefers to use organic forms because, she claims, they give the illusion of spontaneity, yet they carry a coded system, as if they grow on their own, to which Keresztes herself adapts during the creative process.[401]

However, apart from the fact that it was included in Novotný's *Orient* exhibition, I don't see much Eastern European specificity in the sculpture's subject matter – although I am obviously relying on my own interpretation. Either way, the work is definitely a reflection on our digital presence, which has been a defining element of Keresztes' generation from a relatively young age, and which is not a shared, collective experience in a global world.

5.2.3 *Sphinx* (2020)

The *Sphinx* (fig. 28) is a work that, true to its name, depicts the sphinx of the 21st century, which was exhibited in 2020 in the Hall of the Parthenon Frieze, a historic hall of the University of Fine Arts in Budapest.[402] The exhibition was based on a fictional narrative of Keresztes's hybrid creatures taking over and dominating an abandoned warehouse.[403] The warehouse wasn't indicated by the room itself where the works were exhibited, but by the metal shelving constructions used in warehouses, which are surrounded and enclosed by the artist's creatures. In 2021, she herself said of them, *"I want to capture these forms as if they were constantly changing bodies, and I want to convey a fluidity that has no limits…"*[404]

The *Sphinx*, although highly stylised, is reminiscent of the Greek Sphinx, with the female breast in a prone position,[405] although in this case the moulded creature has neither wings nor a lion's body, but the human head is perceived by the artist through the eyes. The artist used the giant eye as a motif for the first time in this exhibition, to which she added a teardrop symmetrically hanging on a chain, as a kind of weight.[406] The sphinx also has a guardian

[401] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive*
[402] Zsófia Keresztes, Conquered Storage, Hall of the Parthenon Frieze, Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Budapest, 30 September – 9 October 2020
[403] Fehér, cit. 375, p. 59.
[404] Artist statement with the participation of Mónika Zsikla from 2021, *Secondary Archive*
[405] Francis Llewellin Griffits—John Malcolm Mitchell – Sphinx, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition, Vol. 25, 1911 (available: wikipedia, accessed: Mar 25, 2024)
[406] Sonja Teszler, 'Zsófia Keresztes: Sculpting Duality', *PW-Magazine,* Apr 29, 2021, (URL: https://pw-magazine.com/2021/zsofia-keresztes-sculpting-duality, accessed: Mar 21, 2024)

function here, although in this case it did not take power from the city of Thebes, but Oedipus is also in the artist's narrative, who, after his encounter with the sphinx, confronted himself and embarked on a journey of self-knowledge,[407] only in this case Oedipus is not a fictional epic hero, but the visitor himself. And the shelves and storage systems in the warehouse hold memories and traumas that Keresztes's monsters have absorbed and made part of their bodies.[408]

The *Sphinx* does not blend in with its surroundings, but emerges from the *white cube* space in a cheerful colour scheme. Keresztes's choice of colour helps the viewer to distinguish the different body parts of this mythical creature from the Anthropocene: its "legs" stand on a pink pedestal, which together with its "torso" is orange, its "breasts" are pale skin-coloured, while its "face" and the extra stretch of its body that encloses the shelf structure are pastel pink. In addition to the teardrops hanging from the eyes, the artist has placed three more giant teardrops on the sculpture, in perfect symmetry of course – one on each side of the sphinx's legs, and one in the centre of the figure, standing in the centre of the metal pole. With the teardrops, Keresztes wants to illustrate failure, which she packs onto the "self-destructive sphinx" like a jewel – by self-destruction, the artist endows her own mythological being with vulnerability, which she considers a totem of the 21st century, but is thus more human and fallible than its artificial predecessor.[409]

In this work, Keresztes perfectly captures, I think, the basic feeling of her generation, namely the question of confronting ourselves, our past, our traumas, which in the digital world constantly confronts us and reminds us of our failures. Fehér perfectly articulates the paradox of her work: "it gives physical form to entities and relationships that are by definition disembodied (virtual or imaginary), and reveals processes in virtual space as bodily experiences."[410] Both of Keresztes's works that I have presented do just that, the only difference being that while the *Tasty Selfie* clearly makes use of references to the digital age, the *Sphinx* uses a figure from ancient mythology to do the same.

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[407] Ibid., p. 59.
[408] Sonja Teszler, 'Zsófia Keresztes: Sculpting Duality', *PW-Magazine,* 2021
[409] Sirbik, cit. 383
[410] Fehér, cit. 375, p. 49.

5.3. The East-Central European Sense of Identity in Németh's and Keresztes's Work

In his biography of Ilona Németh, Gábor Hushegyi points out that Central and Eastern European art is often seen as secondary to "universal" art, and thus given a role that does not belong to it, but at best the domestic and international trends are in sync. Yet in the case of minority and women artists, their achievements are often judged in terms of multiculturalism, feminism and otherness.[411]

When Németh was asked in an interview whether, because her work is linked to the local Central European context, drawing on local values and traditions, it is still understandable or comprehensible to a Western audience, she replied:

"...I think openness is fundamental to my way of working, and that includes Western theories but also different theories – it's always about looking at the world from an individual perspective. When you absorb different influences, if you're lucky, it's somehow present in your work. (...) The honesty and openness of things determines whether they are acceptable from different perspectives. This applies to feminism, for example. I don't do feminist things programmatically. I think it's human first in order, and only then does it open up the possibility of reading from a feminist perspective. And I think that's what I think about Westerners and Easterners. We live in an open world, quite mixed up at the moment, and you can look at things from a Western or a Central European perspective and read them differently every time. I've never been interested in which category I should fit into. Maybe that's a mistake, but that's not the way I think."[412]

In *Eastern Sugar*, Ilona Németh explores the bitter experience of being left behind, the trauma that neoliberal dispossession has inflicted on a community, and through this, she explores the imprints of her social responsibility, her sense of community.[413] While in *Public Art,* she mirrors xenophobia, racism, the prejudices of the people living in the area, she tries to provoke a reaction, a rethinking of the preconceptions embedded in the locals, or just a simple dialogue. Both were heavily influenced by communist power: a sense of social

[411] Gábor Hushegyi, *Ilona Németh*, Bratislava, 2001, p. 9.
[412] Klára Pelouškova, 'Politikum a člověk', *artalk,* May 31, 2012 (URL: https://www.artalk.cz/news/politikum-a-clovek, accessed: Apr 3, 2024)
[413] Imre Szeman, 'Sugar Dreams; or How to Learn to Live With (and Without) Extraction', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 66.

responsibility was undermined by the regime through intimidation, while prejudices were allowed to run rampant within the closed borders of the region.

Joanna Skołowska interprets *Eastern Sugar* as offering an alternative to the intersecting paradigms that dominate post-socialist historical politics, which contrast the "victim" (people, nation, workers) with the "perpetrator" (foreign capital, EU, foreigners, others).[414] This interpretation is extended by the *Public Art* I have taken as an example. And in this interpretation, I see Németh's work, like Endre Tót's, as truly Eastern European in what she addresses as a theme, because as an East-Central European, regime change, the totalitarian past, rampant populism and exclusion are all Ilona Németh's present (and to some extent the region's). But in her visual toolkit she draws on everything she sees that can help her address her chosen theme.

In contrast, I find much more global themes in the work of Zsófia Keresztes. Keresztes is of the generation that could no longer directly perceive anything of the Soviet system and regime change, and who was greatly influenced by the virtual existence, as can be felt in her choice of themes. This is precisely why I think that being Eastern European is a feeling of life, in general, which in most cases stems from being perceived as "worse off" in the European Union, and the resulting comparisons reinforce our sense of otherness. However, when I look at the visual arts, I find less or almost none of this. Although it is often reflected in the choice of subject matter, I do not believe that something becomes Eastern European art because it bears the imprint of the pre-1989 regime, or a critique of it.

[414] Joanna Skołowska, 'Manufacturing Therapy', in: Maja Fowkes – Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Ilona Németh. Eastern Sugar*, Bratislava, 2021, p. 123.

Conclusion

In my work, I tried to examine the aspects along which the Central and Eastern European label can be formulated within the visual arts. Eastern European art can be seen as an artistic practice that developed in the context of the former state socialism or as an artistic activity of the post-Soviet states in general. The first statement seems wrong because it would mean that the label Eastern European should no longer be applied to the region's artists (which is still the practice); the second statement ignores the fact that the countries of the former Eastern bloc are heterogeneous, with different cultural traditions, linguistic and ethnic roots, and the only common collective experience is their Cold War heritage.[415]

I mentioned in the introduction that the adjective Eastern European, which accompanies the region's art as a stigma (whether it wants to or not), has a questionable source. In the first chapter, I tried to clarify the geographical framework of Central and Eastern Europeanness, but I did not get an answer why it is necessary to demarcate the artistic aspirations of the region in the same way. Speaking of the era before the fall of Communism, I feel that the distinction between Eastern Europe and Western Europe was justified, since local artists worked under completely different conditions from those in France or the US, for example, but this changed in 1989. I should add that in recent years, with the rise of populism in the region and the nationalist narrative that has been reinforced in this spirit, the question of the free flow of culture – in the case of Hungary, for example – has been raised, but in the course of writing this thesis, these questions are also emerging in Slovakia.

However, my questions are not about this, but about whether the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, and then Hungarian contemporary art, has a sense of Eastern European identity. The artists I have listed are aware that in some ways they are the *Others,* or rather they are reacting to and using their own historical past and present. They are artists from Central and Eastern Europe who in many cases are actually reflecting on their own collective history, but doing so with universal means that are not only locally interpretable – installations, objects, abstracted forms, organic shapes, etc.

Endre Tót, Ilona Keserü, Ilona Németh and Zsófia Keresztes are indeed East-Central European artists, because Hungary is also an East-Central European country. However, as I

[415] Boris Groys, 'Haunted by Communism', Phoebe Adler – Duncan McCorquodale (eds.), *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, London, 2010, p. 18.

wrote in the chapter on the definition of identity: individual identity is primarily defined by individual narratives.[416] This is not to say, however, that it is not possible, for example, to build an exhibition around the experiences of the region or to run and maintain separate institutions focusing on Central and Eastern European art. The Eastern European label is still important in terms of self-historicization, which the Soviet regime has in many cases prevented. Indeed, in an ideal society, Eastern European will really be just a label that will serve as a point of orientation in vertical art history writing. However, while we still understand the East in relation to the West, it is perfectly understandable that some artists, such as Deimantas Narkevičius, do not want to be constantly (or at all) cast in the Eastern European role, which from the West often still carries the connotation of being economically backward, politically immature, culturally exotic and still rather uncivilised overall.[417]

[416] Timothy J. Owens – Dawn T. Robinson – Lynn Smith-Lovin, 'Three Faces of Identity', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36, 2010 (URL, https://web.archive.org/web/20151123031113id_/http://majorsmatter.net:80/gender/Readings/Three%20Faces%20Of%20Identity.pdf, accessed: Oct 22, 2023), p. 479.
[417] Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art. Resistence and Re-existence*. New York, 2017

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Source: Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,* doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2014

Fig. 15: Ilona Keserü, *Gravestones 1*, 1967
Source: Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,* doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2014

Fig. 16: Ilona Keserü, *Approach 2*, 1969
Source: Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,* doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2014

Fig. 17: Ilona Keserü, *Approach 2*, 1971–1973
https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ilona-keseru/ [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 18: Ilona Németh, *Polyfunctional Woman*, 1996
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/polyfunctional-woman/ [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 19: Ilona németh, *Floating Gardens (Future Garden, Healing Garden)*, Kassel, 2011—2022
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/floating-gardens/ [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 20: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, 2018
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/eastern-sugar/#gallery-2735-4 [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 21: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, 2018
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/eastern-sugar/#gallery-2735-4 [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 22: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, 2018
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/eastern-sugar/#gallery-2735-4 [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 23: Ilona Németh, *DS Public Art*, 2006
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/ds-public-art [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 24: Ilona Németh, *BP Public Art*, 2007
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/bp-public-art [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 25: Ilona Németh, *NZ Public Art*, 2010
https://www.ilonanemeth.sk/nz-public-art [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

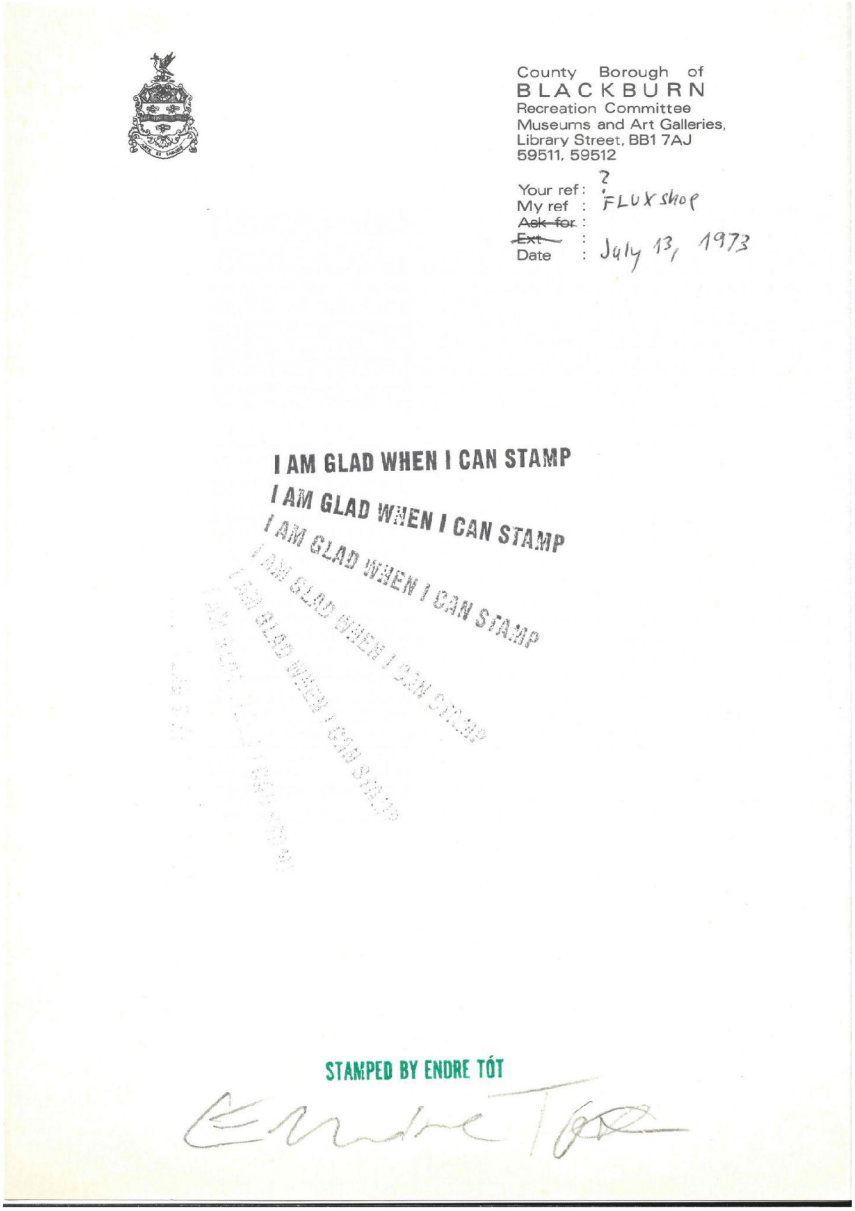
Fig. 26: Zsófia Keresztes, *It Wasn't Us Who Told Lizi to Lie Down on the Cold Kitchen Floor*, 2016
https://artviewer.org/zsofia-keresztes-at-labor-gallery/ [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 27: Zsófia Keresztes, *Tasty Selfie*, 2018
https://www.kieselbach.hu/alkotas/tasty-selfie-2018 [accessed: Apr 4, 2024]

Fig. 28: Zsófia Keresztes, *Sphinx*, 2020
Source: Mónika Zsikla (ed.), *Zsófia Keresztes: After Dreams: I Dare to Defy the Damage*, cat. Hungarian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Museum Ludwig – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2022

Pictorial Appendix

Fig. 1: Ciprian Mureşan, *Leap into Nothingness – Three Seconds Later*, 2004, Tate London



County Borough of
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Museums and Art Galleries,
Library Street, BB1 7AJ
59511, 59512

Your ref : ?
My ref : FLUX shop
~~Ask for~~ :
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Date : July 13, 1973

I AM GLAD WHEN I CAN STAMP
I AM GLAD WHEN I CAN STAMP
I AM GLAD WHEN I CAN STAMP
I AM GLAD WHEN I CAN STAMP
I AM GLAD WHEN I CAN STAMP

STAMPED BY ENDRE TÓT

Endre Tót

Fig. 2: Endre Tót, "*I am glad when I can stamp",* 1973, pen, pencil, offset on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm

Fig. 3: Endre Tót, *„I am glad if this can hang on my neck"*, street action in Genf, 1976, 50 x 62 cm

Fig. 4: Endre Tót, *"I'm happy to read a burning newspaper"*, 1971–1976, 11.8 x 18 cm

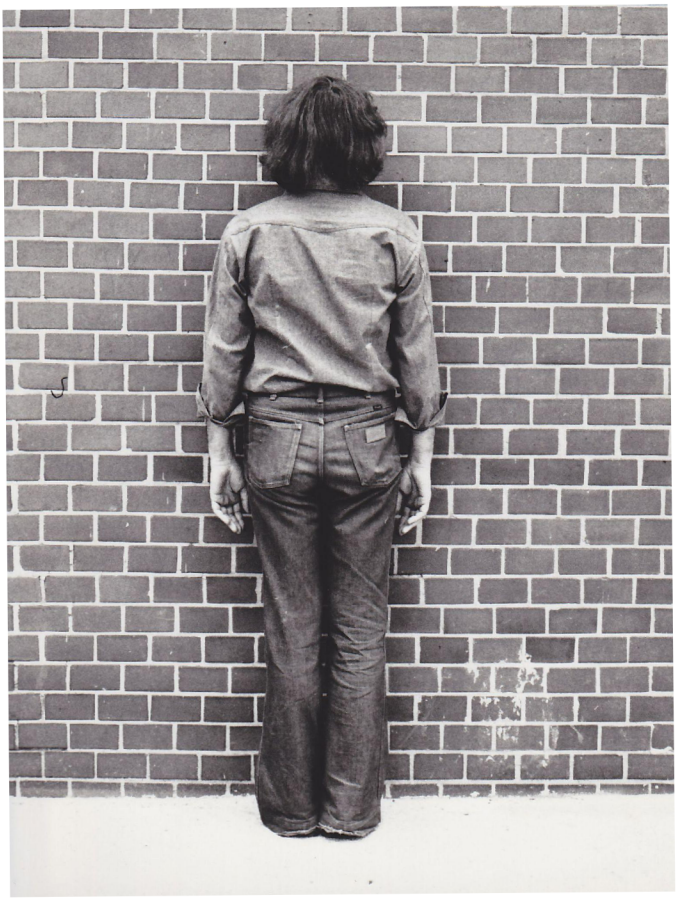

Fig. 5: Endre Tót, *"I'm happy to stare at the wall"*, 1971–1976, 11.9 x 9 cm

Fig. 6: Endre Tót, *"I'm happy to look at you"*, 1971–1976, 9 x 13.5 cm

Fig. 7: Endre Tót, *"I'm happy to look at something beautiful"*, 1971–1976, 11.9 x 9 cm

Fig. 8: Endre Tót, *"I'm happy to look at something beautiful"*, 1971–1976

Fig. 9: Endre Tót *Untitled,* 1966, tempera and oil on paper, 100 x 70 cm

Fig. 10: Endre Tót, *Untitled,* 1982–1985

Fig. 11: Ilona Keserü, *Numbered Paintings No. Two,* 1965, oil, enamel and oil pastel, graphite on canvas

Fig. 12: Ilona Keserü, *Red Picture (Numbered Paintings No. Nine),* 1966, oil, enamel and oil pastel on canvas, 120 x 165 cm

Fig. 13: Balatonudvari Cemetery, Action 3, 1969

Fig. 14: Ilona Keserü, *Approach 1*, 1969, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm

Fig. 15: Ilona Keserü, *Gravestones 1*, 1967, oil on wood fibre, 125 x 170 cm

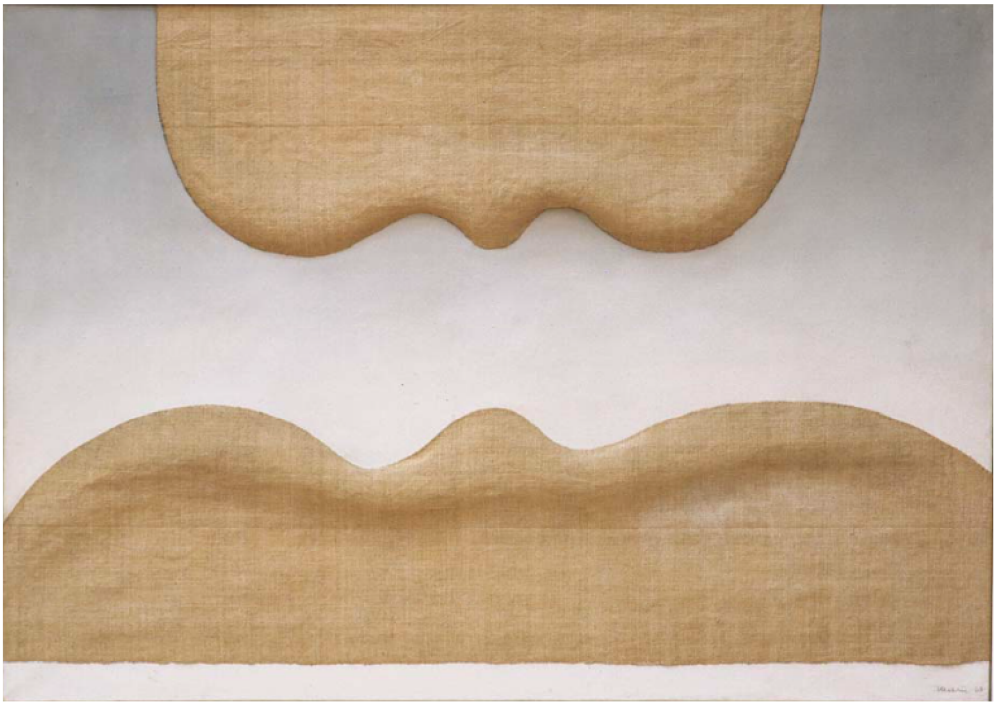

Fig. 16: Ilona Keserü, *Approach 2*, 1969, oil on canvas, canvas embossing, 120 x 170 cm

Fig. 17: Ilona Keserü, *Pasted forms*, 1971–1973, marble, sandstone and mortar, 1000 x 685 x 53 cm

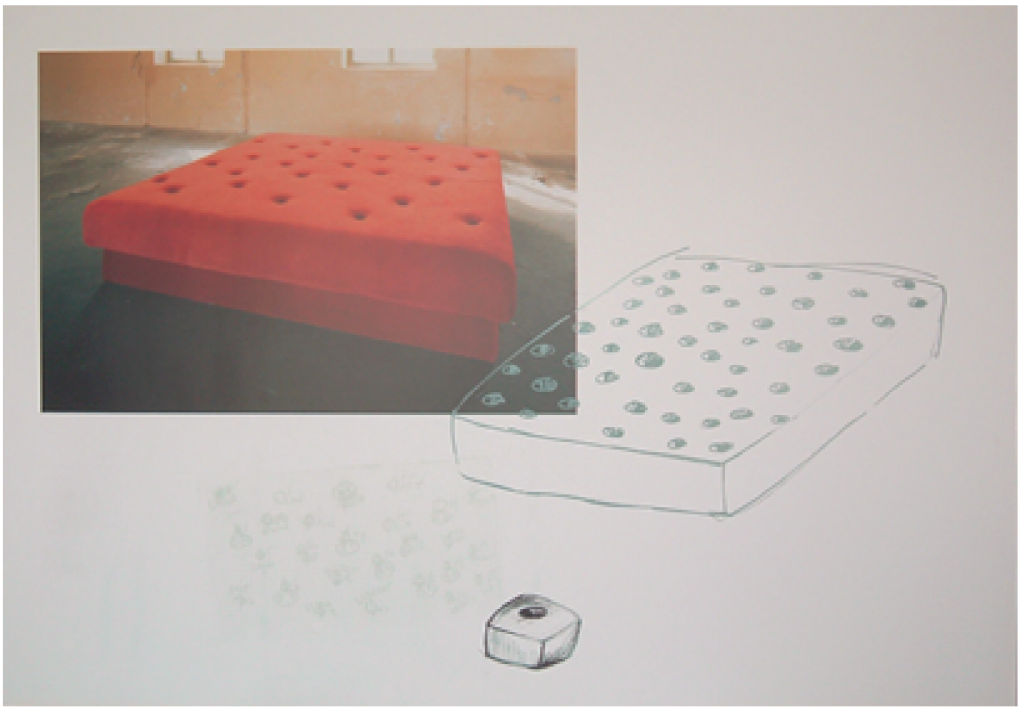

Fig. 18: Ilona Németh, *Polyfunctional Woman*, 1996, sound installation, 200 x 260 x 45 cm

Fig. 19: Ilona németh, *Floating Gardens (Future Garden, Healing Garden)*, Kassel, 2011–2022, objects (polypropylene, soul, plants, solar panels, water pumps), 300 x 400 x 90 cm

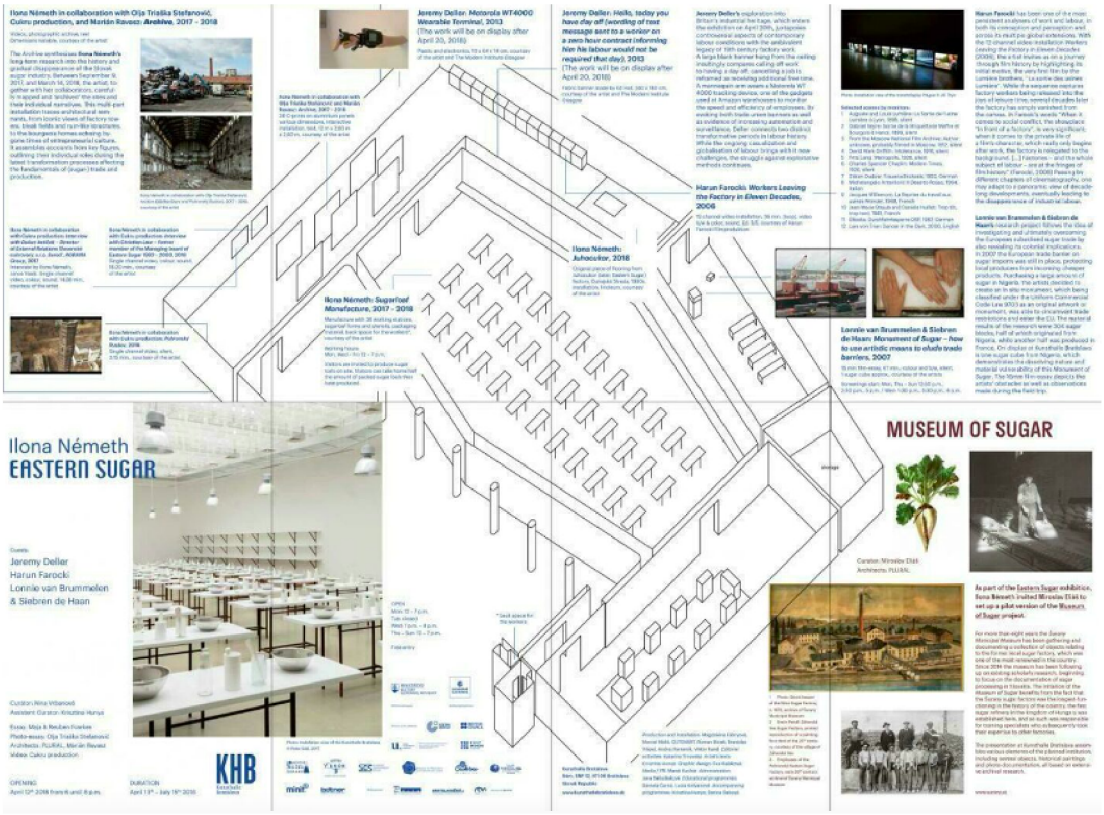

Fig. 20: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, solo exhibition at Kunsthalle, Bratislava (Apr 12 – Jul 15, 2018), curated by: Nina Vrbanová

Fig. 21: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, solo exhibition at Kunsthalle, Bratislava (Apr 12 – Jul 15, 2018), curated by: Nina Vrbanová

Fig. 22: Ilona Németh, *Eastern Sugar*, solo exhibition at Kunsthalle, Bratislava (Apr 12 – Jul 15, 2018), curated by: Nina Vrbanová

Fig. 23: Ilona Németh, *DS Public Art*, 2006, Dunajská Streda, Slovakia, metal plates with reflective adhesive foils, 150 x 100 cm

Fig. 24: Ilona Németh, *BP Public Art*, 2007, Budapest, Hungary, metal plates with reflective adhesive foils, 150 x 100 cm

Fig. 25: Ilona Németh, *NZ Public Art*, 2010, Nové Zámky, Slovensko, metal plates with reflective adhesive foils, 150 x 100 cm

Fig. 26: Zsófia Keresztes, *It Wasn't Us Who Told Lizi to Lie Down on the Cold Kitchen Floor*, 2016, styrofoam, acrylic paint, router, artificial flower, Macbook box, thread

Fig. 27: Zsófia Keresztes, *Tasty Selfie*, 2018, mixed media, 137 x 62 x 145 cm

Fig. 28: Zsófia Keresztes, *Sphinx*, 2020, mixed media