

# EVASION TECHNIQUES

Strategies for the subversion and derision of power  
in 1960s and '70s Hungarian avant-garde art

Giuseppe Garrera and Sebastiano Triulzi

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Strategies for the subversion and derision of power  
in 1960s and '70s Hungarian avant-garde art

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Giuseppe Garrera, József Készman, Viktória Popovics and Sebastiano Triulzi

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Making art is a mysterious, excellent process. Here at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, in 2019, we had the opportunity to get to know works by artists created within an adverse social and political context. These are the Hungarian artists featured in the exhibition *“Evasion techniques. Strategies for the subversion and derision of power in 1960s and ‘70s Hungarian avant-garde art”*.

Although many of these artists are known throughout the world, the conservation of these works is the result of attentive and often courageous actions. Our gratitude goes to those private individuals who took on this responsibility and to the Ludwig Museum in Budapest that currently preserves and promotes this important collection. Together with the Hungarian Academy in Rome, it has made this exhibition possible. For the considerable personal dedication towards the realisation of the exhibition, we would particularly like to thank the director of the Ludwig Museum, Julia Fabényi, and the director of the Hungarian Academy in Rome, István Puskás, as well as the exhibition’s curators Giuseppe Garrera, József Készman, Viktória Popovics and Sebastiano Triulzi. Theirs is the merit of having been able to offer a specific reading of the work of these Hungarian artists as a paradigm of the different ways it is possible to elude censorship and repression.

Within such a framework, this exhibition and the research that is behind it offer a number of cues for reflection.

One asks oneself whether the absence of freedom under censorship and state control is capable of suppressing creative expression. The indignation at the absence of avant-garde Hungarian artists from the international scene in those crucial 1960s and ‘70s would serve to reinforce – yet further – the political conscience of condemnation towards all forms of totalitarianism, favouring the freedom of expression of creativity as an indispensable nourishment of a civilised way of life.

But the events we are looking at here – the vitality of the works by these Hungarian artists – would seem to prove that no censorship is capable of entirely suppressing artistic expression, which by contrast will find precisely amidst such hardship the elements necessary for critical actions of considerable intelligence, often on the verge of paradox.

This presentation accompanies the digital publication of the contents of the exhibition and inaugurates a new direction taken by the Azienda Speciale Palaexpo, that of rendering accessible on the web the scientific contents of its initiatives. By exploiting the possibilities offered by technology to overcome physical and temporal barriers, the chances that research and knowledge will reach an ever-greater number of recipients are multiplied.

*Luca Bergamo*

*Vice Mayor of Rome in charge of Cultural Development*

I am particularly proud of the online publication, in Italian and English, of the catalogue for the *Evasion techniques – Strategies for the subversion and derision of power in 1960s and '70s Hungarian avant-garde art* exhibition which ran at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni from October 2019 to January 2020.

I take pride in the fact that, through the display of some remarkable original documentation, this exhibition has provided the Rome public with an opportunity to know about the existence of an artistic research which is extensive, aware and radical and which, in a context such as that of Hungary during the Cold War, was able to employ cunning, paradox or the simulation of stupidity to circumvent the phobic mechanisms of repression, overturning them against themselves.

This is the “tactic” as understood by De Certeau – that which possesses as its sphere of action the “place of the other”, the orderly city in which the systems and rules imposed from above escalate to such a shrill pitch of control that they become vulnerable to actions and movements interpretable both as their celebration and as a “surreal” form of denunciation. Far from being inconsequential, these apparently nondescript actions and movements are corrosive and critical beneath their innocuous, irrelevant façade. In my view, they are acts of freedom which outline the true political significance of art.

I am also pleased with this publication because it inaugurates an editorial line which the Azienda Speciale Palaexpo had already decided to embark on prior to the quarantine and which aims to relaunch some of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni’s most important productions via websites, or rather within web environments. Thanks to fresh contributions and research, these environments have the capacity to amplify the cultural goals of an exhibition and, with their universal accessibility, render them visible – as in this case – also to a public away from Rome and unable to enjoy the *Evasion techniques* exhibition directly, with its documentation and photographs that were hitherto practically



unseen or unknown.

Firstly, I would like to thank the curators of the exhibition and of the catalogue, Giuseppe Garrera and Sebastiano Triulzi. Together with their Hungarian counterparts, József Készman and Viktória Popovics, their work of selecting, historicising and critical understanding has been truly excellent.

I would also like to thank, on behalf of the board of directors and the Azienda Speciale Palaexpo as a whole, the National Cultural Fund of Hungary, the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art of Budapest and the Hungarian Academy in Rome. This exhibition would never have been possible without their generosity and enthusiasm.

*Cesare Maria Pietroiusti*

*President Azienda Speciale Palaexpo*

Today, in these times of social distancing, hosting an event such as *Evasion techniques* is arguably the greatest paradox of the moment we have just passed. The friendly arts of our two countries, the Italian and Hungarian cultures, have drawn so much closer with this exhibition and it became clear from the start that the evasion techniques of this era – together with the voice they have in the workings of society – constitute a theme in art which is eternal and knows no boundaries. This encounter has therefore been a very special opportunity, opening up new horizons for artistic dialogue. The exhibition has generated much reflection, the Roman context has created a new situation and has done much to build a new professional approach. With the exhibition now closed, we find ourselves sharing a common, tragic context from which only medicine is able to save us. But even now the strength of art helps us find the bridges, exits and hopes that will lead us to a more liveable life.

Although declined differently, both our nations are familiar with the two-tier cultural phenomenon in art. The levers of official art and those of avant-garde art, positioned to defeat one another in both societies, were not seeking novelty per se but were defying the existing official art because they had not found their means of expression strong enough to provide them with answers to the major issues of their time – issues which are still relevant today.

The cordial hospitality granted to us by Palaexpo and the other exhibition spaces in 2019 has been extremely important to the artistic life of Hungary. It has enabled us to showcase our strong and expressive art and it may well have contributed to the diffusion of Hungarian art as a whole.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Hungarian Academy in Rome, particularly Dr István Puskás, who during the three years of his directorship has managed to create so many unprecedented opportunities for contemporary Hungarian art.

A special thanks goes to Palaexpo and its director, Cesare Pietroiusti, as

well as to his two exceptional colleagues Giuseppe Garrera and Sebastiano Triulzi, who have accompanied this material with such enthusiasm and devotion and have rendered this valuable forum possible.

I would also like to thank our colleagues Viktória Popovics and József Készman for their hard work, together with all those who assisted them. They believed it was highly important for us to introduce ourselves in Rome with some contemporary material, or at least from the late-Modern period.

One day the pandemic will end and we hope that Hungary's art will have left behind some good memories.

We share deeply in the grief for the victims of Covid-19, along with their loved ones, and hope that a better age will shortly be upon us!

*Julia Fabényi*

*Director of the Ludwig Museum, Budapest*

*Budapest, May 2020*

Thirty years on from the fall of the Berlin Wall, the situations, actions and resistance strategies employed in the opposition and criticism of communist regimes by some of the most courageous protagonists of the culture and arts of Central-Western Europe – Hungary in particular – remain valid and, most importantly, are indispensable for acquiring a conscience of the forms of power under which we live. The growing attention of the public towards these artistic communities and avant-garde artistic production (a case in point being the 2017 edition of the Venice Biennale, where Christine Macel devoted an entire section to the Hungarian artist Tibor Hajas) stands as confirmation of the vitality and relevance of an artistic language which, despite having taken form in Hungary in the 1960s and '70s, continues to speak to us and stimulate us, making us vigilant of all state apparatuses and all the propagandas of history. It is not uncommon for the lesser-aligned responses to the problems of a civilisation to emerge from the periphery, rather than from major cultural centres. The fringes offer a different and original perspective, are able to shed light on contexts, into those darker corners which are invisible to those inhabiting the system from the inside. The artistic production of the Magyar counterculture under the “Kádár” regime provides precisely such an opportunity, possesses these special virtues. The *Evasion techniques* exhibition at Rome’s Palazzo delle Esposizioni recognises the validity of this chapter in Magyar history of art. We are both delighted and honoured to be able to share such a precious moment from our culture with the Italian public, confident that it will be a contribution towards analysing and interpreting the reality that surrounds us while, at the same time, providing information on a past which can seem distant and which is now emerging thanks also to the dedication of one of the most prominent Italian cultural institutions.

*István Puskás*

*Director Accademia d’Ungheria in Roma*

## Introduction

Some of the finest and most authentic expressions of contemporary art have been those which have taken place in hiding, right under the nose of the state apparatus, in basements, private homes, hidden from institutions and committees. Reconstructing and representing such expressions is in itself a struggle. Contemporary art history becomes even more wondrous and touching when – then and now – it tells of clandestinity, subterfuge, elusiveness. This has been the goal of *Evasion techniques. Strategies for the subversion and derision of power in 1960s and '70s Hungarian avant-garde art*, which aims to explore the dynamics of freedom and expression of artists within any system of rule. The exploits of this group of Hungarian artists – Endre Tót, Judit Kele, Sándor Pinczehelyi, Bálint Szombathy, András Baranyay, Tibor Csiky, Katalin Ladik, László Lakner, Dóra Maurer, Gyula Gulyás, Ferenc Ficzek, Tamás St. Auby (Szentjóby), Gábor Bódy, Marcel Odembach, Gyula Pauer, Zsigmond Károlyi, Tibor Hajas, László Beke, István B. Gellér, György Kemény, Kálmán Szijártó, Gábor Attalai, Károly Halász, László Haris, Orsolya Drozdik – whose achievements are examined here, are both remarkable and exemplary in light of the array of the different formulas, degrees of clandestinity and subterfuges which they resorted to, both in their exercise of freedom and in their awareness of the persuasive power of any regime over the consciences of humankind. With the idea of making these strategies – these “evasion techniques” – more readable, as if in a survival manual, we have chosen to divide them into six sections, each of which exemplifies a particular means for evading state control and confuse censorship, making fun of it in the process and, most importantly, protect the individual artist’s vocation to art and his or her artistic dream.

Entitled “The Artist’s Portrait”, the first of these sections dwells on how these artists represented themselves within the context of an authoritarian power system. How do you need to present yourself to ensure that your actions remain as undisturbed as possible? The fool, the retard and the madman are all guises which can be used to express oneself and move with greater freedom, deflecting censorship or accusations. Traditionally, power appears disarmed when confronted with the infantile and the clownish. But at the same time this form of self-representation inevitably conveys suffering and underlines the alienation from all official, uncompromised institutions. And so the “idiocy” is accompanied by a degree of melancholy, a mood detested by the regime, which considers it a form of political disease, something defeatist and unpatriotic. A unique place between these two forms, deprived of an exit route or salvation, is occupied by the extraordinary feminine representations of Hungary’s avant-garde women artists. In a patriarchal society strongly prejudiced against women, just appearing in public as an artist was considered scandalous and indecent. These women were immediately branded immoral and shameless, much as any power system regards women who recite poetry in public, show their face, perform and use their bodies, as being immoral.

Following on from the artist’s self-portrait as the lazy, defeatist fool, melancholic and parasitical, the second section of the exhibition – “Degrees of Freedom” – dwells on the different ways in which these artists chose to communicate and testify their dissent. From the bizarre ways in which artists represented themselves in the first section, the second section highlights their expressive potential by presenting the clandestine, ephemeral nature of some of their actions. These included writing on walls, leaving notes, putting up posters and a series of ironical and irreverent actions which at times consisted just of taking photographs and jealously guarding the roll – developing was

risky. Some of these prints have been developed for the first time here and are on display in the exhibition.

In parallel coherence with these practices, another crucial expressive form was “Mail Art”. Via the postal system, artists were able to travel freely across borders, iron curtains, sentinel posts and customs, simply by mailing postcards or packages that seemed quite innocent to the censorship. The transgression was in the fact that they were travelling, and was so blatant that it passed unnoticed. These letters and messages were concealing nothing except for the subversive thrill implicit in their status as “travellers”, as “fugitives”. It was the journey through the postal system which encapsulated the essence of the excursion, the escape, an unpunished wandering across the world in defiance of the authorities, flaunting all fences, all prohibitions, all borders. The fourth section instead uses photographs and visual accounts to testify to the “Psychosis of Power”. These works always allude to the perception of reality as a succession of bans, conveying the anxiety of control and the idea of constant observation. This is a proliferation of images which stands as a painful reminder of the reality of everyday life – disused railway tracks, boundary stones, fences, security signs, warnings, alerts – all elements of the urban panorama which are imbued with an allegorical, allusive significance. Life itself is punctuated by the icons of power, from unexpected visions of Lenin to the feelings conveyed by the artist by blocked roads which make it impossible to get out. This art simply reproduces reality, without any clear message of dissident. It is in the choice of the symbols of that reality, in the sense of danger which colours existence itself, that these works reveal a neurosis, a feeling of imprisonment, secretly illustrating a state of mind and a condition of pervasive political unease.

As a natural, reactive continuation of what has preceded it, the “Call to Resistance” section which comes next brings together these artists’ dreams and desire for rebellion, their ill-concealed appeals to react against the system. The piles of cobbles – sampietrini, as they are known by Romans – or pebbles which appear recurrently in these works are not documenting the efficient roadworks being conducted in the streets and squares of the cities of power. They are in fact a scathing reference to potential weapons of revolt. A ban on featuring artworks with pebbles in exhibitions was quickly put into place as soon as the government grasped their symbolical value. In one extraordinary sequence, Sándor Pinczehelyi moves cobbles just as a workman would during repaving works, concealing an explosively subversive message beneath the iconic figure of the workman devoted to the common good so frequently used in socialist realism propaganda.

The closing section is devoted to art, the dream of art and chiefly to the “Unease of Art”. First and foremost this means, literally, the unease experienced by these artists in making their art, to the extent that some of their most remarkable shows – documented in this exhibition by photographs – were held in back gardens, gatherings between friends, alleyways and backstreets safe from checks or prying eyes. But more often than not they simply took place in the imagination, away from the officially recognised art channels. The entire productive activity of these artists took place outside galleries and conventional art spaces, and was therefore inherently in a state of “unease”. Such unease did also point to an awareness of the risibility of art when compared to the sufferings of the real world, and to the abyss separating the triumphalism of state-licensed art from daily life. These were artists whose commitment to freedom spelt failure both socially and career-wise – they were never admitted to the art academies, never qualified for prizes or scholarships, their works never appeared in of-



ZUSAMMENGESTELLT VON FAMOUS ARTISTS SCHOOLS WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT, USA



Szombathy Balint,  
Kolasinska 12,  
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# Talent test

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6 Frankfurt 1 - Bleidenstraße 1

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Unterschrift: 

ONTVANGEN 19 SEP. 1967



In the U.S.A. accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council, Washington, D.C., a nationally recognized accrediting agency as defined by the United States Office of Education.



Von der I.S.O., der Aufsichtsbehörde für den Fernunterricht, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem niederländischen Ministerium für Unterricht und Wissenschaft.

Figure 1. Balint Szombathy, *Talent test*, 1967, collection of the artist

ficial exhibition spaces. None of them, as testified by this show from its first section, were ever even recognised or anointed as artists, and were consequently deprived of the prestige and status such a role would have brought with it.

Bálint Szombathy's object *Talent test*, from 1967 (Fig. 1), is emblematic of this entire current, standing for everything that could have been but which never was. It is an application form for an Amsterdam fine arts academy ("Famous Artists Schools") containing a test in which the candidate is required to specify which works are authentic and which are fakes. Szombathy repeatedly enjoyed reproducing it in his catalogues, as a reminder, a warning, a plastic and symbolical representation of the choice he never made. Neither did the other members of his group make that choice, even though there was nothing stopping them being admitted into an art school to become "artists". Every time, that application form stands as a memory, a sign, an essential "non"-action from their youth. This was the moment they chose to turn their backs on a career in art, to despise the opportunities an academic training would have afforded them – the reassurances, the prospect of a good wage, all the traditional trappings of the artist's status, part of a circuit with all the certifications and quality seals. All the artists included in this exhibition walked away from such prospects. Szombathy in fact used this image as a sarcastic yet joyful reminder to himself of the unbridgeable distance between him and the comforts of the state art apparatus, of the vanity and vacuity of painting. He preferred an art that was alive, corporal, able to reiterate his desire for freedom and independence. The signature on that application form would have entailed the admission into the ranks of power even as an artist, and most of all it would have opened the doors to the serenity and reassurance of the halls of creativity, of an art that was subjected, acquiescent, innocuous, with a good chance of being invited to biennales, triennials,

quadrennials. The entire experience of these Hungarian artists is one that has not submitted that application form, has not received regular or regulated training. The fact of being self-taught was for them something absolutely vital, with all the consequences – being the fools, the idlers, without identity or investiture. They were excluded from the system's painting panels, from enjoying any legitimate gratification from recognition, from success, even from their own identity and official documents – none had artist written on their identification.

State power systems love painting and sculpture but loathe art. In comparison to the many artists who received an academy training, those featured in this exhibition are failures, irregulars, disobedient. They were the ones destined to disappoint their families, condemned to never attain a recognisable social status. The brave decision not to fill in that application form which, like in all repressive regimes, would have secured all the benefits of an organised training, brought with it a presage of their own future – outside the ranks, inexistent, ghosts, just as they appear in so many of their self-portraits. Unlike any self-respecting artist working with the tools of their trade – paintbrushes, the palette, canvases, or marble in the case of sculptors – these Hungarian dissidents went in the opposite direction, towards the “being alive” described by Verlaine, towards the body: their own. *Evasion techniques* presents relics, vestiges, impressions on paper, photographic documents, deflected actions or their memories. All this manifests itself through writings on walls, actions, spoken words. Here there are no monuments, paintings, sculptures. This is a realm of the ephemeral, a spectrum of degrees of freedom, of suffering and much-suffered freedom.

## I. «The Artist's Portrait»

The first of our “evasion techniques” is devoted to how artists operating within a rigid power structure represent themselves, the ways in which this must be done in order to work and act undisturbed, the masks and attitudes that it is necessary to adopt. In any power system, the most common strategy for an artist to express him or herself freely is to play the fool, the “simpleton” idiot. This stratagem ensures that you can say anything you want without being noticed – power is always disarmed when confronted with the village idiot. From wartime to peacetime fools, all avant-garde movements in art regard idiocy as a metaphysical virtue, something which lays bare the hypocrisy of common sense and the lethal reasonableness of power. History of art is bristling with examples of this, which indicate the degree of pervasiveness, persuasion and violence of power through the ages. In a power system, idiocy is an escape from a stereotyped identity, from identification, and consequently from being catalogued by that same power system. It is one of the solutions for paralysing any control mechanism and interference. Several of Gábor Attalai's works, such as the *Idiotic Manner No. 1 and No. 3*, or *Idiotic Communication*, all from 1973 (Fig. 2/3/4), clearly show how expressing idiocy or madness creates a mechanism of innocence, similar to a court jester or a Shakespearian fool. This madness functions as an escape from the language of power, distorting it to the point of absurdity and, conversely, becomes a source of truth. In these Hungarian artists the madness principle, the sublime idiocy category, results in an extraordinary production of works, performances, proclamations, postcards and supremely “idiotic” portraits. The initial impression they give is one of insignificance, or rather absurdity. But because every form of regime or violence is based on good sense and rationality – and therefore on certainty with regards to criminal actions – the strategy of passing as an idiot can be so effective as to be the



**Figure 2-3.** Gábor Attalai, *Idiotic Manner No. 1 e No. 3*, 1973, Vintage Galéria, Budapest





**Figure 4.** Gábor Attalai, *Idiotic Communication*, 1973, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

ultimate and clearest form of derision of power, revealing its profound idiocy. Indecorous, idiotic, offensive towards solid masculine values, Károly Halász presents himself naked under an apron in his *Promote, Tolerate, Ban* (1980 – Fig. 5/6), explicitly referring to a “happy”, innocent state of sexual “diversity”. He perfectly achieved his goal, which is also to amuse himself and to outrage the self-righteous. Confronted with “such aberration”, such buffoonery, their only possible reaction is to shake their heads in dismay on seeing their worst fears confirmed: that all their healthy, secure principles – country, party, family – are “going to the dogs”. When Endre Tót decides to walk the streets either holding or wearing on his back a signboard proclaiming how happy he is to be walking, he is blowing apart the lie behind a freedom which consists in the illusion of telling oneself and believing oneself free.



**Figure 5-6.** Károly Halász, *Promote, Tolerate, Ban I e II*, 1980, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

This form of self-representation as the idiot is, sadly and inevitably, also a representation of suffering, of the awareness that it will never be possible to accede to any state-licensed art institution because they are all compromised. Within the idiotic sphere there is therefore the addition of an intimate, clandestine and melancholic self-portrayal. Dejection is particularly averse to the regime, which considers melancholy and all its related sentiments akin to a political disease, synonymous with a defeatist, unpatriotic attitude. Alongside these artists' self-representation as idiots, and arguably more dangerous (although it was easy to slip up and not be able to pull off the act), is their passing themselves off as good-for-nothings, discontented, lazy or melancholic (a political disease). No such forms or categories are admissible within the power system, which strives to make everyone happy, everyone the same. Unhappiness is therefore one of the most radical forms of revolt, a profound challenge to the existing system and of the status quo. Not satisfied? Not happy? Such defeatism for the regime is a slap in the face, something which highlights and is the tangible evidence of its shortcomings. Another instrument for deception within a system of power, melancholy – like tardiness, laziness, impatience, untidiness, imperfection, the accidental, dirtiness – is a form of protest against the order and cleanliness promoted by the regime. These artists are sus-



**Figure 7.** András Baranyay, *Self Portrait I e Self Portrait I*, 1970, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



picious of order and cleanliness, of the illusion of Bauhaus and all the promises of regime propaganda. In some of their despondent self-portraits – particularly those by András Baranyay, *Self-portrait, I*, 1970 (Fig. 7), and *Self-portrait, II*, 1970 (Fig. 8) – there is a strong tendency towards disappearance, becoming immaterial, diaphanous, ghostly. An expression of the lack of public recognition of their status as artists, this is a reference to their degradation into a state of clandestinity, to the fact that they were obliged to flee from and give up – in the name of their own freedom – the esteem, identification and substantiation of their status as artists. In these two works, as elsewhere in his production, Baranyay becomes a shadow, a ghost, disappears. Again, this nebulosity conveys both his mental state and is a political sentiment, a condition in which the lack of a clear identity is the inexorable result of having renounced – for freedom’s sake – one’s recognisability. Erik Satie was famously of the opinion that an artist should both refuse the Légion d’Honneur – the highest official recognition to artists granted in France – and ensure that he remains undeserving of it. It is within the context of such a contradiction, subjected to such a contradiction, that disappearing equals preserving one’s freedom and the conscience of one’s pride.



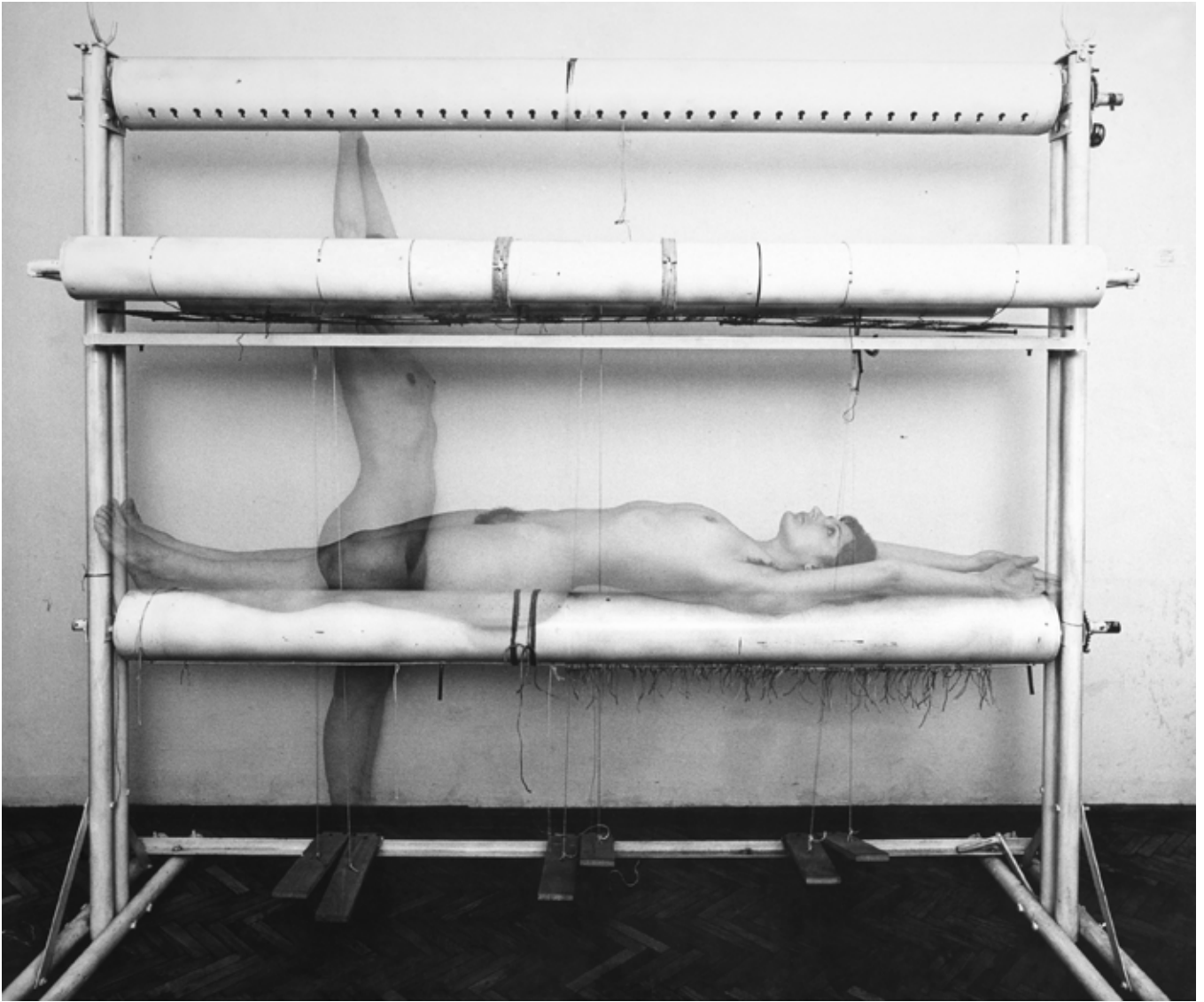
**Figure 8.** András Baranyay, *Self Portrait I e Self Portrait II*, 1970, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

Not only do these artists relinquish any chance of a Légion d’Honneur,



**Figure 9.** Zsigmond Károlyi, *Straight Labyrinth*, 1977, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

their activities ensure that they will never deserve it. Although art can be a state of grace, in these men and women it is also a curse. Zsigmond Károlyi's work *Straight Labyrinth*, from 1977 (Fig. 9), stands undeniably as a great tribute to the legacy of expressionist film, as a lesson of appropriation with no pretences towards the real. Battered, lost and frightened, the artist is however aware of the bars of his prison, unseen by others, and is therefore conscious of his condition. In Judit Kele's *Textile Without Textile*, 1979 (Fig. 10), the artist's bed becomes a restraining bed of pain, like in a lunatic asylum or a prison, only that in this case the bed is a frame testifying to the centuries of subjugation of women under the yoke of their household chores, within the family hearth. Her naked body forms two Cartesian axes measuring out and delimiting the entire prison/trap space of the frame, nailing her to the

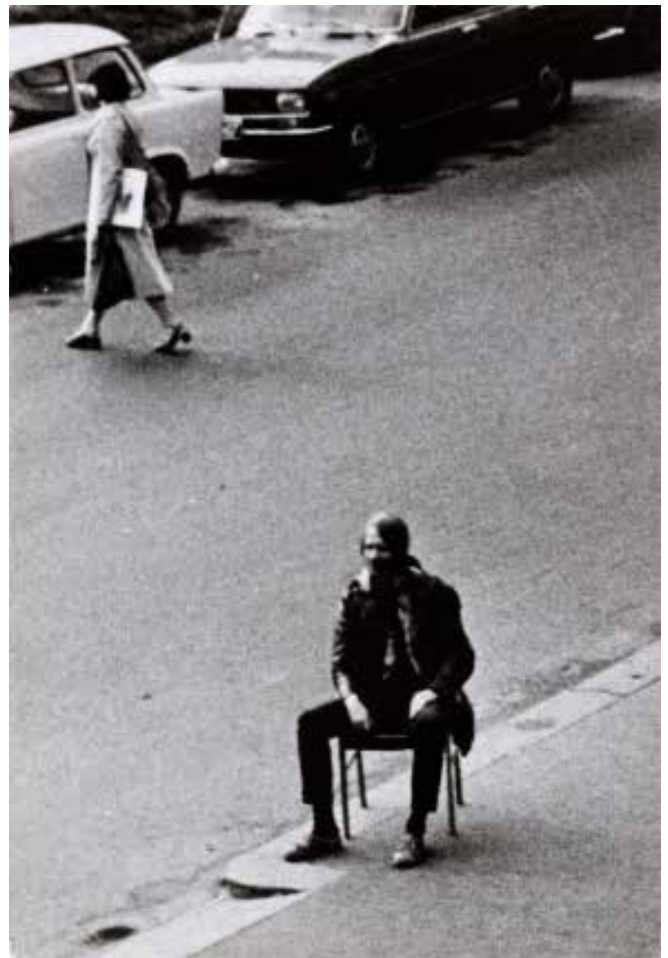


**Figure 10.** Judit Kele, *Textile Without Textile*, 1979, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

frame as if to a Cross. This presents her as submissive to her husband and his desire, delimiting her role of housewife and wife. The following year, at the Paris Biennale, Judit Kele puts herself up for sale as a wife, this being the only way she can obtain a visa to leave Hungary and patriarchal tyranny – becoming the bride and obtaining the patronymic of a foreign husband. In a remarkable slap in the face of the authorities, she was in fact successful in her attempt thanks to a gay French friend who agreed to make her his wife, providing her with an officially approved and sanctioned escape. This did not turn out to be entirely the liberation she had expected. This scenario in her destiny proved to be also without escape – in a conversation with the two creators of

the *Evasion techniques* show, she confesses that she felt she had left the Soviet regime only to enter another, the regime of the West, just a different form of slavery – from political submission in the first case to financial submission in the second.

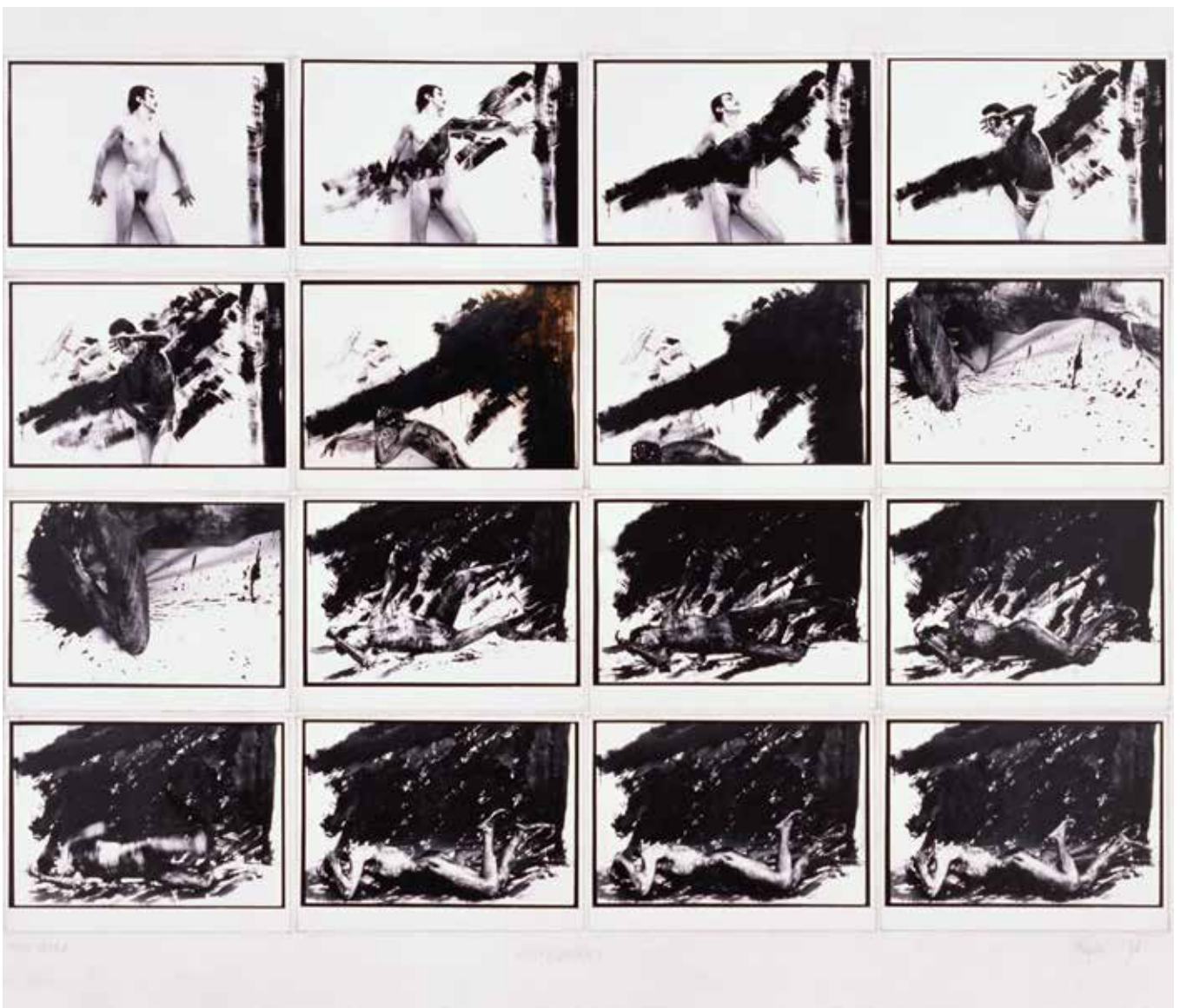
The element of depression is so strongly accentuated in these artists that any state power branding them defeatist will, by paradox, be stating the obvious. Kill-joys are simply unbearable for the regime, which cannot get its head around the fact that there may be people who were not happy and optimistic. Literally, in this sense, in Tamás St. Auby's (Szentjőby) *Sit Out/ be Forbidden*, from 1972 (Fig. 11), the artist is seated in a street with heavy traffic. Out of place, lost, threatened and in danger, the artist sitting on his little chair is in an inappropriate context, in the futile and intentional illusion of being in a home where he could stay and live. This image perfectly conveys his condition of misfit, his chair at the mercy of the passing cars allusive of a comfort that is completely illusory and misleading. This work can be interpreted in many different ways, from the feeling of being out of place to that of being, literally, in the wrong place, of finding oneself significantly in the middle of a street, of the "it is forbidden to be there", of the threat of being forcefully removed, as well as of the obvious danger that the artist might be overrun by traffic and by



**Figure 11.** Tamás St. Auby (Szentjőby), *Sit Out/ be Forbidden*, 1972, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

the cars speeding by. Melancholy, here, is elevated to the rank of political failure – what could initially appear to refer to a decadent, solipsistic dimension, is instead a pure political matter: the feeling of being castrated, stunted, consumed, eroded, hampered in terms of creativity or self-realisation. Werther’s suicide was above all a political, generational act... something which emerges clearly in the interpretation of these artists’ work. The deepest roots of melancholy, Marx intuited correctly in this case, are historical and political.

In another, even more extreme self-portrait, Tibor Hajas’ *Flesh Painting No. 1*, (1978 – Fig. 12), the artist reveals himself naked, lacerated by



**Figure 12.** Tibor Hajas, *Flesh Painting No. 1*, 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

his own creativity, by a form of pictorial lapidation, wounded, fearful of disappearing or becoming invisible, presenting creativity as a self-awareness issue of his time. He is in fact succumbing to art and the burden of creativity. In this powerfully allegorical work, painting is transformed into violence and corporeity, as if it were raining or hailing on him, as if in a flagellation. This is an action centred around the body, which is pivotal to the research of all these artists, who carry on their own flesh the scars of their creativity. Even when Hajas wrote on a wall with chalk, he was having an “ejaculation” of creativity, of freedom. Never have chalk or markings in the snow been so laden with an intimate and vital significance as in this context, one of self-dejection to the point of risking one’s own blood, veins, lymph – whether it be the body enduring or the body writing, it remained the body always. The concept of the body at the centre of art is one of the signs of the catastrophic legacy left by the horrors of history to art – that it was impossible to continue making art and therefore both art and artist were in a Christic state, like a Christological parable pushed to the extreme of risking one’s own body, bearing the signs of the power of history, in sympathy, in compassion – art as the Holy Shroud, leaving behind the traces of all its life and pain. Artists often play on the idea of art as a Calvary, with the creative process a Via Crucis. That in the process they might be crucified, lapidated, derided, spat on, crowned with thorns, is not because they presume to be God’s children but because Christ is the perfect image of mankind in its fragility, its submission, enduring the insult of abuse and evil. The artist embodies all those who suffer injustice, a Christic form of *Ecce Homo*.



**Figure 13.** László Lakner, *I put on The Shape of the Stairs*, 1971, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

process they might be crucified, lapidated, derided, spat on, crowned with thorns, is not because they presume to be God’s children but because Christ is the perfect image of mankind in its fragility, its submission, enduring the insult of abuse and evil. The artist embodies all those who suffer injustice, a Christic form of *Ecce Homo*.

In an ideal triptych, the melancholic and lapidated artist is naturally followed by the dead artist (or crucified head down like St Peter, as in the work by László Lakner *I put on The Shape of the Stairs*, 1971 – Fig. 13). In the work by István B. Gellér, *Mantegna/Che Reconstruction*, from 1975 (Fig. 14), there is even a clear, direct reference to the Mantegna Deposition, to the mourning of the Dead Christ, and to another martyr of justice and freedom – Ernesto Che Guevara. There are therefore two distinct thematic strands in this installation: admiration for the great painting tradition of the old masters with the Mantegna dead Christ



**Figure 14.** István B. Gellér,  
*Mantegna/Che Reconstruction*,  
1975, collection of Róbert Alföldi,  
Budapest

(in turn a universal tribute to all the departed and those who mourn them), and the artist's identification with the figure a play on artistic referencing which becomes also an allegory of a personal sentiment and the perception of the artist as a "political hero". As we have seen, allusion is one of the most frequent means of expression. In this case the initial allusion to art history is followed, like a circle closing in on itself, by a return to the self, down the well-trodden path in art tradition of the artist representing himself in the figure of Christ, both as creator and victim. A third consideration must be made with regards to the subject of artistic tradition: the artist in bed, not an uncommon image within the context we are examining on account of the fact that laziness and sleepiness in general belong to that realm of depression and melancholy so disapproved of by the regime and which convey a political mood and suffering – exacerbated by the knowledge of being under observation, spied on (the deposition is visible through a screen and a video camera, the intimacy of the bed and privacy are not allowed and are constantly violated by the sleepless eye of state surveillance and guardianship). Diversity, whether it comes in the form of a sense of unease or even guilt, is always a painful experience. But above all it is not a peaceful process. Living with one's creativity, with one's condition of artist, is not a pacifying process. The artist's traditional role of being different from the rest of society takes on a more dangerous valence when it carries with it a political connotation, undermining any calm or status quo. In any power system consensus is the Arcadian state which can be lost thanks to dissent, entailing the banishment from the earthly paradise of the conformism, the joyful parades and triumphal processions of the state. This is the root of the preconception by all power structures that artists are lazy good-for-nothings, failures. Brodsky was persecuted and condemned as a social parasite not because he was a poet but because he failed to be



productive towards, and collaborate with, the collective happiness. At times there is another aspect to this multi-faceted perception of artists – the fact that they remain free, attempt to avoid categorisation, means that they must come to terms with the perception of a fragmented self, a shattered identity, as in *Chess-Board Image* (1978-79, Fig. 15), by Zsigmond Károlyi. Danger, anguish and the feeling of being “halved”, perennially half in shade, hidden, in a permanent desire to re-embrace this other self which seems destined to be confined to a corner, in a cupboard, under the carpet.

In their self-representations, artists always have space for a clear-cut, unflattering vision of their desperation. In his *Image Whipping I. Magnesium*, 1978 (Fig. 16), Tibor Hajas stages a form of self-flagellation, an agonising introflection that is however private, closed and therefore invisible. The self-punishing artist is not even granted the immolation of a public martyrdom in this work, set within the desolation of an empty apartment in a social housing tenement. Structured around four shots focussing on the pain of discouragement and the damnation of the artist’s condition of solitude, the piece culminates in a masturba-



**Figure 15.** Zsigmond Károlyi, *Chess-Board Image*, 1978-79, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

tion as a form of self-dissipation – a futile and sterile loss – and a tragic, excruciatingly sorrowful simulation of a suicide by hanging. The realisation that melancholy is a political disease brings considerable pain, it means carrying the cross of History. The hide-and-seek game played by these artists with the regime ultimately produces a weakening, a fragmentation of their self-awareness. In many of their self-portraits, the



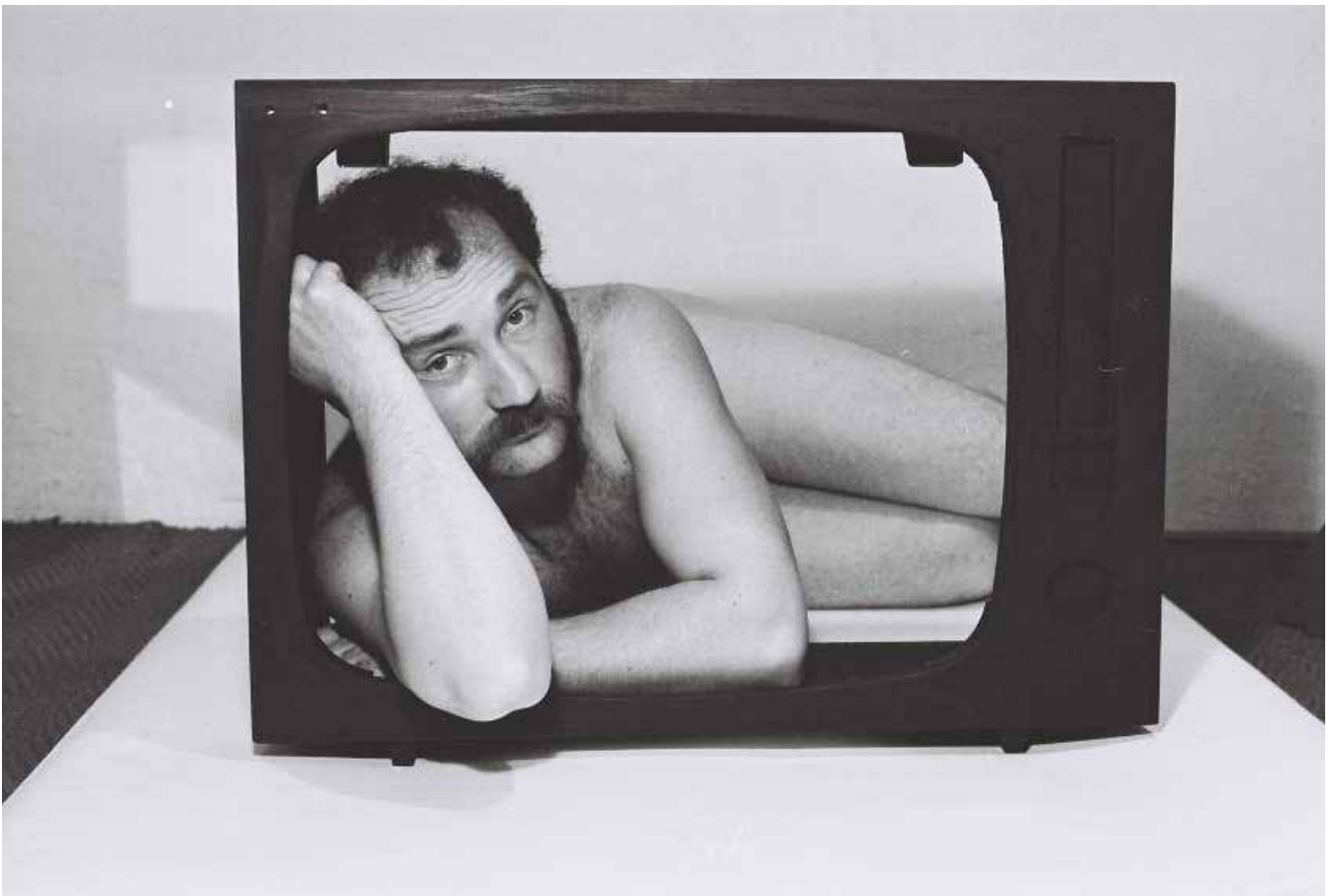
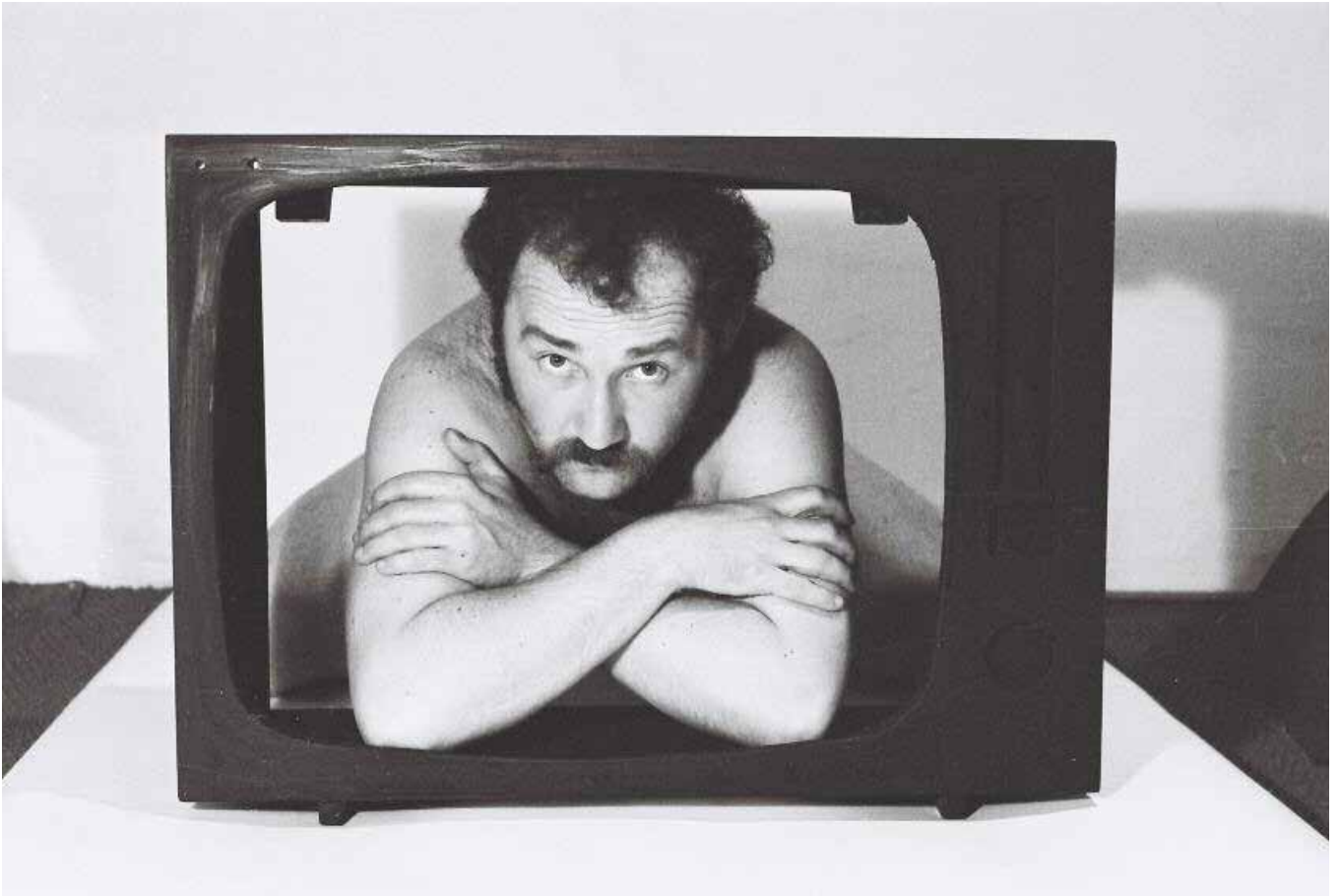
**Figure 16.** Tibor Hajas, *Image Whipping I. Magnesium*, details, 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

politically culpable element of melancholy manifests itself or evolves into a sense of disorientation, a splintering as they seemed to shed parts of themselves: melancholy means that it is impossible for them to be whole. In Ferenc Ficzek's *Handshake*, from 1977 (Fig. 17), the artist extends his hand towards a double which is merely a shadow on a wall – what is most precious about a person always remains hidden. Clown, buffoon, master of derision – in his intimacy, his mask down, the artist counts his wounds and humiliations, yearning for an integrity which has been denied him. These broken, dismembered, multiple self-portraits display a clear stand on behalf of their creators – a radical rejection of the appellations of power which would have them happy, identical, cooperative, decisive. Power dislikes nuances and indecision.

It is common knowledge that communication channels are one of the principal tools employed by power systems to build consensus and shape a population's identity. For these avant-garde Hungarian artists, the television becomes an allegory for an entire reality which is "boxed in", a fiction, like a stage used to educate viewers to become an applauding audience. Within such a system, the programmes aired on television are the building block for shaping happy consciences. In *Private Transmission I-IV* (1974 – Fig. 18/19), by Károly Halász (as well as in the entire sequence *Pseudo Video I-IV*, 1975 – Fig. 20), the artist is physically inside the television set, constrained within the apparatus like a giant, living cathode ray tube exposed to the gazes of others. Anyone entering that television set is stepping into its unreality, into its box, becoming instantly identified and transformed into a perpetually smiling stereotype, a caricature. By definition the stereotype is also a way to stamp out any form of unpredictability, multiplicity or radical diversity, and therefore also of vital restlessness. These artists are particularly mindful of two factors in their self-representations.



**Figure 17.** Ferenc Ficzek, *Handshake*, 1977, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 18.** Károly Halász, *Private Transmission I, II*, 1975, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest



Sopra **Figure 19.** Károly Halász, *Private Transmission III, IV*, 1974, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest  
 Sotto **Figure 20.** Károly Halász, *Pseudo Video II, IV*, 1975, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

Firstly, there is the essential question of avoiding identification, the stereotype, hence their attempts to research into multiplying images – two, three faces, exalting plurality and heterogeneity also as a means to render themselves unpunishable, non-recordable. The other factor is avoiding gratification, the happiness brought by integration, falling into the trap of conformism and recognisability, resulting in their need to cover their tracks and be elusive. Together with the calm that accompanies it, categorisation is the incubus of any artist working under a state power system. From the state’s point of view, this is ultimately a question of goods which need a “label” – labelling humans just as one might label a can of tomatoes, because there is essentially no difference between a human being and a can of tomatoes so long as both are clearly marked. This process is of paramount importance to

the power system, not so much the fact of obliging someone to wear a given mask but because there is the need to empty the human being of his unlimited potential, of his singularity. Just as the label on a can of tomatoes needs to show provenance, ingredients and best-before date, the same principle applies to the human being. There is a strong stigmatisation by artists who observe around them the collective identification with power or, worse still, the generalised aping of the attitudes of the regime, the acquiescence of the population. As Carlo Emilio Gadda explained so masterfully in his *Eros e Priapo*, the adoration of the leader derives from the reassurance projected by his strength, like that of a father or a party/deity. The leader exercises a sexual seduction, satisfying our recondite desires of submission and command. He agitates the sleep of women and men in equal measure, his every move a thrill, everything about him a macho, phallogocratic manifestation. There is a point at which the citizens' emulation of their leader becomes duplication, revealing the degree of mimicry an entire society is capable of. It is a female artist – Lenke Szilágyi – who contents with this phallogocratic nightmare in her *Lenin – Robi I-V* (1978 – Fig. 21), with her shots of the heroic-mimicking poses of the Hungarian “serfs”. In her portraits Szilágyi registers the disquieting, mortifying multiplication of Lenins and Stalins around her, in friends, neighbours, workers, young couples. Her shots fully convey the grotesque aspect of this form of mimicry of the attitudes of power, together with the satisfaction this buffoonery brings with it.

A unique place between these two forms – that of the artist as idiot that of the artist as melancholic and abused, and deprived of an exit route or salvation – is occupied by the extraordinary feminine representations of Hungary's avant-garde women artists. In a patriarchal society strongly prejudiced against women, just appearing in public as an artist is considered scandalous and indecent. These women are



**Figure 21.** Lenke Szilágyi, *Lenin - Robi I-IV*, details, 1978, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

immediately branded immoral and shameless, much as any power system regards women who recite poetry in public, show their face, perform and use their bodies, as being immoral. For any repressive regime, any woman making art is little more than a stripper. The mere fact of showing themselves, displaying their bodies (and in many cases this was limited to their faces, their expressivity, their individuality) or even the very idea of presenting themselves as artists, is considered improper. Female creativity is by definition something extreme and out of control, a salacious obscenity. In general, female artists and the concept of female creativity are an embarrassment for a regime, they epitomise wanton dissoluteness and effrontery, they are an act of insubordination which requires monitoring and surveillance. The most widely employed countermeasure to such manifestations is to morally stigmatise them. Artists such as Katalin Ladik, Judit Kele or Dóra Maurer are doubly culpable on account of their youth and beauty, two characteristics which are already sufficient to deprive them of any credibility whatsoever. The fact that they are also creative – a compulsive behaviour which is a consequence of their youth and beauty – makes them the inevitable targets for accusations of immorality, for indignation, contempt and, in many cases, unmitigated opposition. The interview-article by Aldo Bressan which appeared on the December 3rd 1970 issue of *Europeo* was emblematic in this sense. The piece featured Katalin Ladik, branding her right from the title as “La poetessa

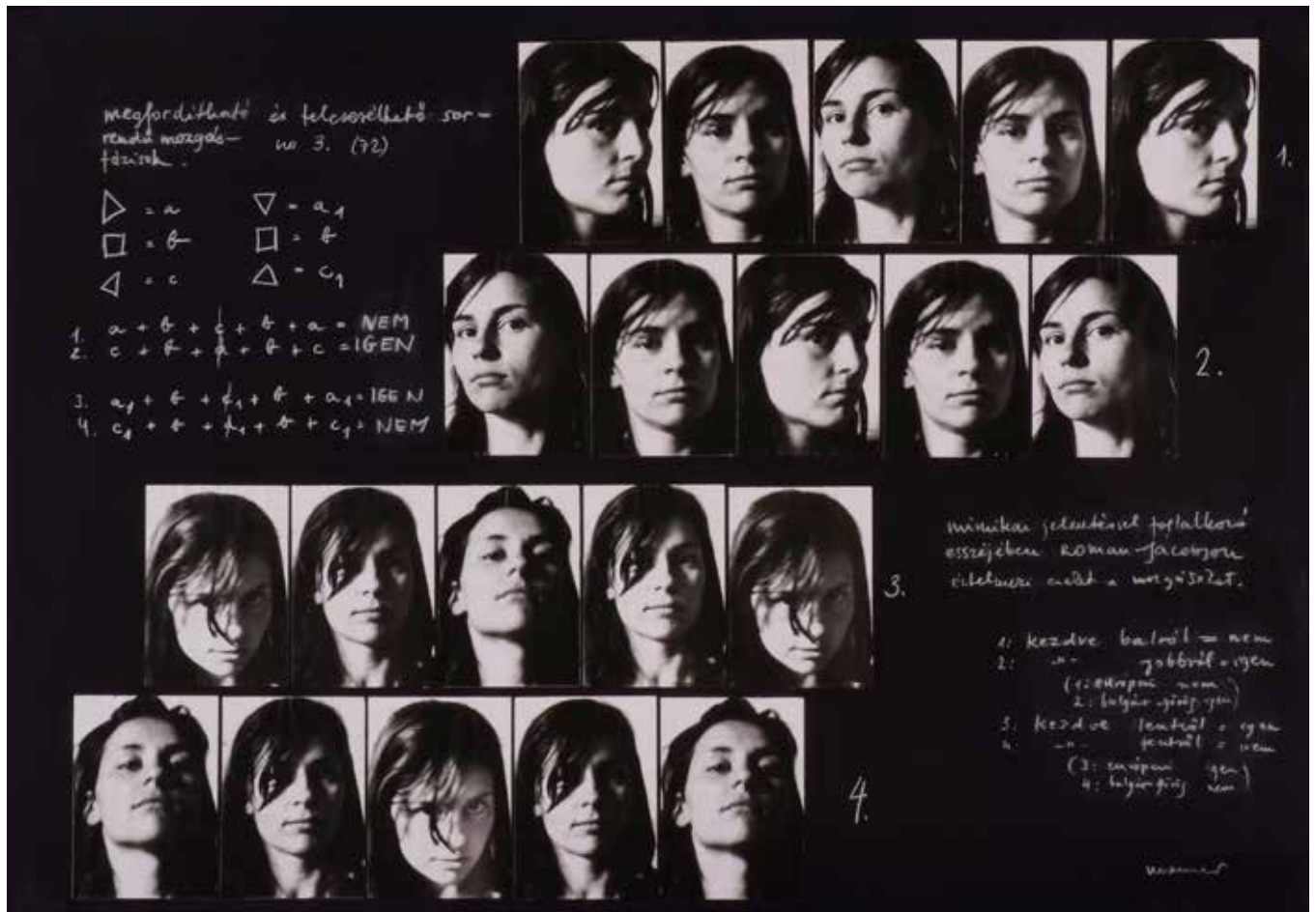




**Figure 22.** Katalin Ladik, *La poetessa che recita nuda sulla scena*, interview with Katalin Ladik by Aldo Bressan, «L'Europeo», December 3rd 1970

che recita nuda sulla scena” (*The Poetess Who Reads Naked On Stage* – Fig. 22). The explicit insinuation that the artist was in fact a stripper is typical of the labelling and banalisation process that the performing arts milieu subjects artists to. The message is that although Ladik might claim to be a poet, she is above all a good-looking girl who liked to read her work with no clothes on, and that is it. A striking element in the photographic sequences of Dóra Maurer (*Reversible and Interchangeable Phases of Motion - Etude No. 3*, 1972 – Fig. 23), as well as in the actions of Kele and Ladik, is that the expression of their creativity, their female creativity, is often based on presenting the poses and attitudes of the stereotype female face – uncovering their faces, their smiles, their gaze, suggestively winking. Such actions are in fact intended to backfire against the viewers, making it impossible for them to continue looking and causing them to endure the embarrassment of being looked at. By playing with the same sexist logic that accuses them of being provocative with their art, by making art, these artists turn the tables on the spectators by confronting the radically chauvinist patriarchal society with its own reflection.

The performance by Judit Kele entitled *I am a Work of Art* (Fig. 24) is held by the artist in 1979 at the museum of fine arts in Budapest. Kele



**Figure 23.** Dóra Maurer, *Reversible and Interchangeable Phases of Motion - Etude No. 3*, 1972, Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

spends three days sitting in the museum like a living sculpture, in the vacant space left by a removed painting. The work is a provocative confrontation towards the system, challenging it on the embarrassing question of state custody and control of works of art – it quickly becomes clear that the custodian is not protecting the woman-“art-work”, he is making sure she remains contained within her allocated perimeter and does not become “ungovernable”. At last art retrieves its embarrassing potential, the price for non-predictability. Although Judit Kele may well start out thinking that she is being custodied, she quickly realises that all of her freedom is in fact under tight control. As an artwork she is free to smoke, file her nails, put on her makeup, brush her hair, so long as she remains confined within her cordoned area and does not step outside. She is therefore free to do anything, to the extent that any woman is free to do anything within the confines

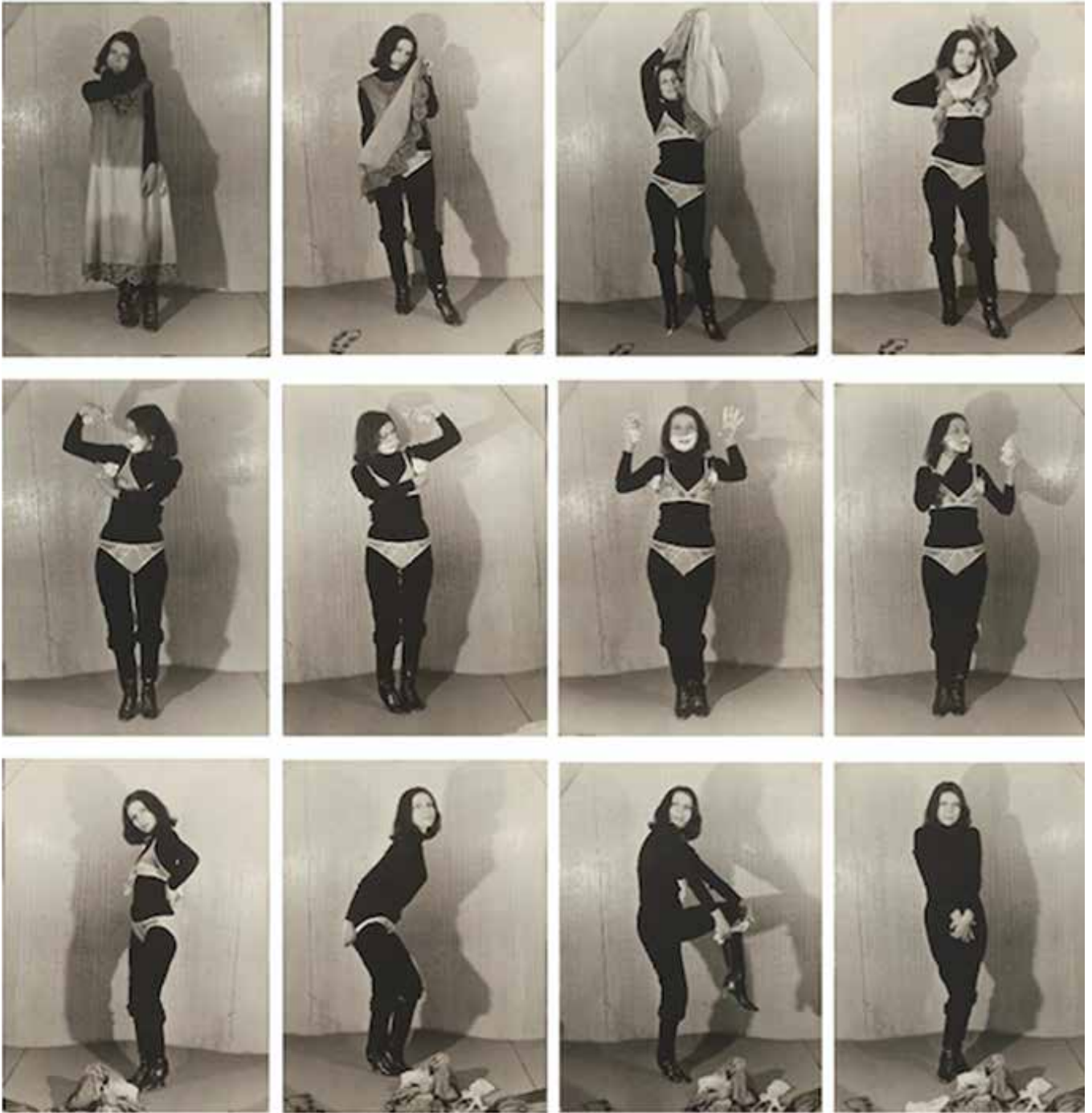


**Figure 24.** Judit Kele, *I am a Work of Art*, 1979, Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

of a system of power. The system's custody of the artwork is, in this case, control. And vice versa, control is custody – surveillance, monitoring, control, guard, stake out... interchangeable terminology. The custodianship exercised over citizens by the state is a form of invisible surveillance. Control is implemented not to safeguard the artist but to preserve power, and so it follows that in any power system the police are effectively prison guards. But ultimately one could ask oneself who is in fact under surveillance. Kele's action is emblematic precisely because it shifts ambiguously between the two mechanisms of protection and control, surveillance and vigilance, custodianship and detention. The absolute zero moment when Hungary's avant-garde women artists display their bodies transforms femininity into something scandalous. Furthermore, if a woman exposing herself is in itself embarrassing, this is brought to the extreme in Judit Kele's action, where femininity and being a woman become in themselves a creative accomplishment. The moment she becomes an artistic action, this seated woman – as she files her nails, does her hair, is elegant and feminine – generates unease, embarrassment and even alarm in those around her and in the system of sexist protection/dominance/control. Femininity reveals itself to be in itself a threat to the established order, to its values, hierarchies, phallocracy, batons, rifles, flags and superiors. Besides performing the usual tasks required of his job, the museum guard is in a condition of danger, embarrassment and fear because “she” is not where she should be – in her domestic environment –, she is out of place and, like in the tale of the emperor's new clothes, we perceive the power and danger of her naked state. That a woman decides to become an artist is explosive for the concept of home, suddenly revealed for its real function as a subtle, complex form of prison. The policeman is a symbol both of state power and the power of all men, under which paintings are the only admissible form of creativity – not the creative body. Being a female artist is an unashamed proclamation of liberty

and autonomy, and consequently unmanageable unless it results in a traditional artwork, whereas in this case there is a play on a person being an artwork, cordoned off and watched over by a guard.

There remained, however, the underlying misconception that a woman dressed as an artist is essentially a stripper. Within a context such as Hungary, the act of a woman removing her clothes in public is a clear message that she is freeing herself from the constraints imposed by the condition of housewife, worker, mother, honest and faithful bride, all roles which it is necessary to forcefully cut oneself out from, like untying oneself. In this sense, the enlightening action of taking off her clothes performed by Katalin Ladik reminds us that a dress, any garment, can often be a prison, a prison uniform, an armour imposed on us, a straitjacket. It is unavoidable, for Ladik's expressivity, to pass through the act of undressing, thereby liberating herself from the clothes that are a livery from girlhood until marriage, from patriarchal control and subordination to her destiny. To make a comparison with a better-known "undressing", that of St Francis of Assisi in front of his father and the entire community, a profound reaction against something requires a public ceremony, a proclamation that can only cause laughter, contempt, condemnation, sarcasm, precisely because it is a radical and scandalous act. This aspect assumes even greater significance in Ladik's readings and performances, as in her *Blackshave* (1979 – Fig. 25), when she stands up in front of the audience in Budapest and performs a striptease, only to reveal that she has a leotard under her clothes. This action plays on the audience's a priori perception, on the fact that our eyes, accustomed to women performing the striptease act, will be tricked into thinking that she really is naked. Only an attentive observer, free from such prejudice, will realise that the artist has in fact simulated the act, that she has simulated our profound conviction of her bad and unjustified will to make art and show herself in public.



**Figure 25.** Katalin Ladik, *Blackshave Poem*, 1979, contact sheet, collection of the artist



**Figure 26.** Katalin Ladik, *Parody Illustration for the Literary Magazine*, in «Hid», 1968, collection of the artist

In some of her actions, Ladik simulates shaving her beard or removing her body hair, both a parody of such moments of intimate male grooming and an obscene allusion to having a moustache or a beard – with the advantages such attributes bring to a woman. Her series of photographs gathered together in *Parody Illustration for the Literary Magazine "Hid"*, 1968 (Fig. 26), or the performance *The Screaming Hole*, 1979 (Fig. 27), clearly testify to this dynamic. Compared with the sobriety expected of women by the dominant cultural climate, it is hardly surprising that any form of parody or play on femininity results in accusations of immorality. Any expression of the female body in general – be it playful, derisive, caricatural or allusive to nakedness – is in fact blameful, banished from the sphere of what is considered serious, from the traditional stereotype of what femininity should be. In all these art forms it is instead the body which speaks, as both alphabet and language, of an art in search of the authentic and which places the body centre-stage. These artists are also appealing to an alternative, gestural language, one through which the woman is free to express herself through an incontrovertible epiphany. Their untying themselves is like undressing from the shackles imposed by the traditions of a sexist culture. As we have already mentioned, they do this violently, staged it like a representation or a celebration of liturgical potency – their liberation from the cords, restraining belts and chains of every order and grade.



**Figure 27.** Katalin Ladik, *The Screaming Hole*, 1979, collection of the artist



**Figure 28-29.** Katalin Ladik, *Performance during the Poetry Reading of Katalin Ladik and Jenő Balaskó*, Budapest, 1970, collection of the artist

In many of Ladik's performances (*Performance during the Poetry Reading of Katalin Ladik and Jenő Balaskó*, 1970 – Fig. 28-29; *Shaman Poem*, 1970 – Fig. 30; *Tour de merde*, 1979 – Fig. 31; *Pseudo Presence I*, 1972-2010, Fig. 36), there is a clear thematic element of the body, her own body, as an instrument of sound. Her voice emerges from the depths of her body in the form of laments, sighs, whimpering, panting painfully. At times she uses the madness of sounds to express, like an animal, her authenticity beyond the limitations of language. More frequently she employs her voice as a representation of her own body translated visually into an instrument. This is very clear in a frame of *Shaman Poem*, where she uses her own hair like the strings of a violin, playing it with a bow, her body an Ingres-like cello encapsulating the need for intimacy so typical of all Ladik's work – giving women, women's bodies, a chance to express themselves and to simply be, with all the risks implied by such display.

These same images, of which some are included in this show, accompanied the article published in 1970 on the Italian weekly *Eu-*





**Figure 30.** Katalin Ladik, *Shamam Poem VI*, 1970, collection of the artist

*ropeo*, and which earned Ladik the unfair and derisory description as a poetess who, in her search for quick success, needed to undress. In many of the interviews she has given, Katalin Ladik mentions how sexism has influence both her personal and professional life. As a woman she finds herself experiencing all the oppressive, punitive measures and mechanisms brought into play by the male dominated society in which she lives – being in a minority and of an inferior status at the workplace, in her artistic career and in her personal life. Particularly in her art, her initial, instinctive reaction, is to display her femininity



Katalin Ladik, *Shamam Poem*, 1970, details, collection of the artist



**Figure 31.** Katalin Ladik, *Tour de merde*, 1979, collection of the artist



shamelessly and provocatively. In *Poemin* (1978 – Fig. 32), for example, Katalin Ladik stages a simulation of acts that are both scandalous and unacceptable for the society in which she lives. Her provocative repertoire includes stripping down to her leotard, parodying the seductress or the submissive slave girl. Other times she simply places herself on display, behind a glass screen, conforming to the desires and gazes directed at women the world over. Katalin Ladik’s photographic projects are outrageous because she is a woman artist exercising the seductive power of her independence and freedom of thought. It is no coincidence that she ranks as one of the most heavily censored, opposed and protested artists in the whole of Eastern Europe. Her voice, which she uses to accompany some of her works, performances or “collage-scores” (Fig. 33/34/35), often sounds like a witch, a possessed girl or a retard. Ladik’s entire vocal activity is a production of erotic,

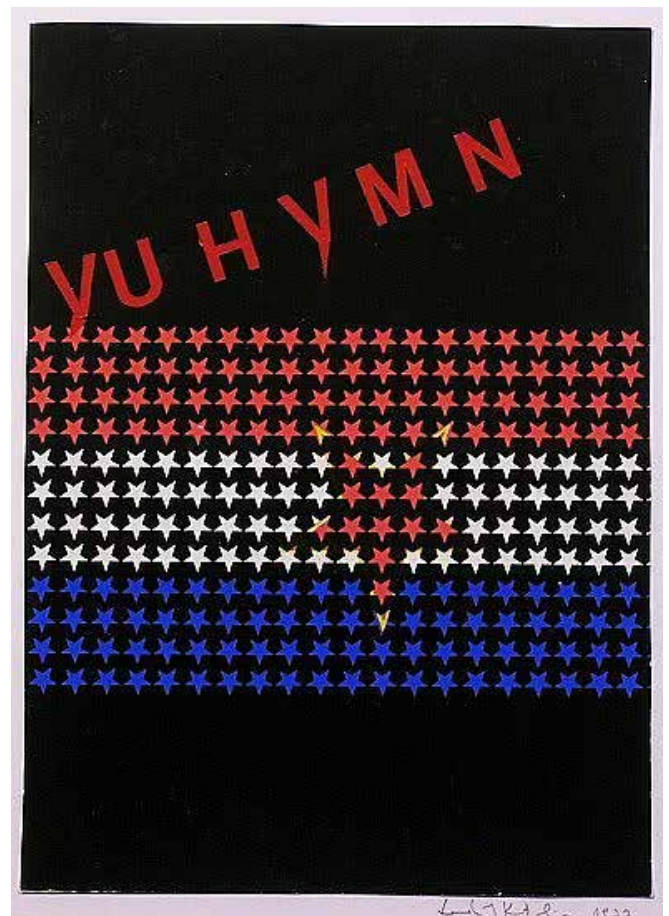


**Figure 32.** Katalin Ladik, *Poemin*, 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

brazen sounds emanating from deep within the body, from the guts, a frenzied and shamanic manifestation of a language that has been ingurgitated and vomited. Like the mystic women or the witches of the Middle Ages, Ladik uses her sexuality to point the way towards a new form of humanism. We often see her beating on a drum as her voice in fact evokes the fears, pain and anguish of her female condition. In her self-portraits as a witch, a madwoman, uttering her demonic sounds, she was not shy of making herself ugly, of grimacing. This is an artist who frees her voice, spanning language in its entirety with irony, sarcasm, madness, and ultimately presenting herself to authority as being completely idiotic and stupid. Such a visceral, liberated vocality, was an exceptional tool for evasion. The authorities are once again at a loss as to which accusation should be formulated against this bar-

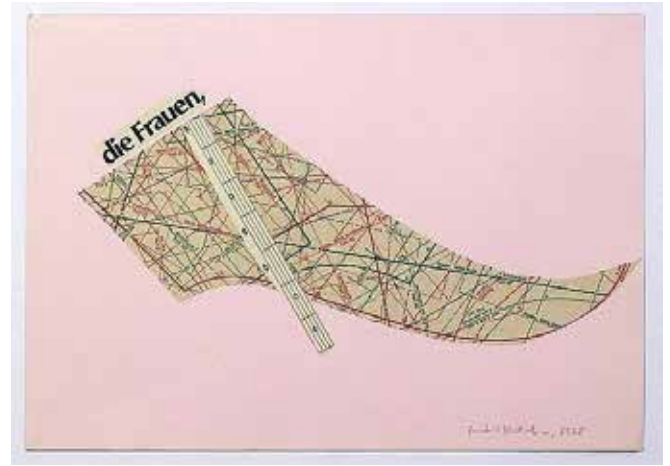


**Figure 33.** Katalin Ladik, *Pause in the Revolutionary Work*, 1979, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 34.** Katalin Ladik, *Yu Hymn*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

rage of jeers, raspberries, hisses, gasps, simulated orgasms, sniggering, childish voices, bawling. Without their sound component, Ladik's works would be lacking some of their most important messages. She is all too aware that even vocabulary is dictated from above, from a power system which teaches those beneath it never to utter a word of truth, nor anything scandalous.



**Figure 35.** Katalin Ladik, *Die Frauen*, 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 36.** Katalin Ladik, *Pseudo presence I*, 1972-2010, property of the artist

## II. «Degrees of Freedom»

Walls to write on have forever been the privileged degrees of freedom within any system of power. Walls become the clandestine, swift means by which an artist can play hide-and-seek with the authorities, alongside the proletarian tradition of protest. Like the private outbursts which take place within the home, cursing the authorities, writing on walls continues to be the public voice of the people. When done by artists, the action joins them in brotherhood with the people. As Tibor Hajas illustrates in his *To the Streets with your Message I. (A Letter to my Friend in Paris)*, 1975 (Fig. 37), the element of risk does not lie in the fact of having dared to bring a friend along to photograph the action itself – the difference between this and all those who write on walls under a regime, venting their frustration, is that in these cases the action was recorded. The artist exposes himself to danger, the photograph transforms a widespread and common desire for a greater degree of freedom such as wall graffiti into a subversive action, a criminal flagrancy, legal proof – the killer has left his signature on the crime scene, at times blithely sitting on the pavement, smiling and unpunished for his criminal action. In this specific case Hajas obstinately rewrites in chalk, therefore impermanently, letters he had sent to a friend in Paris but which had never reached their destination because they had been intercepted by state censorship. Transcribing the letters was an act of rebellion in itself. For the most part, performances of this nature never experienced official or private visibility, largely confined to existing only on rolls as a potential microfilm. Such actions were the sentiment of risk, disobedience, secret subversion, with no compromising, highly dangerous evidence such as contact sheets or vintage prints left behind. As well as doors and walls as supports, there was also the marvellous expedient of writing in the snow: temporary signs traced in the snow that existed

(UTCÁRA A MONDANIVALÓDDAL I.)

LEVÉL  
BARÁTOMNAK  
PARIZSBA



Az új művészet olyan, mint  
Eremit, melynek zsebében  
Szerep alakoznak is, jelszavak  
és határozott művel, nem dől  
zól, hanem ajánlatot tesz és  
javasol.  
Tajara



(FOTÓ: VERES JULIA)

HAJAS TIBOR

Figure 37. Tibor Hajas, To the Streets with your Message I. (A Letter to my Friend in Paris), I, 1975, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



Tibor Hajas, *To the Streets with your Message I. (A Letter to my Friend in Paris), I*, details, 1975, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

until it melted or until they were covered by fresh snow, the ultimate erase and rewrite operation. In *Negative Star* (1970-71, Fig. 38),

by Gábor Attalai, the symbol of power is achieved simply by removing the snow and then taking the photograph. The inexorability of the real will quickly cover the surface again with snow. This clandestine action takes place on steps leading down to the Danube. A brief protest – in snow all symbols are in negative, imprinted in mourning, black on white, with the snow that comes after a simulation of the inexorable return to reality. The protest is temporary, destined to be submerged and erased.

Yet more clandestine and fleeting than words written on walls in rage, yet more ineffable than the snow, is the “uncatchable” oral protest. Imprecation, outburst, street gesture, curse, swear word,



**Figure 38.** Gábor Attalai, *Negative Star*, 1970-71, Vintage Galéria, Budapest



witty proverb, grimace, contempt – all directed towards the superiors, towards the manifest injustice, the shameless ostentation of position and privilege. In another of his vertiginous actions, *To the Streets with your Message II. (Live Comics)*, 1975 (Fig. 39), Tibor Hajas relays this long-standing tradition and its memories simply through using cartoon speech bubbles, recording the trace of that which is destined – despite being such a vast accumulation of peoples’ imprecations and tears and rage – to never pass the confines of the lips. Stendhal was the first to observe that one of the qualities of the people of Rome, subjugated by the obtuse obscurantism of papal rule, was precisely their fantastical and phantasmagorical use of swear words as an outburst and an imprecation that was “subtle and biting satire”, a moment of freedom with a momentary detonation. In one of his well-known sonnets<sup>1</sup> Gioacchino Belli, one of the most refined masters and declaimers of evasion techniques under the leaden sky of the censorship implemented by the Papal States, has his protagonist – a Roman from Trastevere – tell of how one day he saw a cardinal travelling down a street in a carriage so richly decorated it was fit for a bride. It occurred to him that he would dedicate a special bow to the prelate, so he touched his cap with his hand and bent his shoulders in order to make his bow as ceremonious as possible. But as he was doing this he asked, through his teeth, “Eminence, do you like shit?”. On noticing the homage, and flattered by it, the cardinal promptly leant out of the carriage and nodded repeatedly in thanks, as if to say “yes”. In this form of rebellion as relief, the protagonist,

1. “Incontrai jermatina a Vvia Leccosa/ un Cardinale drento a un carrozzino,/ che, ssi nun fussi stato l’ombrellino, / lo pijjavi p’er leggnò d’una sposa. // Ar vedemmelo llí, ppe ffà una cosa, / je vorzi dunque dedicà un inchino, / e mmessame la mano ar berettino / piegai er collo e ccaricai la dosa. // E acciò la convegnenza nun ze sperda / in smorfie, ciaggiontai ccusí a la lesta: / ‘Je piasce, Eminentissimo, la mmerda?’. // Appena Su’ Eminenza se fu accorta / der complimentò mio, cacciò la testa / e mme fesce de sí ppiú dd’una vorta”; April 5th 1835

(UTCA'RA A MONDANIVALÓDDAL II.)

A KÉPREGÉNYNEK NEM NŐFAJI,  
HANEM TÁRSADALMI JELLEMZŐI VANNAK  
A KÉPREGÉNY: MAGATARTÁS.  
VARRÁS A REALIZMUSBÓL A  
REALITÁSBA.



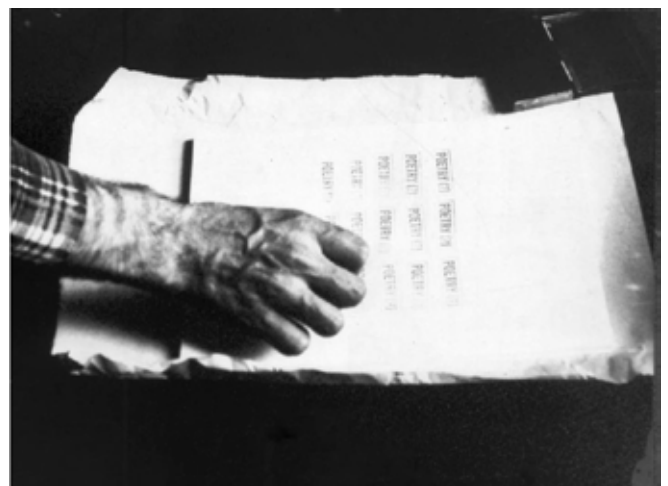
HAJAS TIBOR

(FOTÓ: YERES JÚLIA  
DOBOS GÁBOR)

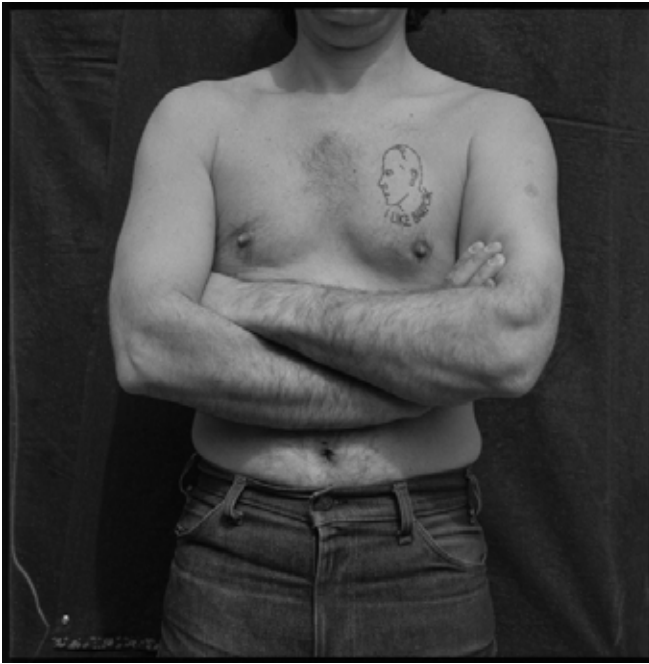
Figure 39. Tibor Hajas, *To the Streets with your Message II.* (Live Comics), 1975, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

the poor Roman from Trastevere, was not endangering himself or even being particularly brave. He was just staging that most human and popular of protests: responding to the visual and insufferable impunity of power with a personal rebellion and gratification. Tibor Hajas' action is a form of solidarity with this kind of silent muttering, this imperceptible and cautious cursing, this form of complaining which is above all a way to deride power and the powerful. Were it possible to string all of these street maledictions against power together in a succession of cartoon bubbles, it would indeed be an infinite and dizzying line.

The obsession with stamps, seals, authentication, imprimatur, with the “approved” word – and “please submit for approval” – that fills forms, identities, applications, permits, passports, travel aspirations, is literally blown apart by an action such as *Rubber and Flesh*, by Bálint Szombathy (1979 – Fig. 40). Like a crazed bureaucrat the artist stamps a woman, but with a tenderness and intimacy more like an erotic fantasy, in hidden parts of her body that exude consolation and allude to happily transgressive thoughts. The official seal is transformed in this work into a caress, a measure of pleasure, whilst at the same time deriding the rigidity and seriousness of the state



**Figure 40.** Bálint Szombathy, *Rubber and Flesh II, I*, 1979, collection of the artist



**Figure 41.** Sándor Pinczehelyi, *I Like Bartók*, 1981, property of the artist

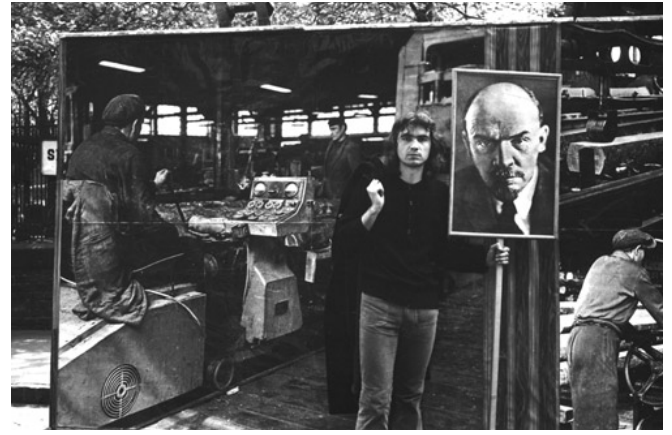
apparatus. Tattoos, as in *I like Bartók* by Sándor Pinczehelyi (1981 – Fig. 41), are another form of subversive protest writing, applied to hidden parts of the body with a forbidden saying, predilection or affection. The bearer is thus able to walk the streets, enter offices or public spaces in the knowledge that he or she is carrying the mark of his or her own defiance. In *I like Bartók*, the tribute is intended for musician

and composer Béla Bartók, the anti-regime hero who died in exile in the United States in 1945.

Casually taking the powerful for a wander, to show them the real reality, how people really live – *Lenin in Budapest* (1972 – Fig. 42), by Bálint Szombathy, stands as one of the most inexorable and melancholic actions it is possible to invent in this sense. May 1st, 1972, Budapest, the day of the annual celebration parade in honour of the worker, with its slogans, signs, colours, happiness. Szombathy takes one of these signs left in the park after the parade, as citizens cast off their propaganda vestments in favour of beer and sausages. Carrying his sign with the portrait of Lenin, Szombathy takes him on a real tour of the existing Socialist reality, through the grey streets, wandering through the courtyards and the depressingly grey atmosphere of the city – a stark contrast to the colourful and falsely optimistic May 1st parade. Should he be stopped at a checkpoint, he is just a demonstrator happily on his way home. The May 1st “march” which Dóra Maurer takes part in and documents in her *5th May Day Demonstra-*



**Figure 42.** Bálint Szombathy, *Lenin in Budapest (I-XIII), I*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Dall'alto** Bálint Szombathy, *Lenin in Budapest VIII, VI, XII e XI* (next page), 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

*tion on Artificial Ground*, 1971 (Fig. 43), is instead tragic, anguishing but utterly allegorical – an aimless wandering, with no destination or horizon, within the space of a room, like a dormouse in a cage, as she treads over a carpet of discarded and scrunched up manifestos and flyers. Dóra Maurer transforms into nightmare and solitary disconsolateness the dreams of future marches, of peoples celebrating, his-

tory progressing, reducing them to repetitive coaction and regular but pointless turns except for the freedom to march. Any power system guarantees an infinite number of liberties with which to be happy and grateful – you can walk, cross the street, buy, greet, sit in front of the television, pay with your credit card, go on holiday, party on Sundays etc.. We are happy so long as we are happy. Believing that we are happy is the great trick played on us by Power. All irrelevant liberties are guaranteed, none excluded. Just



like with Paradise, we must be content with what we have or with what is within our reach, and be content with being happy. Constant happiness is a duty in the Social era, a moral obligation exacted by every Power – we must always appear smiling, bustling with activity, experiences, travel, sharing, visibly jubilant, satisfied and happy. When in fifty, a hundred, even two hundred years' time, people will look at the photographs and selfies we post on our social network pages, they will think “these were indeed happy people!”



**Figure 43.** Dóra Maurer, *5th May Day Demonstration on Artificial Ground*, 1971, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

The satisfactory, cathartic dance

of Orsolya Drozdik in her *Individual Mythology*, 1977 (Fig. 44), is emblematic in this sense. On stage, an improvised stage set in front of a wall in her bedroom or kitchen, Drozdik performs like an *étoile* in a succession of no less than 24 poses. But she is always solo, as if she had been sent away by the rest of the ballet corps, left with only the shadows of other ballet stars for company in a kind of superimposition of imagined movements. The liberation of one's body, the joy brought on by the ecstasy of dance – again to be lived only in private and only there, jealously cultivated like a forbidden dream.

Such “degrees of freedom” can at the same time prove to be entirely spurious. How is it possible to state that a totalitarian regime is



**Figure 44.** Orsolya Drozdik, *Individual Mythology*, 1977, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



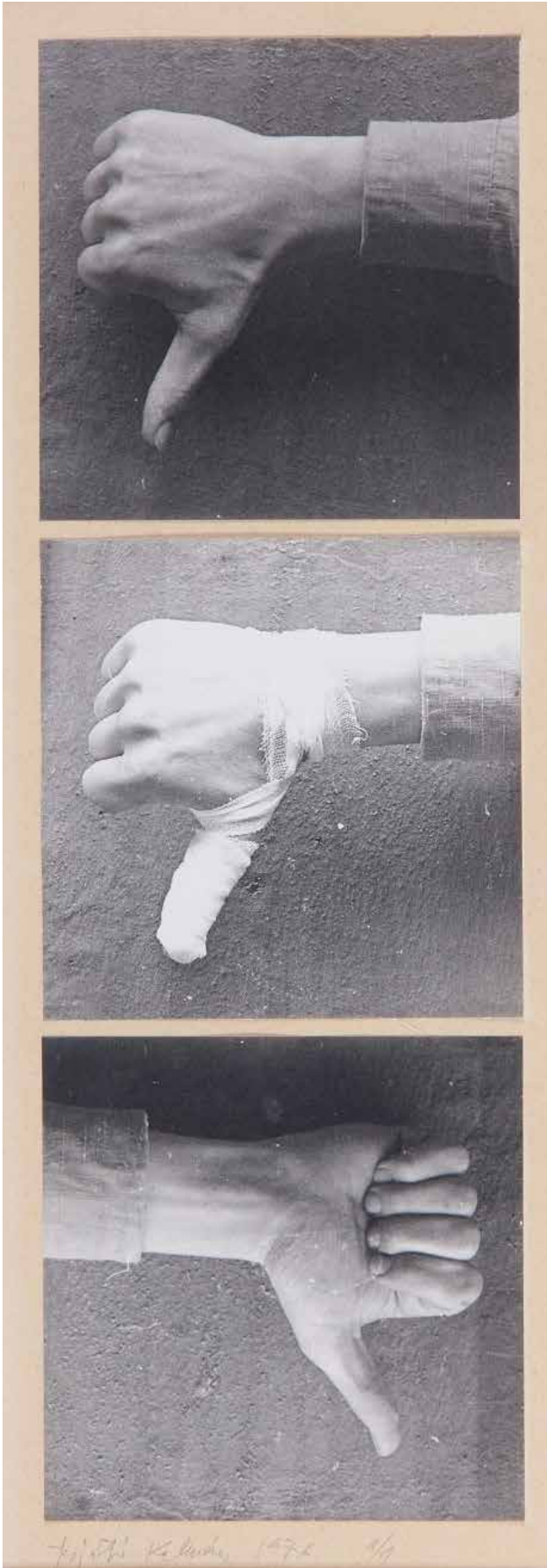
such when it allows you to eat, cross the street, look out of your window? As Endre Tót highlights in his performances, it is clear that this staged life in fact permits thousands of actions that are pure façade (liberty is measured only in neuralgic actions which, paradoxically, are precisely the ones that are forbidden and which cannot be spoken of). The pillars of a deep-rooted freedom are lacking, whereas all fictitious liberties are guaranteed – the ones that are irrelevant but which build consensus – and we find ourselves thanking power for all those freedoms that contain no alternative. In this sense the actions of Endre Tót (as in the video *TÓTaIJOYS*, 1975-76, Fig. 45) are tautological, or rather possess the stereotype of the smile, a little like selfies. In them we see the joy of crossing a street, of getting into



**Figure 45.** Endre Tót, *TÓTaIJOYS* (video), 1975-76, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

one's car and driving off, of lying on our living room sofa, of paying with a credit card, of sitting down in a bar and drinking an aperitif. This list of actions of freedom is in fact obscene, as if it were the degrees and virtues of civilisation – it is a moment of humour and a way of circumventing power that is among the most crystalline and efficient but also one of the most inexorable available to us.

Who could possibly dare to claim that we are not free? All the actions we perform are guarantee and proof that we are free and this is the charade, the stage awaiting our applause and that of our friends as they are gradually informed and updated. The first task of any power system is to organise shows, staging reality as a parade. But in truth, every form of power tries above all to form its applauders, a public capable of applauding, ever more and only trained and accus-



**Figure 46.** Kálmán Sziujártó, *Untitled (Finger)*, 1971, ACB Galéria, Budapest

tomed to applauding – a professional public. On a number of occasions, the police, even abroad after Tót emigrated, stepped in to block and suspend these blissful walks of his.

If the various “degrees of freedom” get cancelled by rain, police or time, for artists it is essential to be able to perform, or have performed, their action, in order to express themselves in complete clandestinity and within a context which ensures that words remain innocuous and do not scandalise. In many cases, to elude control and suspicions it is enough to arrange images misleadingly, or in such a way that they easily escape the scarce visual perspicacity and the poor visual education of the authorities. The sequence of the raised, the downed, then raised again thumb by Kálmán Sziujártó, *Untitled (Finger)*, 1971 (Fig. 46), is a prime example of how to circumvent an official ban on something, of an optical trick illustrating the mental process necessary to avoid

forbiddance or incrimination. The first thumb, in a raised position, reminds us that only assent is legitimate and tolerated (like applause). Dissent is neither admissible nor welcome, unless you want to incur fracture, wounding, breaking of the thumb (as underlined in the second image of *Untitled (Finger)*, which leaves no space for any doubt). But there is a third way, a ruse, which is part of the evasion techniques and avoiding the reaction of the authorities: the raised thumb we see (third image) is in fact a reversed thumb that appears to point upwards. The artist simply switched the image upside down and what is actually presented is a misleading reflection, clearly a fake image much like a reflection in a mirror where left is right and right is left. In this case (and in how many others?) the sign of assent is a mistake, an optical trick, the real sign being unequivocally a sign of condemnation, dissent, refusal.

Exchanged glances, smiles and handshakes all come together in many of these artists' works, given that one of the most recurrent political and poetical motifs is the chain that links and must link shared thoughts and passions between people, extending over fences and borders (András Baranyay, *Handshake Action I-IV*, 1972 – Fig. 47). Within this group of artists, and group in this case means more than just an affinity of ideas, friendship becomes a chain of solidarity and resistance, a recognition between themselves from the risk of being isolated, of dissolving, of vanishing, of ever being able to assert their own identity. On the basis of this friendly relationship they organise private exhibitions in their homes, where they simulate the rituals of the art world, the gallery, the vernissage, the encounters: dramatically they simulate freedom of expression. But although in this Hungarian adventure there are countless tributes to handshakes – or rather to gestures, to the clandestine and silent language in which a network of relations is woven with glances, smiles, embrac-



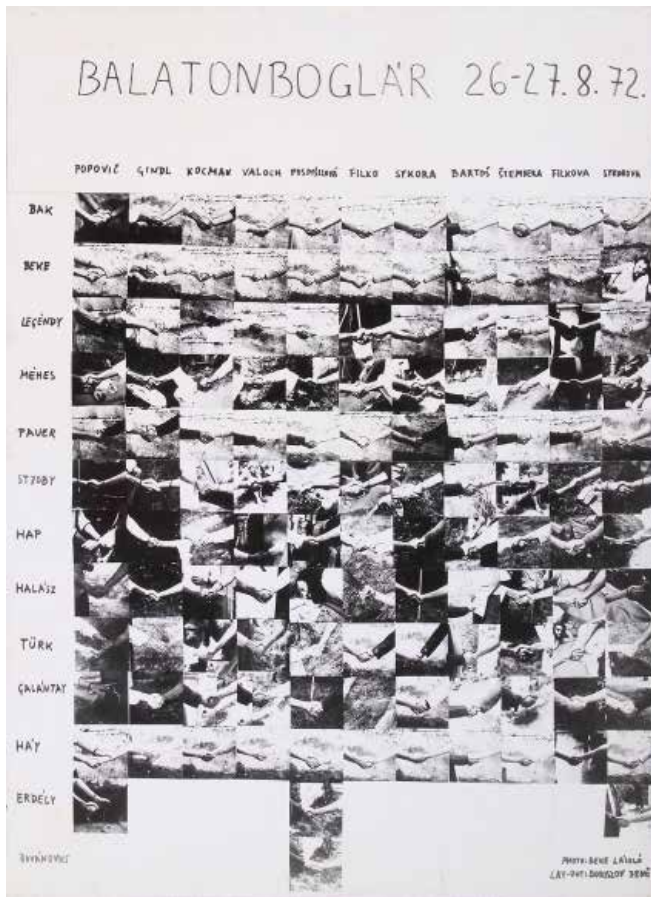
**Figure 47.** András Baranyay, *Handshake Action I-II*, 1972, Vintage Galérie, Budapest



András Baranyay, *Handshake Action III-IV*, 1972, Vintage Galérie, Budapest

es – there is also an awareness of the inauthenticity of language which is emptied, consumed, degraded by the rhetoric and unreality of power. The handshake is an expression of the linguistic power of the body, the body is an authentic language that can, without being overheard by unfamiliar ears, say things and circumvent the schematism and stereotypes of language. The body tells of unease, of rebellion, of discouragement, of affection. One of the motifs underpinning perhaps all the works in this show is precisely the body – that which always speaks in silence is the body.

The work *Tableau of László Beke's Handshaking action*, 1972 (Fig. 48), by László Beke, is a great photographic crossword of artists shaking hands. It tells of a meeting which took place between Hungarian and Slovakian artists during a holiday in the summer of 1972, at Balatonboglár, with the intention of showing solidarity and building relations, authentic ties based on a shared love for art, also as an answer to the outrageous involvement of Hungarian troops in the 1968 occupation of Prague. Located on the outskirts of Budapest, the chapel of Balatonboglár was one of the most legendary secret and clandestine spaces for the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, and was in fact closed by



**Figure 48.** László Beke, *Tableau of László Beke's Handshaking action*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

bubbles and their closeness as friends speak louder than any political declaration, whilst being beyond the reach of any suspicion. Besides the mockery embodied by the soap bubbles, the bubbles of air, what strikes most in this video is the closeness of the two men, their glances, signs, complicity – once more it is the bodies which are speaking. Exemplary in this sense was the hitchhiking trip made to Italy in search of new artist friends, to exchange and gather material, made by György Galántai (*Pacco dall'Italia* – Fig.

the authorities the following year. On an equal plane in terms of fraternity, exchange, cross-boundary and cross-restriction relations, is also the action filmed in the video *Conversation between East and West*, 1978 (Fig. 49), in which two friends – the Hungarian Gábor Bódy and the Cologne artist Marcel Odembach – enact a hypothetical meeting with the aim of holding a “serious talk”, in public, where they would be exposed to a word for word censorship by the authorities. They therefore limit their exchange to blowing soap bubbles at one another. As it turns out, those soap



**Figure 49.** Gábor Bódy e Marcel Odenbach, *Conversation between East and West* (video), 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 50.** György Galántai, *Pacco dall'Italia*, 1979, ARTPOOL, Budapest

50) in the summer of 1979 (from June 21st to August 21st). The trip involved meetings with Ugo Carrega, Michele Perfetti, Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, and above all with Adriano Spatola at the Mulino di Bazzano, and with him in Parma with Romano Peli. The itinerary was one of exchanges of ideas and works, of information on the reality of artistic research in Italy and of consolidation of relations and friendships. On his return Galántai intended to exhibit all the material he had gathered, exchanged and received, in a show entitled “Pacco dall’Italia”, including also the greeting cards and personal messages, as an account of his artistic and friendly adventure. But permission was not granted by the Budapest art academy, which did not even deign to examine the material in the conviction that Italian art was “Fascist in nature”. From that moment the show existed in hiding, disseminated in the post, in peripheral spaces, cellars, in exchanges of publicity information. It was transformed into something elusive, able to slip through the net of official control. The highest and most paradoxical moment of the entire operation takes place in Budapest’s Heroes’ Square with *Homage a Vera Mukhina* (Fig. 51), in



which György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay pose as the famous Vera Mukhina sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* together with Cavellini, over from Italy to see them, writing on their chalk-white clothes a list of “degenerate” artists. The paradox lies in the fact that, as he writes them, Cavellini proclaims the names out loud – and therefore also the freedom of art – through amplification speakers positioned in the square for a scheduled official celebration, with the excuse that he is helping the local technicians and the police in the task of testing the system. His pronouncement of first names, in Italian, avoids any suspicion, it being to all those present just an incomprehensible tongue twister.



**Figure 51.** György Galántai e Júlia Klaniczay, *Homage a Vera Muhina*, 1979, ARTPOOL, Budapest

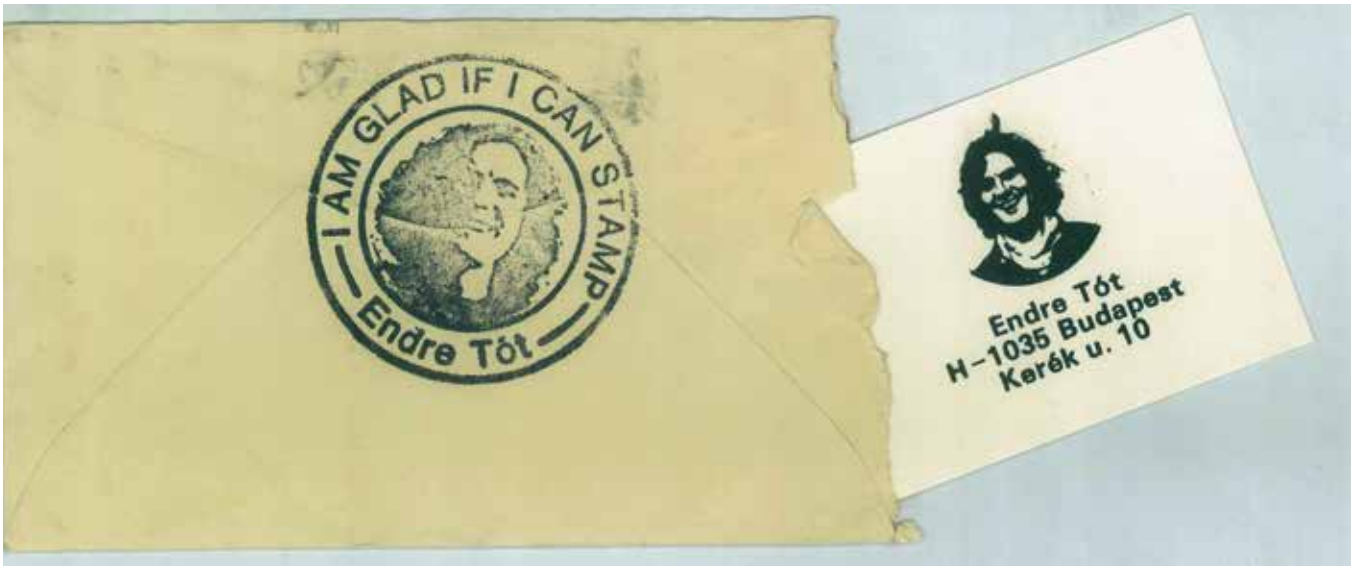
### **III. «Mail Art»**

An essential technique for evasion is “Mail art” which, through the postal system, enables artists to journey to free lands, across borders, iron curtains, sentry boxes, customs, simply by posting letters and postcards that appear innocuous to the eyes of the censors. Their culpability is in the fact that they are travelling and is so blatantly obvious that they pass unseen – letters and messages which hide nothing except for the subversive joy at their condition of “travellers”, “evaders”. Through this subterfuge it is the postal journey itself which becomes a sortie, an evasion, an unpunished wandering, free across the world, right under the very nose of the authorities, blatantly deriding all barriers, all bans, all borders. Postcards fly, they are always messages, greetings. Everything about mail art is subversion in full view of power, with the satisfaction of roaming the world, travelling and overcoming all borders, all bans, to see friends, be with them. The subversion lies also in the act of licking the stamps with the president’s image, the uniforms and symbols of propaganda, and attaching them face down, or in using a fake stamp with zero value. Sending postcards means ignoring walls and borders to go on a journey around the world, an impertinent and brazen sortie, with the satisfaction of it being authorised and stamped by the authorities. In every power system, writing and sending postcards – even the act of writing itself – is a liberating action, something subversive which allows repeated escapes. Mail art ranks as one of the great chapters of evasion techniques. Enabling artists to overcome iron curtains, walls, barriers, postcards are in themselves – by the fact that they travel – an act of evasion and adventure. Postcards also have a front and a back, are marvellously reversible. By travelling, the image – along with the postal marks and the stamps – abolishes distance and, above all,



is a message that reaches its destination almost without fail. From the totalitarian regimes in which they lived, some artists managed to stay in touch with the entire world, thereby remaining alive. They disobeyed the order to remain confined within their national borders, within custody, simply by flying postcards and letters through the skies. And with the added mockery – by virtue of the efficiency of the service – of being escorted in their escape, their wandering, their sneaking out from under the very nose of the power which stamped its approval and which was unable to see the obvious subterfuge, which was not capable of focussing on something happening so in its face.

The postal marks attest that frontiers and states have been crossed. Mail art does not need to allude because it is in itself an allusion, an incarnate allegory of freedom. Container and content coincide intimately in these works. And should a letter look suspicious, clearly it will be opened, so many of these artists send envelopes containing nothing, or simply a greeting or a visiting card, thereby disconcerting the censors, leaving the controls perplexed and derided. Postcards instead hide nothing, they are transparent, showing everything as they play with their own language – the journey and the fact that the chosen images are *ready made*, able to allude without leaving any space for suspicions or accusations or insinuations of there being ulterior motives. In truth the greetings, the signature, the address, are in themselves the message, always containing the power of the greeting from a distance, with the difference that postcards arrive in the hands of the recipients, embracing them, finish their journey, enter into their homes in a manner that is not otherwise permitted to the sender. Postcards have the privilege of being light, innocuous and innocent, all things which render them highly efficacious – every postcard crystallises a moment, though its greetings, its



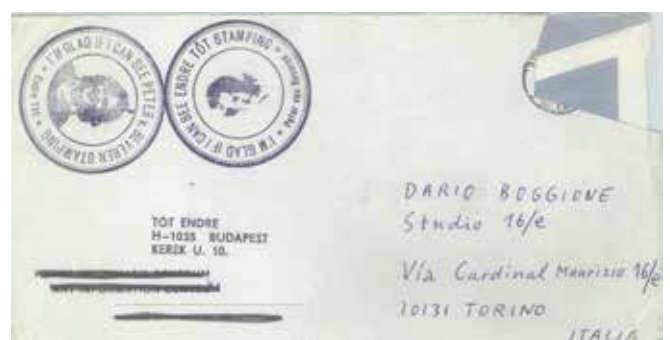
Hey! Look! Here are beautifull  
 new zer0000000000000000  
 from Hungary - Endre Tot 1974

**Figure 52.** Endre Tót, *Mail Art*, 1970, Garrera collection, Rome

embraces, the relation between image and text, how the stamp is placed, when it is upside down no one can object even though it is an effigy of power. Likewise, if one has chosen to write using a red pen, as if it were blood, or adding a succession of zeros and cancelling everything, no one understands and this becomes an allusion to the condition of

I write you  
 because you are there  
 I am here

Endre Tót  
 H-1035 Budapest  
 Kerék u. 10



paralysis in which one finds oneself – the zero and nothing being a degree of freedom and guaranteed folly. Among the most ingenious and vital mail art operations are those by Endre Tót – envelopes, either empty or with their front stamped by the artist himself, cheekily smiling, accompanied by a statement at how happy he is to be sending letters. At other times he simply includes a visiting card, the message being the envelope itself, its journeying with the postal marks and stamps. Alternatively, the envelope could contain (one of his most poetical and absolute examples in these cases) a note with the short phrase “I write to you because I am here and you are there” (Fig. 52), underlining the letter’s strength to overcome, tear down the distances and walls in the way of his affections. Yet again the letter intuitively reaches a friend, arrives at his side like a homing pigeon, as part of him forever. In all these cases, these letters containing nothing were for the censorship a mockery and a source of bemusement. In some cases, they contained a slip



**Da sinistra a destra.**

**Figure 53.** Endre Tót, *From Cologne Some Jecke Dinge To You, Everybody And Nobody*, 1983, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

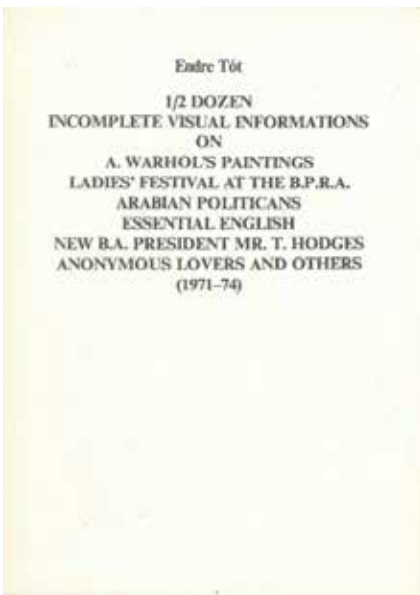
**Figure 54.** Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can write sentences*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

**Figure 55.** Endre Tót, *Book of an extremely glad artist*, Rainer Verlag, Berlino, 1981, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 56.** Endre Tót, *Rainproof Ideas*, 1975, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

of paper with, literally, nothing... an infinite succession of zeros. Reproducing one's own works in postcard format, publishing them in this way (Fig. 53/54/55/56), is the perfect stratagem for avoiding the gallery circuit and the art system, whilst at the same time circulating image-icons that spread their message more widely thanks to the facilitation brought by printing. With their strong penetrative potential and the rapidity with



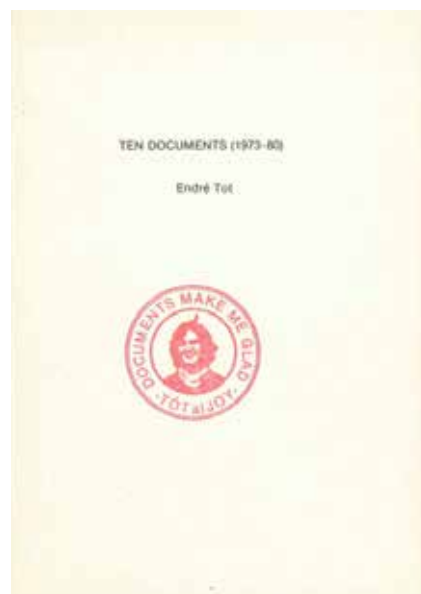
**Figure 59.** Endre Tót, *On the next page I shall say something*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 57 left.** Endre Tót, *1/2 Dozen Incomplete Visual Information On...*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

**Figure 58 top.** Endre Tót, *One Dozen Rain Postcards*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

**Figure 60.** Endre Tót, *Ten Documents (1973-80)*, 1980, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest





**Figure 61 top.** Endre Tót, *Postcard*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

**Figure 62 left.** Endre Tót, *Possessive Adjective*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

which they exchange hands, postcards are among those art diffusion tools which are able to reach further than painting, installation, video, and above all they escape control. The use of postcards is therefore not just a tribute to mail art but also a consequence of the urgency to speed images and visual operations up, to multiply them (Fig. 57/58/59/60/61/62).

In the 1960s and '70s there were even some artists who tampered with authentic postcards by introducing or camouflaging disrespectful signs or symbols. Using collage inserts of two poodles where



**Figure 63.** György Kemény, *The idea of replacing the "Chain Bridge"*, detail, 1971. s.l.

the two lions would normally be, György Kemény (*The idea of replacing the "Chain Bridge"*, 1971 – Fig. 63) tampers with the official image of the Budapest Chain Bridge, replacing its two lions with two poodles in such a way that, precisely because the

bridge is a stereotype image everyone is accustomed to, is invisible. The postcard in question passed completely unnoticed by the controls, but not for the sender or the recipient – it became a mockery, a grimace, a derision, the revealing of the real identity of power through the simple force of mail art (in some cases tampered postcards were mixed up with authentic ones directly at the sales points, thereby entering the official channels as proper “disturbances” or ideological “errors”). Szombathy uses



**Figure 64.** Bálint Szombathy, *Poetry – Language I*, 1977, ACB Galérie, Budapest

a postal mark of his own invention on his postcards, with a graphic juxtaposition between “language” and “poetry”. The juxtaposition is clear, with two different postal marks in different colours and with distinct typographical lettering. The language he employs belongs to the unauthentic, rigid, boxed in, repetitive kind, while the poetic register escapes this grid and is an invitation to freedom, authenticity, diversity – the realm of language is closed, while that of poetry is open. In the series of postcards *Poetry – Language* (Fig. 64), Szombathy sometimes adds a question mark in brackets to the term poetry, to convey doubt, the non-rigidity of acquired truths, plurality of identity. The Szombathy-art postal mark is the juxtaposition between the ranks of militarism and language on the one hand and the upper case, luminous green on the other – isolated, different, outside the scheme of things – which interrupts the sequence, indicates areas of freedom and experience within

the poetical sphere, where to inhabit and live poetically. The use of the postal mark ensures that the message cannot be grasped by the censorship, it being such a clear and subtle message all at once that it appears inoffensive and beyond suspicion. The two words appear innocuous, language and poetry, seemingly non-political terms. But we know that the language is only the language of power. Even though it contains nothing negative, no incitement to guerrilla warfare, it is in fact a profound reminder (as in the two postcards – Fig. 65 - sent to the curators for this exhibition, urging for a sole preoccupation: poetry).



**Figure 65.** Bálint Szombathy, *Poetry – Language*, 2019, Garrera collection, Roma



#### IV. «Psychosis of Power»

Through apparently innocuous or neutral photographs, as well as visual accounts, there is always an allusion to reality perceived as a succession of bans conveying the stress of control, of the watchful eye, with a proliferation of the images denoting power that stand as painful alerts of the existing situation, of daily life. Railway tracks leading nowhere, boundary stones, fencing, alarm or warning signs – the signs that appear in urban areas become a continuous allegory and allusion. It would seem that all of life is punctuated by the icons of power, from images of Lenin cropping up in the most unexpected places to the feeling conveyed by artists on seeing roads that are blocked, rendering escape impossible. This art simply reproduces reality, seemingly without conveying any dissenting message. But the chosen symbols of reality, those danger signs which are so emblematic of a reality characterised by neurosis



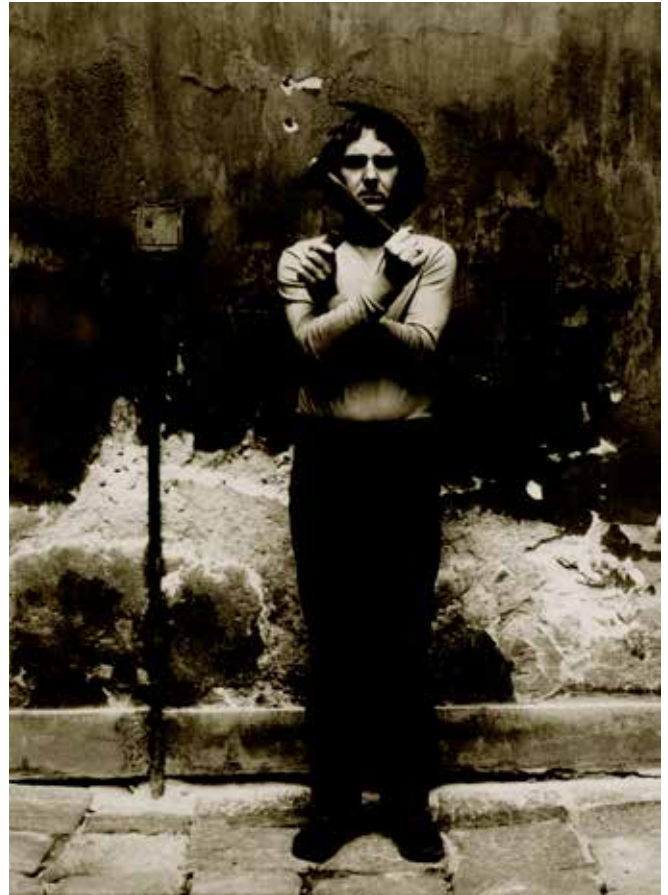
**Figure 66.** Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Sickle & Hammer*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

and a feeling of imprisonment, are in fact capable of secretly illustrating a state of mind and condition of total political unease. In the sequence *Sickle & Hammer* (1973 – Fig. 66), by Sándor Pinczehelyi, the ambiguity is all in the simulation of the parade, in the choreography of the regime. For the authorities it is impossible to understand whether he is play-acting, displaying those symbols of power as an act of buffoonery, making propaganda or acting the fool (probably the latter), or if he is exercising, diminishing himself beneath a cruel,



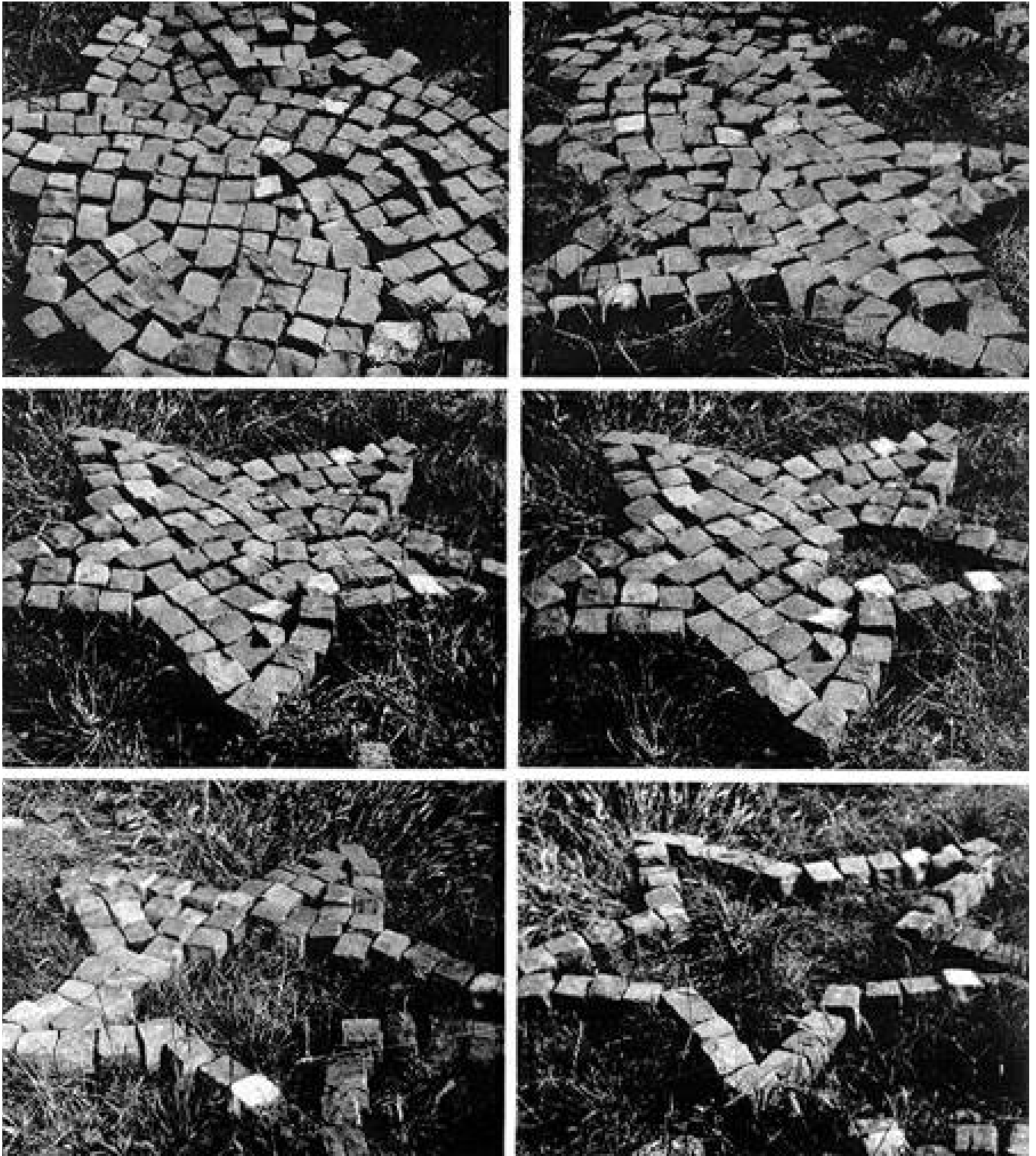


Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Sickle & Hammer I*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Sickle & Hammer III*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

threatening ostentation of power, or even if, simply by posing with these two universal symbols, he is inexorably registering the space and limitations of the incarceration which they trace, which any political symbol ultimately traces. As in any great artistic exploit, this operation contains also the heartbreak over symbols which brought with them a dream of justice, freedom, equality, but which are instead associated with exhaustion from work and excessive oppression. Confronted with the hammer and sickle, and with the artist's impenetrable expression, we measure both the dream and the failure, the aspiration and the vulgarity of reality, the ideal beauty of the revolution and the real inadequacy of its application. But they are also a poetical invitation to not give up on that legacy, even though everything about the contrast between light and shade, as well as the ambiguity and the gaze of the artist, point to there being no hope. Interpreted also as a choreography of power, this is a homegrown,



**Figure 67.** Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Star Cobblestone*, 1972, property of the artist

childlike staging of the choreographed parades in which the symbols of power are emptied of their true ideological content, reduced to fluttering banners and therefore caught up in an irreversible process of power branding. One of the sensitive issues is precisely the degradation of the symbols of power and the betrayal of what they were supposed to represent. In his images of the star made out of cobblestones (*Star Cobblestone*, 1972 – Fig. 67) Pinczehleyi represents all the revolutionary power hardened within the emblem of authority and therefore within the reality of power – a trajectory which begins with the urgency and the freedom of cobblestones and ends with the well-traced architecture of the star which is emptied of its potential. The artist seems to ask himself when a dream becomes idiom or nightmare, or why a symbol becomes a brand. This show is in fact crossed in its entirety by wonderful symbols that have become brands, that have been degraded, such as the red star in the snow revealing all its black soul. Maybe the overall theme of these artistic exercises is in fact the slaughter of symbols. In *Makò Projects*, from 1980 (Fig. 68), Pinczehleyi stigmatises both the degradation of symbols and their banalisation, their exploitation, their hollowing out in the name of the only real power:

**Figure 68.** Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Makò Projects*, 1980, property of the artist



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capital. The star which has ended up in the shopping net alongside Coca-Cola could either be a starfish or a revolutionary star, it makes no difference. The two can exist perfectly alongside one another because capital accepts everything, invests in everything, mixes everything up. And then there is the relaxed holiday mood of a pleasant outing into the countryside, or to the lake, by bike. No reason to complain. The greatest danger for symbols is to slip into banality, the worst way to shatter them is to continue to display them (and inevitably knock them down, as happens also in this show, into the net of souvenirs and nostalgic bazaars).

Yet again it would appear that Hungarian artists are investigating the spectator's neuroses, measuring their injuries and degree of conditioning. These and other images serve to highlight also our own traumas, like a mirror into which we gaze. The unit of measurement used by Tamás St. Auby (Szentjóby) would be a sincere tribute to Minimal Art and the geometric absolute were it not for the fact that the object in question – in bad shape and dented, within the short-circuit between appearance and title (*New Unit for Measurement*, 1965 – Fig. 69), recalled and recalls to any visitor quite a different object of daily use for the police: the “unit of measurement” of the exercise and in the



**Figure 69.** Tamás St. Auby (Szentjóby), *New Unit for Measurement*, 1965, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

exercise of power. When they view this piece, spectators think of a police baton and the misunderstanding is a traumatic indicator, revealing the spectator's traumas. The relation between appearance and title becomes sarcastic as we in fact find ourselves confronted by a new unit of measurement which guarantees cleanliness and obedience: if the ideal of geometric perfection is compromised by the contusive use of the tool when beating the heads and shoulders of citizens, this is compensated by the order and cleanliness which it achieves. The political allusion is more in the wicked minds of the visitors than in that of the artist himself, who allows the object – in its simplicity and brutality – to defuse the visitors' fixations. Even our dreams are political, we cannot escape the symptoms. The souvenir snapshot *Falce e martello* (1973 – Fig. 70), for example, taken in Florence by Katalin Ladi during their trip to Italy, is an additional chapter in the artistic research of Bálint Szombathy, whose gaze next to a hammer and sickle drawn onto an Italian wall contains, already and inevitably, the awareness of the destiny of that symbol – the illusions, disappointments, snares, betrayals associated with it and which are, and will be, part of the history of Italy. The artist conveys his irony with his doubtful expression, his greater awareness, knowledge and conscience compared to us, even though he must have been touched to find that sign on a wall in Florence, with all its antique



**Figure 70.** Bálint Szombathy, *Falce e martello*, Firenze, 1973, collection of the artist

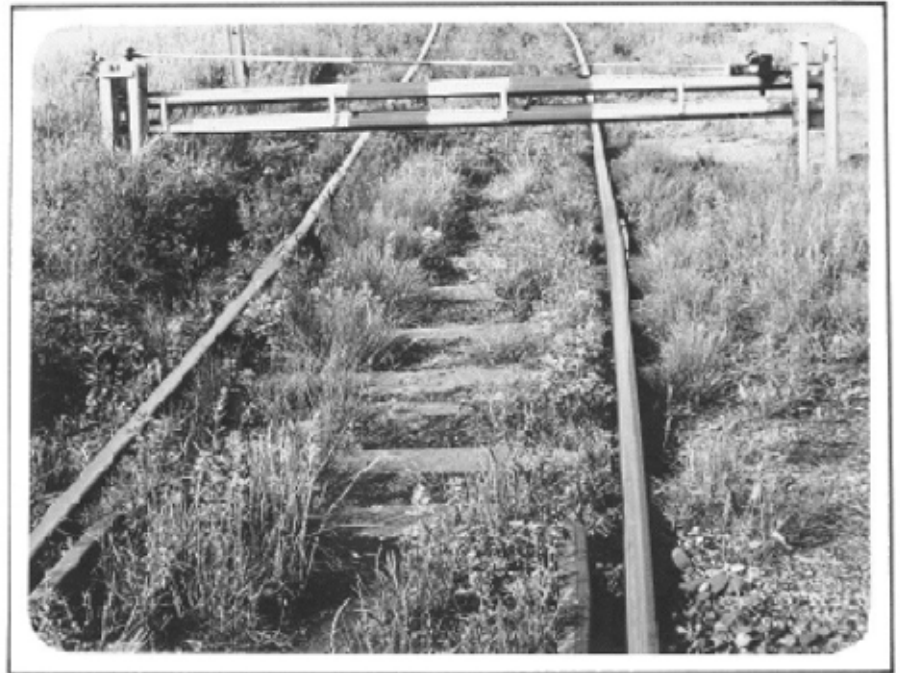
freshness. Moved by the iconic and subversive power of a degree of freedom of that sign on that wall, by the bravery of that graffiti, still uncorrupted prior to its great fall in history and the palaces of power. The hammer and sickle graffiti discovered in Italy has an authenticity which could only bring a smile to the face of the very young artist Szombathy, who in fact stands next to that symbol as if he were returning from a journey into the future he has already been on in its entirety. Memory is clearly what enchants him in that find, but also the feeling of ingenuousness conveyed by the symbol, the innocence derived from the hope and trust of whoever traced it. Szombathy can only stand by that wall in a state of doubt, bewilderment, mild melancholy. If even for just a moment he were able to return to, recover in that sign an ancient, primordial flavour, free of the suffocating weight of history and its betrayals to the extent of being able to read in it an



**Figure 71.** Tibor Csiky, *Bicycles*, 1973/82, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

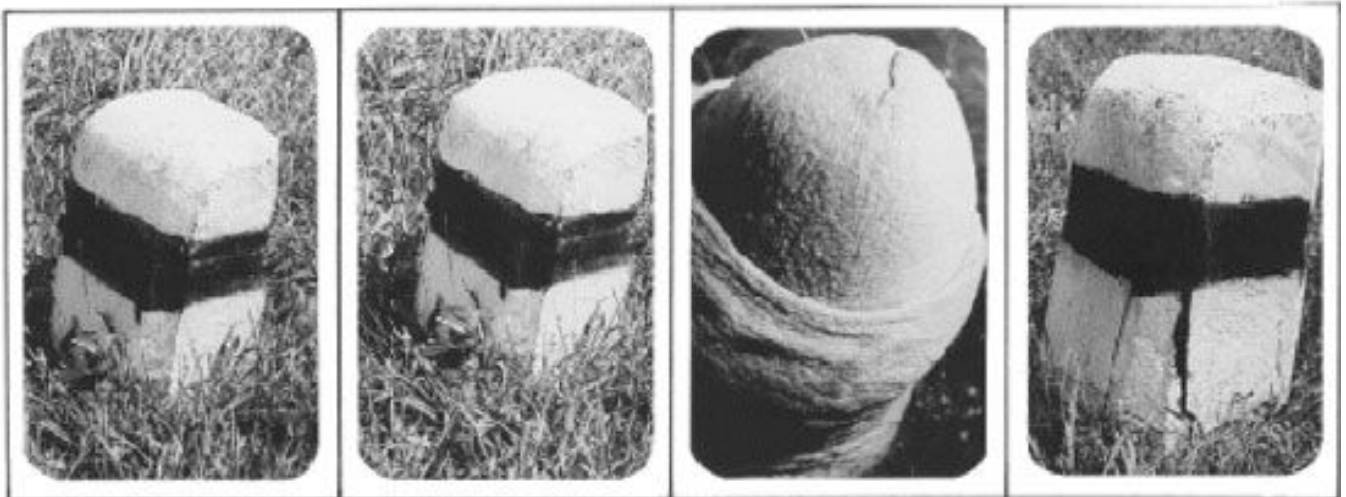
invitation to freedom, justice, equality, the promise of a better world – as a tourist in Florence, with its Giotto's, Raphael's, Michelangelo's, finding also this fragment of his fatherland and the nightmare which has seemingly followed him all that way – he can only stand amazed.

Friend or enemy – in a system of power they are perfectly the same – are always watching, lying in wait. They watch, guard, control, monitor, supervise, as Tibor Csiky reminds us in his *Bicycles* (1973/82 - Fig.71). In reality there are only images of power, which is why they are not perceived as a threatening presence, a sleepless eye, a constant danger hanging over us. Their function is to make us lose our memory of power, promising calm and oblivion instead, or even becoming icons and discreet signs of reassurance, a paternalistic presence. To perceive them traumatically, and indeed to perceive the whole of reality this way, is one of the highest degrees of awareness. When does an image finally frighten us, or disturb us? When do we perceive, within reality, the threatening shadow of an all-powerful father who does not let us get away with anything? The eye of these artists perceives signals everywhere, perceives reality in its worse possible sense – a reality in which there is always a presence of power. The photographic images by Csiky (such as *Danger! High Voltage!*, 1973 – Fig. 72; *Barrier*, 1973 – Fig. 73; *Parallels*, 1973 – Fig. 74; *Stone Banister*, 1973 – Fig. 76; *Ring*, 1974 – Fig. 75) are in fact only apparently innocuous. Again, these are operations intended to dodge any accusations which might come from the censorship – they could easily be classified as absolute realism, still lifes, stylistic exercises, elements of landscape. They are in fact all danger signs, or rather traumatic perceptions of reality that is also a psychological trauma – railway crossings, barriers, bans, threats, warnings, border pillars, all symptoms of a phallogocratic, imperative authority. A simple stroll in fact becomes an account of the profound reality in which he lives, revealing at the same time the mindset of those who built it. In these walks everything, as Baudelaire would have said, is allegory. The idea of



**Figure 72.** Tibor Csiky, *Danger! High Voltage!*, 1973, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

**Figure 73.** Tibor Csiky, *Barrier*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 74 top.** Tibor Csiky, *Parallels*, 1973/58, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

**Figure 75 left.** Tibor Csiky, *Ring*, 1974/15, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

**Figure 76 right.** Tibor Csiky, *Stone Banister*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest





**Figure 77.** Tibor Hajas, *Self Fashion Show*, video, 1976, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRBLAZavqc0>

escape, of travel, distance, of the whistle of a departing train, of reaching new lands and territories, is converted here into the impossibility of travel and in its prohibition, occlusion, in the throwing up of walls and boundaries, in a non-free passage, a railway leading nowhere, with no longer a horizon (for pretend escapes there is organised travel with its specific holidays and agencies). Likewise, the many stone markers placed at crossroads, the boundary stones like erect phalluses controlling borders and boundaries, all become allegorical, to the extent that – as Csiky bitterly underlines – even playing alone with model trains can be a dangerous act. Reality is never recorded but is always, inevitably, manipulated. Tibor Hajas illustrates this clearly in his work *Self Fashion Show* (1976 – Fig. 77), a documentary shot among passers-by in the streets of Budapest and

therefore with the intention of filming everyday reality. Some passers-by are asked to pose in front of the camera, in silence – the off-screen voice we hear was added in the cutting room and, in its pretence to create a show, comes over as exceptionally cruel, unpleasant and disrespectful to them. The laws that govern showbusiness and viewing shares have no respect for human dignity. The documentary manages to touch on three major issues surrounding the question of propaganda and reality. On the one hand there is the manipulation of images, particularly in the sound commentary which, having been inserted subsequently, deforms, modifies, “colours” the images for us viewers, rendering the subjects being filmed vulnerable, like during a detention by the police when accusers are licensed to be dissonant, to mock those they are interrogating. Then there is the consubstantial inauthenticity of the moment someone knows they are being filmed – the mechanical tool (camera, television, portable phones, etc.) immediately produces a discrepancy, a pretence... anything that is filmed is by definition false, and filming is inherently a performance. Thirdly – and this is one of the most poetical and subtle points of Hajas’ work – that notwithstanding the verbal manipulation and the acting of those being filmed, the mechanical subconscious of the camera manages to capture the expressions, clothes, the street, the social and historical climate; that notwithstanding everything the images manage to reveal themselves and tell us something real about what is being filmed and would like to manipulate. This is a discrepancy which avoids the control of power and which, if we switch off the audio, immediately conveys another message. Power seeks complete control over images because images can be elusive and, in themselves, a form of evasion. *Centaur*, by Tamás St. Auby (Szentjóby), 1973-1975 (Fig. 78), is packaged as a typically orthodox regime propaganda film, with its workers, citizens, families, factories, all shot within these contexts but with a soundtrack mounted separately – made with the help of his friends – which makes those people appear to be revealing their discontent, delusion, separation from their

expectations and appearance, thereby revealing the true reality of the images we see: a grey, unjust and suffocating world. The murmurings in the audio tell us, like bubbles in a comic strip, the unuttered thoughts, giving form to gazes, the resignation, the greyness that is in the footage. The work constructs the dialogues and thoughts of the desire for change and of an urgency, a wish, a hope for freedom. This is not precisely an evasion technique; any evasion having been thwarted when the regime censorship immediately blocked the film. It could have been another chapter, one which featured all the works that have been censored and suppressed under all regimes – to have the opportunity to conduct a census in that respect, to render them justice in an exhibition, would indeed be a nice dream for a future project.



**Figure 78.** Tamás St. Auby (Szentjóby), *Centaur*, video, 1973-1975, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

## V. «Invitation to Guerrilla»



**Figure 79.** Sándor Pinczehleyi, *The Cobblestone is the Weapon of the Proletariat*, 1974-1988, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

This section showcases the desire or the dreams for revolt, the thinly-veiled appeals for subversion and rebellion. In fact, we are confronted by a pile of cobblestones – or sampietrini, as they are known in Rome – or pebbles. What at first glance appears to be an account of effective and efficient maintenance works in the squares and streets of the cities of power, is in reality a finger fiercely pointed at munitions and weapons of revolt (Sándor Pinczehleyi, *The Cobblestone is the Weapon of the Proletariat*, 1974-1988, Fig. 79). Having grasped their symbolism, the authorities moved quickly to safeguard their power and simply banned the use of pebbles in art shows. Under every power system, violence is forbidden, power systems are pacifist because in this way they stamp out dissent by making dissent a crime. Peaceful marches



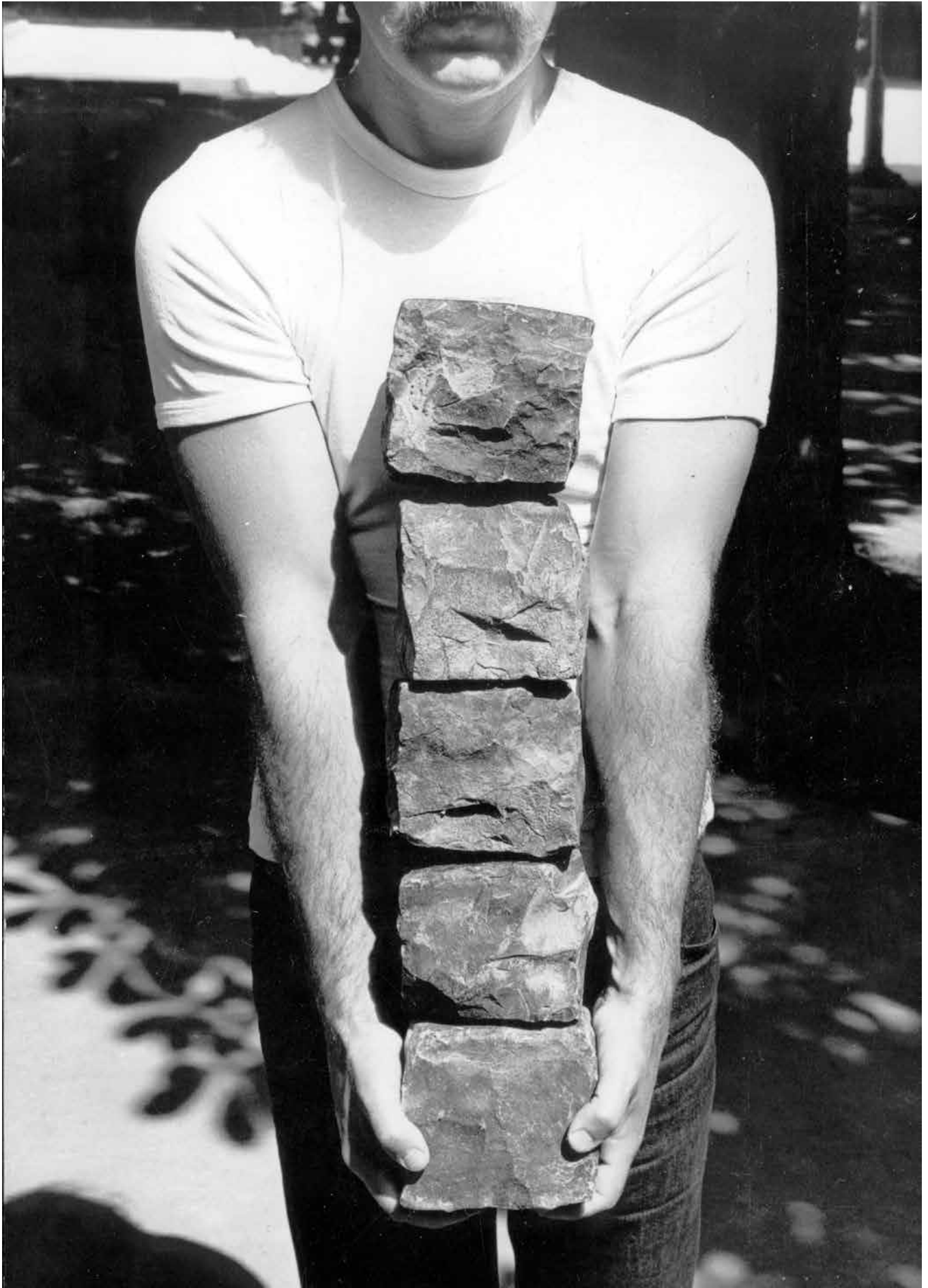
**Figure 80.** Gyula Pauer, *In Memoriam of Revolution*, 1956 – 2006, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

where “no incidents are recorded” are the illusion and the other side of power, which exploits pacifism as a means to checkmate, corner any revolt with its back against the wall. All protests are therefore criminal and outlawed because they jeopardise the established order. A remarkable installation in this sense is the one by Gyula Pauer entitled *In Memoriam of 1956 Revolution* (2006 – Fig. 80), where pebbles (or, as is the case here, sampietrini) remember and commemorate all rages, revolts, hopes and dreams of all peoples. Each of these pebbles carries with it the memory of the 1956 revolution but also of the Paris Commune, terrorist organisations, street demonstrations, the resistances that have taken place and continue to take place throughout our history. Likewise, the disappointments and the betrayals, the broken promises of struggle and justice, are here represented by ridiculous papier-mâché pretend pebbles. The work is dated 2006 because with some works it was not possible to bring them to completion – to fulfil their expressivity – until now, but mostly because it was in the artist’s intentions from the beginning that works should “continue” to bear witness to a history which is not yet concluded. History, alas, is never concluded, as



**Figure 81.** Gyula Gulyás, *Portable Cobblestone*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

we have learnt from Elsa Morante: Fascism is eternal, all totalitarisms are eternal, the Shoah is eternal, the scandal of injustices and the unease of art are eternal. When confronted by horrors and suffering there is no possibility to archive, close the accounts, ease consciences. At a certain point a ban is introduced on exhibiting works with pebbles. Such actions are clearly an incitement to revolt and therefore viewed with suspicion by the institutions. One ruse, a technique for circumventing the ban (such as Gyula Gulyás' *Portable Cobblestone*, 1972 – Fig. 81) is to transform them into sculptures, as if in a tribute to the perfect geometry of certain Minimal Art pieces or, conversely, an exercise in realism by reproducing in the minutest detail even the shadows and reflections cast by the sun on a pebble – again alluding to the hollowing out of the principles of struggle behind Socialism. Disguise is possible within an innocuous object, one that can even be used in exhibitions as part of the furnishings or placed on a surface, an ornamental monolith. In Sándor Pinczehleyi's sequence, *Five Cobblestones* (1976 – Fig. 82), the ban on exhibiting cobblestones is sidestepped by the apparently innocuous action of a worker, in this case performing the task of repaving a street or a square. With the action decontextualized, it is hard to establish a motive for his moving these cobblestones. It is impossible to know for certain whether this is a Socialist celebration of the diligent worker toiling for the common good as he helps repave the street or if he is a subversive, a dissident, putting together an arsenal for a street barricade or an assault action. The dangerous, explosive theme of the *sampietrino* is declined in a comical, subtly ironical manner, through the continuous exchange

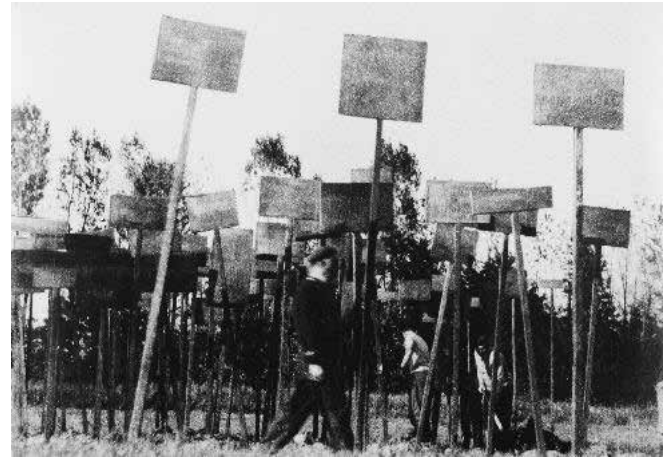
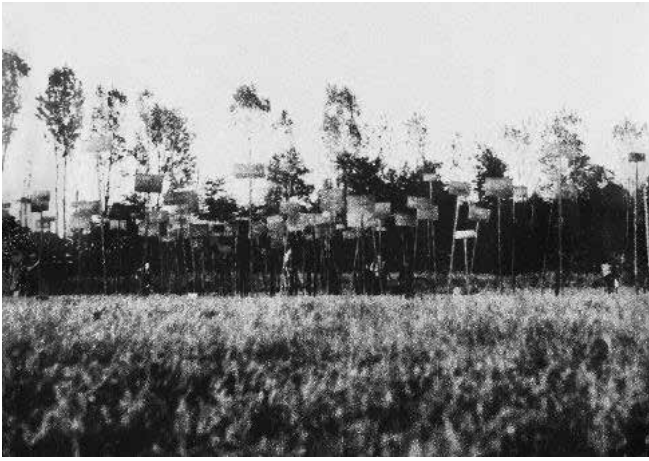


**Figure 82.** Sándor Pinczehleyi, *Five cobblestone*, 1976, collection of the artist



**Figure 83.** Dóra Maurer, *What Can One Do With a Paving-Stone?*, 1971, Vintage Galéria, Budapest





**Figure 84.** Pauer Gyula, *Demonstration Sign Forest I e II*, 1978, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

between consenting worker and dissident revolutionary. In reality the two figures are complementary, two sides of the same character, of the same coin. A parody of the good workers depicted in realist propaganda paintings lies in the very representation of the exertion of work, and never more than here do the smile and proud gait of the worker become more ambiguous and disquieting. An analogous humour is present also in *What Can One Do With a Paving-Stone?* (1971 – Fig. 83), by Dóra Maurer, in which the artist pretends to be ignorant of the real, dangerously semic – and therefore political – function of the sampietrino, by simulating all the nice things it is possible to do with cobblestones: you can hang them around your neck and drag them along, use them as the corner of a hearth, as a toy or a doll to be nurtured, a present for friends, an instrument for training in throwing weights. For the purpose of derision, cobblestones have a thousand uses other than the one the artist has in mind – this pebble is therefore innocent, how can it possibly be conceived as a weapon of subversion to be hurled in squares, or something which generates fear even just by exhibiting it?

In *Demonstration Sign Forest I and II* (1978 – Fig. 84) we see before us, both negatively and melancholically, a cortege of ghosts and invisibles. A procession, a protest of desires, as in a dream, a moving forest with

behind each of those signs a person unable to carry them. Through this work, Pauer highlights the hidden potential and the impotence of thousands of thwarted desires for dissent, thousands of protest boards but also thousands of demonstrators who do not demonstrate, who are unable to protest or render themselves visible. It is as if we are seeing dissent only in dream form – those signs are not carried, this is the resting ground of all the dissatisfaction which cannot show itself, which does not come to light. Those who should be carrying those dissatisfactions are absent, there are not even any slogans, the protest is potential, does not take form – the perception of repeated abortions of dissent, the counter-revolutionary potential perennially suspended, unborn signs, unborn marches, unborn demonstrations but which are there nonetheless. Like in a phantasmagoria from the grave, with invisible spirits, the artist offers us the dawn apparition of thousands of signs and countless spirits who would like to flood the squares in protest, exactly as they did as soon as they were able. The image conveys a sense of impotence and absolute force all at once, the forest being reminiscent of the forest of Birnam in *Macbeth* as a perfect premonition of revolt. Having predicted to Macbeth that his tyrannical, bloody rule would end only when Birnam Wood moved to Dunsinane, the witches seemed to mean that his power was solid and eternal. As it happened, when the army seeking to overthrow Macbeth's tyranny reached Birnam, each soldier was ordered to slash a branch from a tree and use it as camouflage in the advance towards the castle walls. An alarmed shield bearer will rush to Macbeth with the news that the forest of Birnam is walking, advancing menacingly towards them... and in fact Macbeth's power will shortly come to an end. All of this extremely powerful political allusion can be read in Pauer's image, together with the condemnation of an authority which has all the features of a terrible and bloody tragedy. Endre Tót would also organise marches, real marches through the streets, only that the

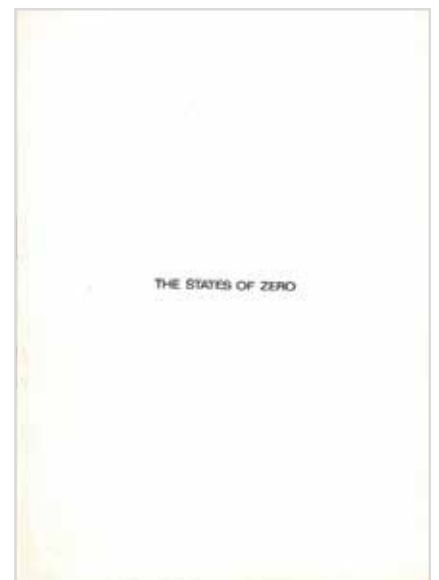
flags and banners literally advocate nothing with their succession of zeros – using the number zero amounts to a call to nothing. The illusion of freedom is the great trick which power plays on us, or rather making it impossible for us to say that we are not free. Every power decides that we are all equal. Freedom is nominal, equality is nominal. The Zero protest by Endre Tót is the protest in itself, not easy to formulate an accusation against it. Humour is one of the most effective strategies of dissent because it complicates the work of the censors. Endre Tót holds a march of nothing in order to demand nothing, but in not demanding anything he holds a march and a protest which claim nothing. The Zero protest is so absolute that the protest consists in the protest itself. Endre Tót's zeros express absolute freedom, in every direction and in every sense, allowing a protest without us knowing the reasons for that protest. They also stand as a head-on economic challenge to art, to the financial systems which govern it, in preparation for a complete and truly liberating “reset”. These marches often took place outside Hungary – Geneva, Berlin, Paris – and in all these places the protests were an actual representation, through the streets, of the pretence behind all protests and all marches, their participants like eunuchs of the revolution, the only difference being that there were no incidents at these events. When Endre Tót parades his banners around with zeros on them, he is performing two actions (as attested by souvenir postcards such as *Zer0 demo* or *The State of Zero* – Fig. 85/86). On the one hand he is simply carrying protest banners around, thereby emptying the act of protesting of its danger and strength, and leaving only the illusion of taking part, expressing a free action. Within a power system, having to ask for authorisation to hold a protest and announce its planned route already deprives it of all its strength of action. Yet again, the “freedom to protest” remains but, like all the freedoms we enjoy, it is useless. On the other hand, however, the Zero protest by Endre Tót is also an act of protest merely by the fact that



**Figure 85.** Endre Tót, *Zer0 demo*, cartolina autografata, 2 maggio 2013, Garrera collection, Rome

it is a protest – it is therefore a total protest which, within an authoritarian system, has the strength to deride power because power in fact lacks the linguistic tools to accuse or cancel a zero protest as it marches through the streets shouting for nothing.

For female artists, the resistance is also carried forward through a liberation from the pretence and sexual hypocrisy imposed by the male order, or by its culture of submission and negation. *Pornography (Projecting Onto Myself) 1-2-3*, (1978 – Fig. 87), by Orsolya Drozdik, is a happy and – through its super-



**Figure 86.** Endre Tót, *The State of Zero*, 1971, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



**Figure 87.** Orsolya Drozdik, *Pornography (Projecting Onto Myself) 1*, 1978, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

imposed images – evocative self-radiography of her own desires; a self-portrait of awareness and pride in her most secret liberties which are a taboo for everyone within a patriarchal and sexist society. This obscene *mise en scène* by Drozdik is both the flag for an identity and shocking for anyone observing – it is an act of insubordination. More than the process of being silenced or stifled, beyond the bounds of avant-garde illegality you run the risk of being stuffed full of propaganda, transformed into a tea cake bursting with preordained patterns. The occlusion of the mouth is the impossibility of using communication, the only authentic communication possible would seem to pass through the body or through the words that affirm the resetting of all messages. Propaganda, mass media, newspapers, all constitute an indigestion of information and essentially serve to shape the serfs – the registers employed by the avant-garde will not pass through verbose channels but rather the opposite: laconism, resetting, silence are their informative elements. The photograph by László Haris entitled *Illegal Avantgarde* (1971 – Fig. 88) conveys both a violent idea of occlusion, an intimation to be quiet, and all the irony and consciousness of a stuffed dish, a pork with an apple in its mouth – all around are citizens who speak like newspapers, only repeating the proclamations of the state

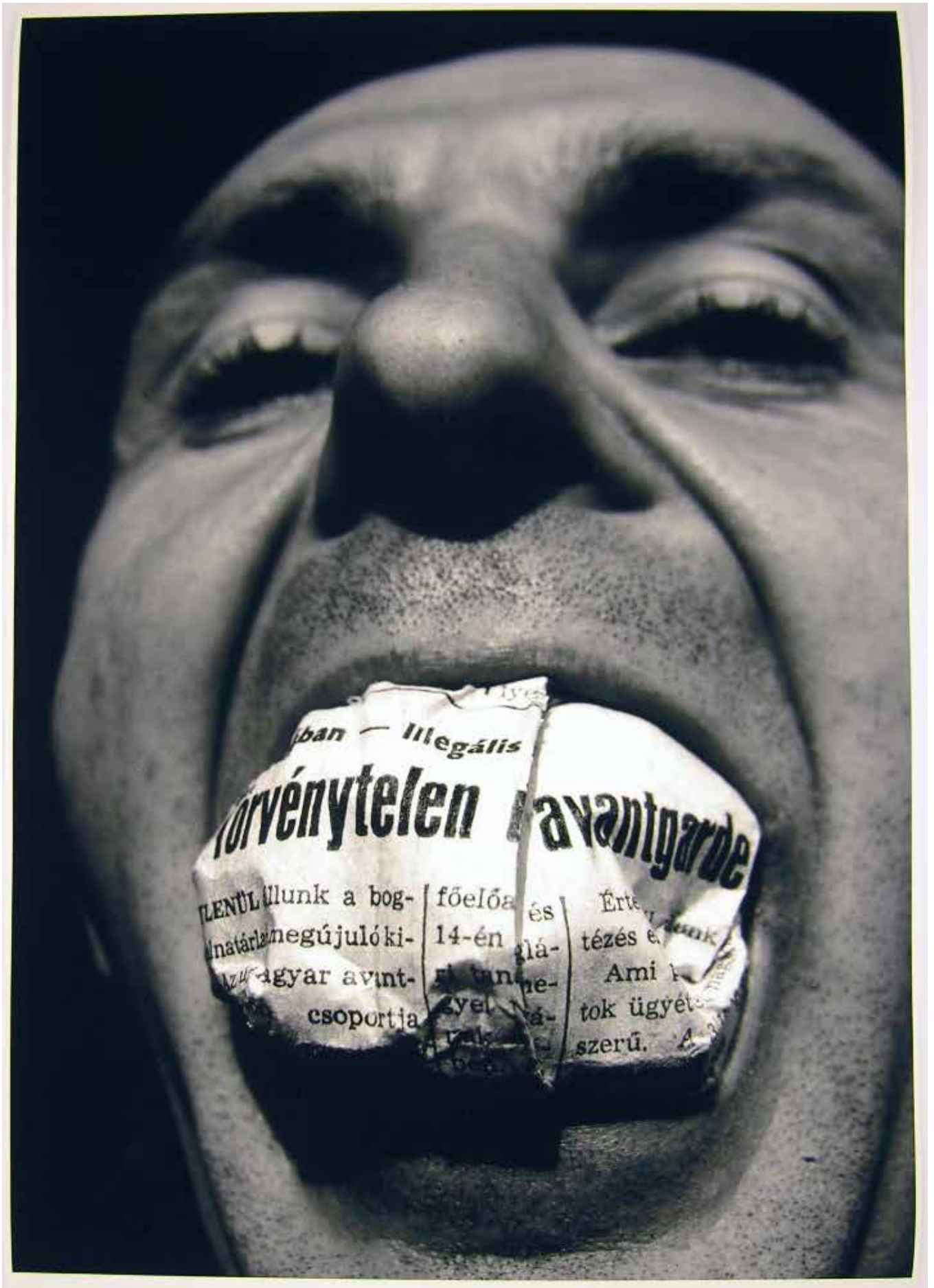


Figure 88. László Haris, *Illegal Avantgarde*, 1971, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

propaganda. The image is undeniably violent, so much so that we can imagine the subject as being tied with his hands behind his back, on the verge of suffocation. It is reminiscent of something out of a torture cell, bearing witness to the knowledge that the actions of these artists, which draw crowds and are applauded in the West, at home are renegaded to being solitary, dangerous, truly risky on a personal level. Whereas in the West many performances are productions in which it is possible to enjoy the luxury of dissent, here in Hungary they are clandestine exercises carried out in private, never in the presence of an applauding audience. During our research into avant-garde Hungarian art of the 1960s and '70s, we realised that the difficulties we encountered in tracing, finding the relevant material, were not caused by the personal incidents, adventures, catastrophes or misfortunes which had befallen the artists we encountered and their archives (flooded cellars, hasty house moves, travel, individual negligence or that of their heirs) but more precisely by a lack of archiving, of looking after their work. This is the result of the way in which they perceive themselves, which does not involve preserving their personal, individual history or gathering together and keeping their personal material. Many of them did not, as one might think, behave thus out of fear, but rather as a result of the conditioning typical of regimes and power systems: the disaffection with regards to personal history, with the incontrovertible liberty of your own story, your uniqueness. It could be said that private histories are inexistent. They could be proof of having always thought with your own head, could arouse suspicion that you thought with your own head – then the accusation of decadence, of suffering from a bourgeois attachment to your personal effects. Power has a strong fear of individual memory, of memory which is not collective, by virtue of the same dangerous and out-of-control mechanism that runs between the official parade in honour of Lenin and the unofficial one made by Szombathy – you are a dangerous element if you go around the city

alone or stay in your own home with a sign displaying Lenin because the private sphere is more political than the political. Treasuring the private sphere jeopardises every system of power, it harbours secrets, passes down traditions, conveys values – authority does its utmost to make the private sphere public and therefore uniform, open and participated. The cult of one's own affairs is dangerous, it entails a cult of the family, of intimacy, of treasuring one's own thoughts or even venerating one's own originality.



## VI. «Unease of Art»

Dedicated to art, the dream of art and, above all, to the “Unease of Art”, the final section explores first of all, literally, the sense of unease which gripped these artists as they were making their art. Some of their most incredible shows, in fact, are held in their back gardens, during gatherings between friends, in alleyways and back streets safe from checkpoints and prying eyes. In many cases, the works remain in the imagination, are never actually completed or featured in the official art channels. Taking place on the outside of galleries and established art spaces, the entire activity of these avant-garde artists is by definition “uneasy”. But this uneasiness embraces also the awareness of the ridicule which making art can have alongside the sufferings of the real world and of mankind, together with the ability to testify to the abyss which separates the art of the establishment – with its slogans and triumphalism – and the reality of the real world, of everyday life. All art risks becoming grotesque when placed alongside the social truths of the world and of life. The contemporary world tends towards the neglect, the unkempt, the dust behind every promise. One need only think of the new houses promised to the earthquake victims or the propaganda of all things new for the reconstruction. There is rampant corruption, speculation, financial interest, clash between the aesthetic promises of power and its reality. The choice of freedom which these artists made was political on a social or career level. They were therefore excluded from attending art school, never received prizes or bursaries, were never admitted with their works into the official art venues. None were even recognised as being artists, they were deprived of the official approval or the prestige such a recognition of their role would have entailed. In the action *Bauhaus I - VIII* (1972 – Fig. 89), by Bálint Szombathy, there is the utmost derision of the construction dream, of the promises of power, of social justice. There is the distance between the reality of propaganda, the propaganda agenda of every power



**Figure 89.** Bálint Szombathy, *Bauhaus (I-VIII)*, VIII, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



Bálint Szombathy, *Bauhaus (I-IV)*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



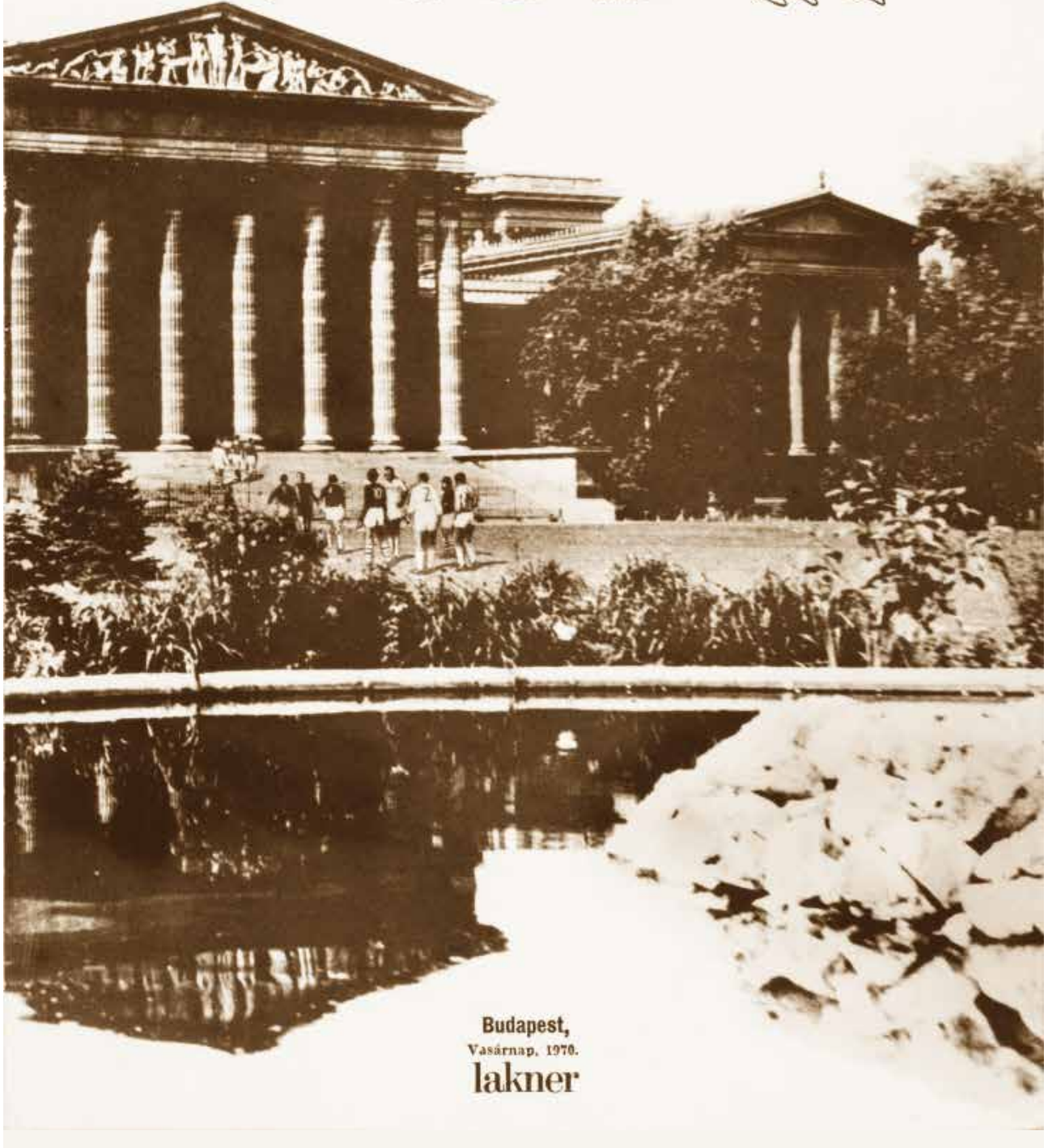
system, and the reality of the real world. The ideal principles of the art of the Bauhaus school inhabit the social and existential context of this artist. The student Szombathy finds himself in the typical sub-

let room, the consequence of greed and speculation which have driven prices upwards to a stranglehold level – a situation we are familiar with from Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. He returns every day from his university lectures about urban redevelopment plans and the new frontiers of modernity, the right to housing, comforts, the progressive turn taken by the architectural designs of the city planners, the propaganda which tells of new development areas offering magnificent, ideal housing equipped with every modern, inclusive, social, state-of-the-art hygienic-sanitary service. Behind these photographs lies all the falsehood of propaganda, the interests of speculation and corruption, which contribute to shape the reality of the real world. The Bauhaus sign is a ruthless and humorous testimony to the grotesque separation between reality and that which could and should have been: the artist's resigned



Bálint Szombathy, *Bauhaus V-VII*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

FOOTBALL  
AU MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS



Budapest,  
Vasárnap, 1970.  
lakner

Figure 90. László Lakner, "Foot-Art" project, 1970, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

expression says everything.

In 1970 László Lakner clandestinely submitted a project (*Foot-Art project*, 1970-2011 – Fig. 90) to the artistic director of Documenta V, Harald Szeemann. There was no response and he only retrieved it in 2010. The project is simple: to hold a soccer match or tournament between Hungarian artists and others from the art world in the exhibition area. He sent a virtual simulation of the project within the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, which in actual fact was the ideal venue because it houses the nation's collection of old masters, from Raphael to Titian and Rembrandt – essentially Hungary's equivalent of the Louvre. The museum functions as an ideal backdrop to events which are considerably more popular, seductive and representative than art, which must have a decorative role in order to embrace “events, shows, fairs and fairgrounds”.



László Lakner, “Foot-Art” project, detail, 1970, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

But László Lakner is above all conscious that organising a sporting event inside a beautiful museum is something which is particularly attractive to patrons, sponsors and the political establishment as a whole – nothing more persuasive, or a greater generator of consensus, than combining cultural activities with the supreme political and cultural value of sport. It goes without saying that such a project would receive all the necessary funding, with private banks and public institutions vying to be involved if they had the chance because it is the perfect synthesis between spectacle, entertainment and applauding citizens. The artist is already quite aware that without the sport, the event, the glamour, the idea of entertainment and the popular national element, art is embarrassing, something which is awkward to deal with. One of the most effective photographs from the project is the one where, using collage, there is a simulation of a soccer match within the great hall housing the museum's collection of Italian masters – “an ideal setting”, reads the description. Within any power system, art needs to be made innocuous, tame, colourful and lively. Official venues never feature art unless it functions as a backdrop to an event, or as an element of sporting and entertainment culture (entertainment is one of the ways of exterminating art). The maximum cultural activity of power is to finance sporting activities, promote sport or use art venues as a stage for the exploitation and propagation of its own strength and prestige. During the organisation of this exhibition we saw a Budapest full of sporting events held in parks, squares and all kinds of public spaces. On a number of occasions, when we naively suggested public or private financing for the show or the catalogue, we were expressly told that in that moment all contributions were devoted to promoting sport. Had we sought to organise a sporting tribute, there would have been no problem accessing funding.



**Figure 91.** Károly Halász, *Performance IV*, 1974, Vintage Galéria, Budapest

**Figure 92.** Károly Halász, *Performance V*, 1974, Vintage Galéria, Budapest



As the private, poetic images of Károly Halász, *Performance IV and V* (1974 – Fig. 91/92), remind us, authentic art is relegated to cellars, kitchens, under the stairs, in back gardens, within the sphere of friendship values and solidarity of ideas. Homegrown art is the greatest achievable degree of freedom, with its installations lacking all monumentality – in fact parodies of the celebrative – held in private gardens, during picnics filled with all things sweet. One of the most emblematic works on this level is Gyula Pauer's *Pseudo-works* (1972



**Figure 93.** Gyula Pauer, *Pseudo-works*, 1972, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest



– Fig. 93), which solemnly proceeds in two directions. The first, as in so many other cases, is that the work is completed with the help of friends (Bak Imre, Peter Bartos, Legédy Péter, Hap Béla, Méhes László, László Beke, Vladimir Popovics, Vladimir Popović, Petr Štembera, St. Auby Tamás, Türk Péter, Jiří Valoch). It therefore displays the signs of more than one hand, of many hands in fact. It is an exchange of signs, drawings, ideas and – as with such pieces – it is a work of friendship. Each of these sheets of paper testifies to ties of friendship, to a collective signature or to a relinquishing of one's own contribution in order to imitate a friend's. The second direction lies in the domestic, private sphere – little more than notes or fragments, these are also projects or drawings of works which will never be able to be shown or completed for major museums, or take part in so-called official events. They are dreams which preserve, intact and undiluted, the intimacy and the need for that work, as well as the interaction of friendship and creativity. Although on the one hand they could be regarded as projects

which have been choked or still-born, they are also untarnished by the compromises which are entailed by contact with the outside world. In these pieces, the private sphere becomes a form of politics, a resplendent and arguably the most intact expression of political sentiment. These works were in fact exhibited for the first time in August 1972, in the Balatonboglár chapel, one of the most legendary clandestine spaces of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde located on the outskirts of Buda-



**Figure 94.** Tibor Csiky, *Globus Tin*, 1973, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

pest, promptly closed down by the authorities the following year. The fiercely contentious allusion to the glut of art which is readymade, boxed, well-packaged, labelled, long-life and vacuum sealed, re-emerges in the work *Globus Tin* (1973 – Fig. 94), by Tibor Csiky. The opened can is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans and the foodstuffs available in American supermarkets, only that here there is a control, an authentication, a consumption, a packaging and an opening of the reassuring distribution of art on behalf of the regime. In his opened can, Csiky identifies the coordinates of the art production in Budapest, where the appearance of modernity, the coquettish attitude towards Pop Art and the avant-garde artistic currents is in fact counterfeit, a form of aping, bearing the same reassurance as any product which is packaged in a can, with its guarantees, its absence of surprises, its consumer-friendly presentation. Its seductiveness is not equal to the commercial products of capitalism, this being a minor,



**Figure 95 left.** Endre Tót, *Night visit to the National Gallery*, 1974, Garrera collection, Roma

Endre Tót, *Night visit to the National Gallery*, interno «Room VI», 1974, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

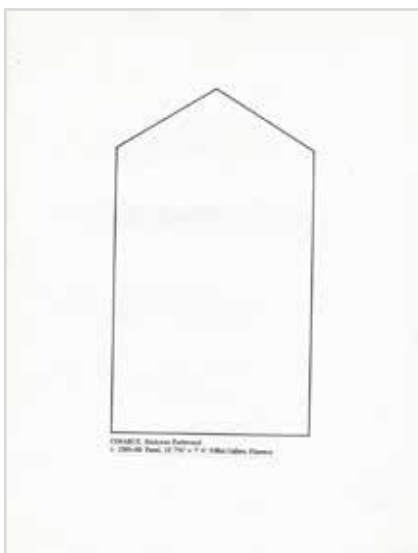


**Figure 96.** Endre Tót, *Night visit to the National Gallery*, 1974, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

communist equivalent, but it is still a controlled and uniform product, with the only difference being that it has an element of the pathetic. This is also a criticism levelled at those who ape fashionable art at the expense of their true identity, which in this case translates into a squalid imitation of Pop Art, of art as a product – here art is equated to a commodity, but above all there is an indication of the degrading of the artwork which has become a consumer good, nourishing but in actual fact unauthentic, and maybe even in bad taste (being second hand) to the extent of it being almost impossible to discern between American commercial art and art which is servile to power, if not by the greater appeal of the former.

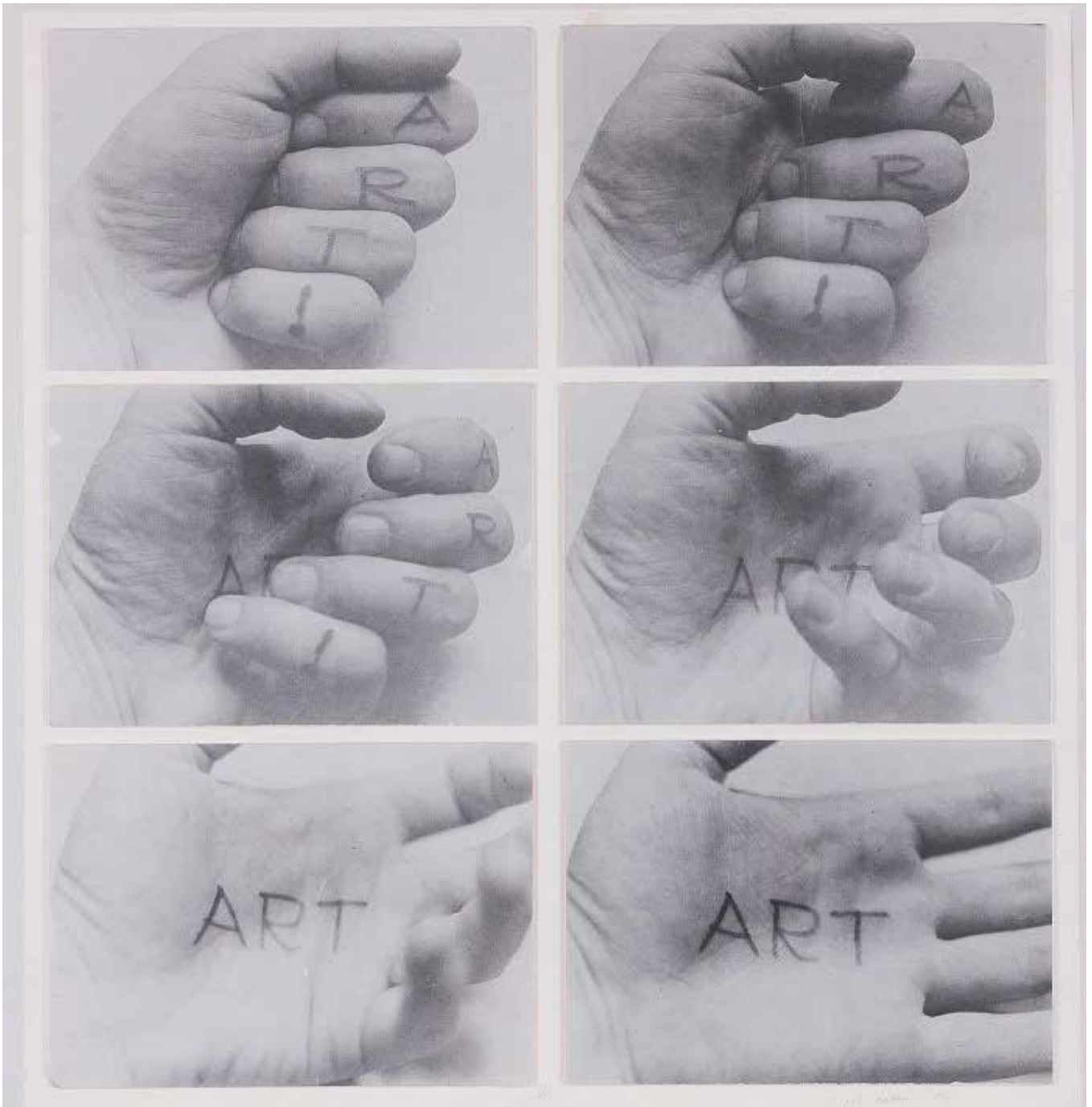
All that remains is the dream of art, and one of the most touching and poetic operations in this sense is *Night visit to the National Gallery* (1974 – Fig. 95-96), by Endre Tót. *Night visit to the National Gallery* is the dream of art which evokes – with eyes shut, in the distance and cruelty of that time – art masterpieces exclusively in an imaginary journey through their names and titles. We see the name of the artist, the title of the work, its size and medium, but no image. This absence of visual information heightens the presence and desire for the original work. These museum visits by Endre Tót are melancholic, magical and, above all, nourished by an infinite nostalgia for art as a realm of freedom, provoked also by the frequent impossibility of visiting the works personally because of restrictions or other difficulties. The operation is also a meditation on the phenomenology of the artwork in an age of reproducibility. The artist works in three directions: what Proust refers to as the magic of names, heightening the desire for the original and not giving into the misleading and stereotyped shortcut, for memory, offered by reproduction. The black canvas gives the work an iconic power, a uniqueness, but is also a physical measure of the distance from the content of the work, from its cognitive possession. This is an

operation which revolves around absence, distance, the danger of becoming inured to the name of the work in terms that are not truly cognitive, and on the museum space as a temple. The evasion technique brought into play here is subtle: there is the idea of being freer but also of being, as an artist, in a dark night. The artists have recounted the painful experience of finding themselves, all too many times, longing and dreaming for Biennales, Venices, Kassels, retrospectives, tributes, festivals, shows to which they did not have access – for a vitality of art which was precluded to them by bureaucracy, by how difficult it was to travel and obtain visas. There is an element of mourning in this nocturnal visit which seems to gather together all the melancholy, all the disheartenment at not being able to take part in the active life of art – trips it is impossible to make, projects which are censured or smothered, clandestine tactics. László Beke remembers when he was invited by Enrico Crispolti to the 1977 Venice Biennale, to curate the Hungarian Pavilion. After drawing up his project, he was immediately summoned for a warning and an out-and-out proscription list by the central committee of the party in Budapest. None of the artists on László Beke's list were permitted to attend that Biennale and the pavilion remained empty and dark. The white version of the Visit (Endre Tót, *Night visit to the National Gallery*, book, 1974 – Fig. 97) goes as far as declining



the artwork and its memory as a disappearance. In the absent canvases we feel still more deeply the echo of the losses inflicted on art through the centuries by wars, plunder, greed, piracy, confiscations, barbarisms. This is a potential catalogue of destruction, like going to a cemetery and reading the headstones. Artworks exist in a permanent state of fragility

**Figure 97.** Endre Tót, *Night visit to the National Gallery*, serie bianca, Collezione Garrera, Roma

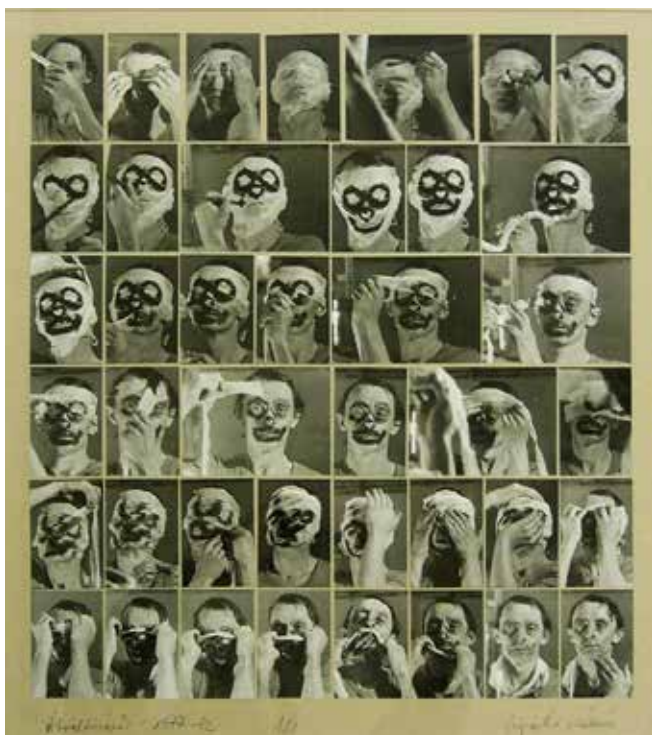


**Figure 98.** Kálmán Sziujártó, *Art Gestures II*, 1976, collection of Szluka Balázs, Budapest

and danger – one need only remember the bonfires in which so-called “degenerate art” was burned. These absences are therefore a reminder of how the obtuseness, stupidity and violence of power – or even just neglect – can lead to artistic genocides, just as limiting the freedom of expression of artists means reducing their works to white canvases, like an unrealised wish. During the various meetings we had with artists to organise this exhibition, we had to compile an account also of the

absences: losses, undeveloped camera rolls, material gone missing in getaways and moves, fragile supports and the continuous frustration at not being able to exhibit their work other than in their back gardens and pantries prior to dispersing it. Ultimately, however, the operation made by Endre Tót through the night or through the blacking out of art – its absence – testifies to the vitality and power of the memory of art, even when the work is not there or is merely evoked and conveyed. Our promenade in this *Night Visit* is one of mourning, dreaming, nostalgia, meditation on the meaning and on the state of all art.

Kálmán Szigártó's image *Art Gestures* (1971) is a poetical tribute to artistic activity as a secret to be defended. It resembles a flame being shielded, as if by a lampshade or cupped hands, or when a little water is carried in the palm of a hand to quench someone's thirst. This very simple image has the delicacy and fragility typical of all this production by Szigártó, little more than a prayer, a religious position of the hands which keep, protect, preserve. In *Art Gestures II*, 1973 (Fig. 98), or again in *Transformation*, 1972 (Fig. 99), Szigártó insists on the fragility of art, on the danger of it being reduced to ash, consumed (as in *Art I*, 1973 – Fig. 100). When we read the word "Arte" in these works, we in fact



perceive it much as we would perceive a pair of hands showing us a quivering firefly, or a butterfly, that we are mindful of not hurting. This is an image of nurturing hands, almost feminine and maternal. Also part of the *Art Gestures I* (1971) series is another gestural poem which explores the meaning of the value of an artwork. Art

**Figure 99.** Kálmán Szigártó, *Transformation*, 1972, collection of Róbert Alföldi, Budapest

has an outside and an inside, an exterior and a secret, a visible and an invisible, which is the delicate marrow that must be protected or hidden, or shown only with caution. Here is a work which protects another work, an artwork which is shielding itself but which, when clenched, possesses also the strength of a fist. The image of the hand is transformed into an image of the complexity which the artwork carries with itself: the secret message, hidden, internal, the revealed aspect. As he dances, the artist uses his hand to make a wholehearted digression on the meaning which an artwork should have. Guarding this secret is strength, the clenched fist of art itself overwritten between the fingers. These artists have often used the exterior and the interior of the hand to symbolise, to indicate, something being hidden – the protection of a delicate dictation and a flame which must not go out.



**Figure 100.** Kálmán Szijártó, *Art I*, 1973, collection of Szluka Balázs, Budapest



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