

a text by Marco Bene

ANNYIT ÉR, MINT HALOTTNAK A CSÓK

“If you read the right side I’ll love you”

Endre Tót

It is imperative, at the outset, to clarify what the title of this project stands for. The figurative meaning of the Hungarian idiom —*annyt ér, mint halottnak a csók*— conveys that something is not worth a whoop, not worth the effort, worthless, and so on.

In 1968, a secret state informant (codename: Mészáros) wrote, after witnessing the first happening in Hungary,¹ that these events are “pastimes for killing boredom [...] turning away from active-constructive activity, and, thus, facilitating the politics of subversive decentralisation.”²

Most certainly, if this exhibition would have been staged back then, his words about it would not be significantly altered, and like he did back then, he would probably recommend to the Ministry of Interior that the organizers be separated from their group of collaborators and, ultimately, institutionalized in a psychiatric facility.

Seen in that light, the exhibition is worth nothing (or would have been worth nothing), since the pieces —around 20 works of art and non-art, films transferred to video, videos, objects, action-objects, actions, photographs, texts, books and

ephemera, conceived by artists and non-art artists during the long sixties and beyond in Hungary—, many of which censored at the time, deviate from the official aesthetic function par excellence in the “happiest barracks” of the Eastern Bloc: propaganda, art by and for the people, an “active-constructive activity.”

“In the relationship between myth and history myth proves to be the primary, history the secondary and derived factor. It is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined, but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology.”

Ernst Cassirer

All pieces were made in the aftermath of the failed 1956 Hungarian uprising, “crushed” as Jasmina Tumbas’ states, by “Soviet tanks,” after János Kádár’s “administration transformed socialist institutions associated with the arts [through] the state’s monopoly in purchases of artworks, control of exhibition venues, and artists’ access to studio spaces and stipends.” Yet, from the 1960s onwards certain restrictions began to ease, which, as Tumbas’ mentions, was the result of “an act of guilty conscience,” that tried to compensate “for the brutal executions during [the] 1956” revolution.³ Experimentation beyond Socialist Realism, was thus possible, but only under the rubrics of what was sometimes called the “holy trinity of cultural policy,” or “the three Ts:” “(*Tiltas, Túres, Támogatás* / Prohibited, Tolerated, Supported).”⁴

Many of the practices that will hereafter be considered purposefully tested the limits of what could be tolerated, and might be

defined, as Klara Kemp-Welch does, helped by the words of Václav Havel: as antipolitical in nature, because they “[offer] nothing and [promise] nothing.” “[P]olitical’ because they do not ‘play politics.’”⁵

Although I partially agree, for me anti political art would be that which is reactionary, destitutive, or a form of political denounce- ment. It exemplifies what I like to call, borrowing from theology a *kataphatic*⁶ engagement. Whe- reas the figures exhibited here play another game altogether. They do respond only through a *via negativa*, demonstrating rather than an antipolitical nature, what I call an *apophatic*⁷ engagement.

Kemp-Welch formulates this beautifully (even though descri- bing such an approach as anti- political) by quoting “the poet Ivan Jirous,” who “described this alternative attitude as a ‘parallel polis,’”⁸

What she is really underlining, what the exhibition is really hinting at, is the importance of the most brilliant gesture and its potentiality, an approach conspicuous by its absence: refusal.

“[T]he goal of our underground is to create a second culture, a culture completely independent from all official communication media and the conventional hierarchy of value judgements put out by the establishment. It is to be a culture that does not have as its goal the destruction of the establishment, because by attempting this, it would—in effect— mean that we would fall into the trap of playing their game.”⁹

[1] *The Lunch (in memoriam Batu Khan)*, 1966. Organised by Gábor Altorjay and Tamás Szentjóby (codena- me: Schwitters), with the cooperation of Miklós

Jankovics and István Varannai; and the help of Enikő Balla, Miklós Erdély, and Csaba Koncz.

[2] Source: https://exhibition-history.blog.hu/2009/07/02/police_report

[3] Tumbas, Jasmina. “International Hungary!: György Galántai’s Ne- tworking Strategies.” (*ARTMargins* 2012); 1 (2–3): 87–115. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00020

[4] Bryzgel, Amy, and Marsha Meskim- mon. *Performance art in Eastern Euro- pe since 1960*. (Manchester University Press: 2017).

[5] Kemp-Welch, Klara. *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence Under Post-totalitarian Rule 1956-1989*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017)

[6] *Kataphatic theology*, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, is the “way of speech.” It is affirmative. E.g. God exists, God does not exist, God is good.

[7] *Apophatic theology* means “to speak off,” “to deny,” or “involving knowled- ge obtained by negation.” A *via negativa* that seeks to approach God through the equivocal. To borrow two definitions and an example: Susan Sontag beautifully puts it as “a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech;” while Ro- land Barthes as that which “aims at the divine essence [politics] by denying it;” and last, the Hungarian artist Endre Tót, in a 1972 artwork, illustrates it cogently with the statement: “NOTHING AIN’T NOTHING.”

[8 & 9] Kemp-Welch, Klara “Autonomy, Solidarity and the Antipolitics of NET,” in *SIEC—Sztuka dialogu/NET— Art of Dialogue*, ed. Bożena Czubak (Warsaw: Fundacja Pro I, 2013).

WORTH AS MUCH AS A KISS TO A DEAD MAN

“If you read the right side I’ll hate you”

Endre Tót

Allow me, before delving into personal narratives, to clarify what the title of this exhibition/screening stands for. The literal translation of the Hungarian idiom —*annyt ér, mint halottnak a csók*— is *worth as much as a kiss to a dead man*, and that’s all we need to know for now.

I must have been about six years old when my father started telling me these little stories: tales starring his friends from Budapest during his late teens. He told me one of those friends used to enter trains and look at the ceiling until the other passengers, moved by curiosity, gazed up in unison. Another friend sat in front of the only international hotel of the capital and waited, sitting, until the police came to arrest him on grounds I did not understand at the time. I always thought those stories

“Only that which turns back and impacts itself
as a cause is capable of molding itself.”

Miklós Erdély

were orchestrated little jokes from when he lived there, just before he defected, back when the iron curtain was relatively healthy. Yet years later —when I was twenty-four and after studying Art History at Goldsmiths— I discovered, while working in Vienna at an art fair, a small booth

and tribute to the Hungarian neo-avant-garde of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s.

To my surprise, inside the stand, I stumbled upon works by Tamás Szentjóby, my brother’s godfather, whom I knew only by name. I approached a person to ask about Szentjóby’s work. The person told me that Szentjóby was one of the instigators of conceptual art in Hungary. We approached a black and white photograph of him sitting on a chair, outside, with his back to a building. “This work is called *Sit Out - Be Forbidden!* and it’s from 1972,” she said, and went on to explain that Szentjóby sat in front of Budapest’s International Hotel, with a leather belt covering his mouth, re-enacting the “binding and gagging” of the co-founder of the Black Panthers, Bobby Seale, at the famous 1968 Chicago trial. Shortly after Szentjóby finished his action the police arrived on the scene. It was strange to put a face to an action that throughout my childhood was a bizarre joke. The person at the booth looked at me and said: “You are the spitting image of Szentjóby when he was young.” I let it slide. She repeated it. I said “well, that’s strange.” She gave me her card. I later found out that she was Emese Kürti, a scholar and researcher of Szentjóby and the Hungarian artists of the period.

My father, who had passed away when I was thirteen, never told me his friends were artist, so only at the age of twenty-four did I realize that those stories of childhood that haunted me, and certainly shaped my sense of humor and aesthetic judgment, were, in fact, happenings, poetical gestures, actionism and works of passive resistance. An overpowering urge

to find out more about these figures consumed me in the years that followed, and while I searched and searched, trying to find my father or his stories in photographs, videos and texts; the myths of youth and the myths that make up history were being intertwined, creating moires. The spirit of a bygone time and space entangled with oral accounts: my father's recollections from youth.

This summer, while I was conducting research in Budapest for a few months, staying at what was my grandfather's apartment, I called my uncle —my father's brother— and questioned him about the Hungarian scene of the '70s. I told him about Vienna, and asked him if he could tell me more about those times. He started speaking about an action Szentjòby carried out. Taking place next to my grandfather's apartment. He told me Szentjòby was tied to a chair from the apartment outside the building, and that at one point the police arrived to arrest him. The knots were so strong and complex, he said, that the police had no choice but to lift it up with him on top, carrying Tamás like a king on his throne, to a police wagon so small that the chair and sitter could not be fitted. "I have read very different reports," I said. To which he replied that, of course, in a state where you had to go through censors to print, the common thing was to spread news, deeds and so on, by word of mouth —rumorology he called it— and that it was quite possible that memory had played a trick on him.

In short, this is how this ongoing project began, with a trick on memory and the question: *how much is a kiss to a dead man worth?*