

# KOVÁSZNAI

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## CHARM AND ELEGANCE...

## THE AUTHENTICITY OF GYÖRGY KOVÁSZNAI OR AN INTELLECTUAL DANDY IN BUDAPEST

The city, in which Kovásznai was living, moving, working, making his plans and weaving his dreams, is no longer. Budapest, whose atmosphere inspired and animated him, despite his constant polemicising with it, despite his permanent and tireless, albeit modest, witty, elegant, never offensive but always open-minded and sensitively fought battles with everybody, at every line: that Budapest no longer exists. Those coffeehouses, restaurants, cinemas, and clubs; those homes and studios; those figures – artists, architects, filmmakers and writers, friends and girlfriends – who were the one-time protagonists of life in Budapest, who pursued their activities at various positions and in various situations within the city’s cultural life; those discussions, and especially the sarcastic, ironic, and creative atmosphere that György Kovásznai embodied with his somewhat eccentric personality, lifestyle, appearance, intelligence, and humour: they are the thing of the past.

Neither does that cultural jungle – that cultural-political labyrinth – exist, in which normally antagonistic phenomena would coexist and intermingle in mysterious yet organic ways; in which an acknowledged author could suddenly and easily fall out of favour, without however losing his or her social status, just to be able to return to the “official” landscape due to the favour of an intervening supporter, in the same easy and sudden manner; where friendships and loves, relationships based on joint interests as well as creative communities could spring to life among people of radically opposing attitudes and disparate moral or political/ideological standpoints; where strange alliances were able to form between art practitioners and politicians, supporting and tolerant functionaries of the state party, unbalanced and insecure “officials” and marginalised, or even refused, “unofficial” artist, writers, and filmmakers; where the future of artworks, the publication of novels and articles, the possibility of exhibitions and theatre performances as well as travel permits were granted on the basis of often unfathomable or arbitrary, changeable or random emotional motives, personal dispositions, tactical moves, careerist schemes, or ideological/political judgments.

In his own refined, elegant, witty, and ironic manner, with his quests and excellent finds, his intriguingly novel insights, superbly realised works and unfinished plans, animation films and paintings, literary experimentations, and aesthetic explications, but first of all, with his clever, sensitive, perceptive, and subtly critical commentaries, György Kovásznai and his entire life epitomises that old – or not so old – Budapest that fed on the highly complex, bustling, and animated atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, with its contradictions, moral cataclysms, enthusiasm, modernist illusions, and creativity as well as with its lingering sense of uncertainty, exhaustion, cynicism, and hopelessness. It was the Budapest modernity *par excellence* that provided the basic material for Kovásznai’s artistic work and the contemporary narration it comprised: the city with its hedonism and peculiar nonchalance, or even irresponsibility rooted in marginal existence, as well as its simultaneous propensity for innovation and revival, with its radical transformation and modernisation of the hanging mundane morals, the cult of novelty alongside the artistic innovations of the era, the peculiarly eclectic Budapest pop, the new Hungarian cinematic art, and the phenomena of fashion.

The life and work of Kovásznai, his personality as well as his literary and artistic activities, his entire being belonged to this Budapest narration *par excellence*, in which he was immersed and on which he simultaneously commented, producing it through acts, words, gestures, and artworks, as well as analysing and contextualising it with a type of melancholic irony, from a certain distance, as if from the outside. From this aspect, his autobiographical writings are highly important. Although the majority of them remained unfinished, these texts offer many explanations, which can help us understand the development of Kovásznai’s painting and his entire aesthetic approach. Likewise, his analytical texts written on various artists speak primarily about his own way, his historical situation as well as the development and orientation of his own generation. And the hereby created image could be seen as an incessant process of self-analysis, an attempt to identify his own artistic positioning in a historical process. From a historical perspective, these texts may be regarded as Kovásznai’s most exciting and informative analyses.

Although Kovásznai’s metropolis, the Budapest of his time, was ruled by the mentality of the 1960s and 1970s, a different and new historic era, it was also closely and inseparably interwoven with the “old” Budapest: the city of the mid-war period, with its grand themes and debates, political experiences and cultural groupings, artistic trends, cultural-political legends and personalities; or one might say, with its political intimacies and behind-the-scenes “stories”, friendships and animosities, cliques and creative communities, aesthetic, ethical, and political issues. Many of the major figures of the literary and art scene – from Tibor Déry, Gyula Illyés, Aurél Bernáth, and Lajos Kassák all the way to István Vass, Dezső Korniss, Piroska Szántó, and Jenő Barcsay – started their careers in the 1920s or even earlier, and played major roles in the reinstitution of cultural life after 1945 as well as after 1956, even if from considerably differing positions and different domains or forums. One and the same person who had been an acknowledged artist or writer in the mid-1940s, i.e., the coalition years following World War II and Fascism, could become a harshly criticised, or even perhaps publicly banned, marginalised, and attacked figure during the 1950s. Then from the mid-1960s, he or she could once again become an active agent in the official cultural life, or may have even advanced to the position of a celebrated artist/author, or become an influential personality with some cultural-political power. For their roles played in the 1956 Revolution, numerous writers, artists, and philosophers were imprisoned or blacklisted for longer or shorter periods of time. Following the 1960s restitutions, they could find their places among acknowledged writers whose works were published, or artists whose works were exhibited or even purchased. Such a practically incessant political incertitude, whereby the actors of cultural life were constantly evaluated and judged, acknowledged or disregarded, or even radically rejected, criticised, and marginalised, had a strong impact on personal relationships as well. Not only did the close friendship and long collaboration between György Kovásznai and Dezső Korniss contribute to the renewal of Hungarian animation film in the form of a few masterpieces, but it also provided an interesting and rather unusual example of an emotional and intellectual encounter, and a strong relationship between two artists from different generations.

It was not only an intensive dialogue between two sensitive and daringly innovative artists, two critical and ironic minds, but it provided the foundations for Kovásznai’s entire aesthetic orientation. As he summed up the path of his development, “György Z. Gács with his wide intellectual horizon, the serious and humane Andor Kántor, and the erudite Ferenc Sebestyén, at high school, or the cold and ruthless Géza Főnyi, the nonchalant György Kádár, and the relentless professor of art Jenő Barcsay, at the art academy, were striving

to shed some light on this objectively truly dark night of art. Subsequently, Aurél Bernáth allowed me to join his class, following a one-and-a-half-years’ break in my studies, when I was working as a miner, because I felt stifled by the academy; and then, under Bernáth, gapingly and with a masochist pleasure, I endured as long as I was able to stand the type of stylistic dictatorship that levelled and moulded us – from Csernus to Lakner, from Bartl to Ákos Szabó – into ‘little copies of Bernáth’. Around 1958, however, a true light started to dawn on me: I had the chance to meet Dezső Korniss and the representatives of the Szentendre School.”

This autobiographical testimony contains many important data that may contribute to our understanding of the young generation of the era, the intellectual and aesthetic development of those young artists who subsequently became great innovators, such as Tibor Csernus and László Lakner, as well as allowing an insight into the general cultural atmosphere of the time. Noteworthy is first of all the presence of the above-mentioned professors in public education and the impact of their personalities and aesthetic views on the young people of the era. The artistic grandeur of both Aurél Bernáth and Jenő Barcsay is indisputable. The latter master reinforced the impact of the Szentendre School in a direct manner, contributing to the recognisance of modernist values in the circle of young artists. Thus, their presence in official higher education, at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, provided a sort of guarantee for high-level education. The passionate and critical-minded young artist with a heart-felt vocation for a painterly career, with his mature and responsible way of thinking, who kept comparing the official interpretations of realism and its various stylistic variations with the ethical standards of artistic utterance seeking totality and truth, started his independent artistic path in this artistic environment *par excellence*, within the inbred and sheltered world of the Academy of Fine Arts, and subsequently under the halo of the modern masters he discovered for himself.

In order to understand the cultural-political complexity of the era as well as György Kovásznai’s specific position of an “an outsider with clear insight into current affairs” and his delicately critical “dandy status”, one must be aware of the fact that the so-called “official” and “dissident” or “unofficial” terms were never applied as clearly defined categories set in stone. They were in constant flux, changing from one situation to the other, from one person to the other, as they corresponded to the given personal constellation and actual cultural political situation. They were also often based on tactical considerations or simply on judgments arising from capricious tastes. This is how Jenő Barcsay could simultaneously be an academy professor and a modern master of the “officially” disregarded, or at times explicitly criticised, “bourgeois, decadent, and irrational” Szentendre School, celebrated in alternative circles. Other “Szentendre” artists, first of all Dezső Korniss and Endre Bálint, belonged for a long time to the suppressed, criticised, or simply non-exhibited artists, who also compromised themselves politically, owing to their roles in the 1956 Revolution and because of their emigration in its aftermath. Korniss and Bálint were only offered exhibition possibilities long years after they had returned to Hungary, while a “second publicity”, an “alternative” and free-thinking art scene acknowledged and respected them as legendary modernists.

Another important aspect of Kovásznai’s autobiographical notes is the historic point of reference. He mentions that “a light started to dawn” around 1958, i.e., when he became acquainted with the art of Dezső Korniss and the Szentendre School. Through Korniss, he discovered a modernist aesthetic orientation, which did not connect to the naturalist and realist tendencies, and which took a specifically Central-European and Hungarian intellectual position, aiming to synthesise the different avant-garde movements. Moreover, this happened in the late 1950s, i.e., in the aftermath of the failed 1956 Revolution, during the period of arrests and executions, when the consolidation was just about to start. This was the time when a considerable number of creative figures of Hungarian culture were still in prison – such as Tibor Déry, Zoltán Zelk, Miklós Vásárhelyi, and many others. Others – such as György Lukács, or the famous Bauhaus architect, József Fischer, who was the Minister of Urban Development in 1956 – were forced to inner emigration, living in Budapest. Having been forbidden to appear publicly, teach, or publish their works, they focused their energies on re-evaluating and reorganising the art scene.

This historic period had a seminal impact on the young György Kovásznai, influencing his worldview and aesthetic approach, his somewhat bohemian, marginal, and at the same time “insider” lifestyle, his intellectual dandyism, and irony. Kovásznai, just like his young colleagues, lived within a hermetically closed art scene, experiencing the atmosphere of the Art High School, or subsequently, the Academy of Fine Arts, the museums and galleries. It was through this filter that they sensed the changes that took place on the political scene, so that they observed the realities of the era with a kind of fatalistic carelessness, nonchalance, certain irresponsibility, intellectual independence, and irony, due to their young age and the marginal existence of the art world. They focussed their attention on the new art, on the depiction of new narratives, and the expression of a new attitude towards life. Their characteristic attitude was laden with fatalism and innovative strive, looseness and coolness, openness, curiosity, a critical approach to the past, and the rejection of all kinds of conservatism, including both the conservatism of the mid-war period and that of the 1950s, as well as an indulgence in the cult of modernity. As Kovásznai wrote in one of his essays, they wanted to be liberated from the “shackles of naturalism”. Obviously, for them this naturalism was a symbol of all types of conservatism: all that which opposed modernity.

Their discovery of the preceding generation’s modernity proved to be helpful in their aspiration to innovate art, in their quest for a new vocabulary. From the end of the 1950s, this discovery was made easier through exhibitions, publications, and personal meetings. Although new articles and monographs of Lajos Vajda, Dezső Korniss, Endre Bálint, Ferenc Martyn, the European School, and the Szentendre painters only appeared from the mid-1960s on, the neglected modern masters reappeared in various periodicals, scholarly publications, or in weekly papers in the form of illustrations or smaller reproductions. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, contacts among the various circles of modern artists, writers, filmmakers, and architects were maintained on the platforms of the so-called “inner emigration”, or on those in the sphere of the “unofficial”, “parallel” culture: in artists’ studios and private apartments, university clubs, auditoriums of the Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge, the Fészek Artists’ Club, and the Architects Club, or at times at museums.

In the case of Kovásznai, his close friendship with Piroska Szántó, and the subsequent years of collaboration with Dezső Korniss resulted in important relationships that fostered the development of his artistic orientation. Kovásznai considered Piroska Szántó as his first art teacher. For him, Dezső Korniss, Piroska Szántó, and the European School as a whole, meant the foundations of his intellectual

orientation and aesthetic explorations. As he wrote, “There was, nonetheless, a sole exception: the European School, to which some of the Szentendre artists belonged as well. They have been miraculously liberated from the shackles of naturalism.” These were the shackles that drove away the young painter from the Academy, propelling him for a lifelong quest for the articulation of new modes of expression. This spirit of experimentation, openness towards every new solution, this unbiased, ironic, and critical approach guided him through the spirited and exciting art world of the 1960s and 1970s’ Budapest: at the Pannonia Film Studio as well as in his own studio, in front of his paintings and in his writings, which let his independent mentality, the intelligence of the elegant literary dandy, and his critical vision of reality be manifested so clearly and convincingly.

In his essay on Piroska Szántó, he includes a highly significant motif, which has bearings on Kovásznai’s own personality and artistic, intellectual position, besides describing the intellectual, aesthetic, and ideological contexts of Piroska Szántó’s work. He wrote the following in relation to Szentendre: “The young artists who made their escape from Fascism were given a chance here to refer to the fact that Hungarian fate was not a primordial fate, that the Hungarian middle-class had already been formed, and that it was possible even in this country to refine visual culture to reach a level that would reflect the European intelligence and practical philosophy; in fact, it is possible to have charm and elegance, which have always manifested the self-confidence and generosity of significantly free citizens.”

Let us pay attention to the congenial precision and complexity of the wording! Kovásznai articulates his view in a concrete manner in speaking of “European intelligence and practical philosophy” in reference to the refinement of visual culture. What he refers to is nothing else than the issue of professional competence, which is one of the cardinal points of European development. It is the “European intelligence and practical philosophy” that makes the social respect of professional knowledge and competence possible. It means the establishment of the *sensus communis*, which is indispensable for the existence of democracy, in whose spirit different spheres, professional competences, various interpretational and linguistic systems can coexist, mutually complementing and respecting each other, based on their own immanent value systems and in various referential contexts, so that they could complement each other, without being subordinated to a single central guiding principle, without being subjected to an absolute and abstract “truth”, to a monolithic and exclusive “ultimate explanation”.

The way he accentuates the connection between a refined visual culture and the free development of “European intelligence and practical philosophy” is a precise and highly consistent proposition. It touches upon the core of civil society and political democracy that was formed alongside the progress of European technological culture and its wide-ranging respect for professional competence. “The self-confidence of significantly free citizens” signifies the development of material culture, the acknowledgment and protection of independent professional spheres, the rejection of dictatorial and totalitarian centralisation and hierarchical subordination, as well as the elimination of all types of monolithic structures.

Kovásznai allows a clear insight into the fundamental correlations between the freedom of artistic work – with its resultant “charm and elegance” – and the democratic consensus informing society as a whole, according to which various professional competences, founded on their own immanent value systems, take part in the general creative processes within the global society, in the social organisation of work, and in the democratic distribution of the spheres of activity and responsibility, so that they are not subordinated to a single monolithic power structure. It is only such a rationalist, pluralistic, and democratic social regulation, based on the acceptance of the intrinsic value of independent professional competences, that is able to create an anti-hierarchic, tolerant, generous, and open-minded intellectual situation, in which the various professional spheres, bearing their own professional competence, are not subjected to the omnipotence of a totalitarian, and monolithic *ultima ratio*. On the contrary, they contribute to the pluralistic course of events of a complex, multilayered, and multifarious creative process, based on the immanent professional competence of their own, on a global level in society. It is only within such a pluralistic structure of society that the creativity of “significantly free citizens” is able to develop, where the charm of free and intelligent art is able to unfold, in tandem with a free and immanent value system.

The metaphoric accent that Kovásznai places on the phenomenon of “charm and elegance” in his seminal analysis reveals the coherence and profoundness of his philosophical thinking as well as the cultural affinities of an artist; namely, his knowledge of the Budapest literature and discourses during the 1920s and 1930s. “Charm and elegance” are the attributes of the sophisticated, erudite, witty, and critical literary dandy. Far from manifesting a sense of superficiality, fashionable buoyancy, emotional indifference, or cynicism, these features stand for intellectual bravery in eschewing all forms of hypocrisy, i.e., a sense of independence. Ultimately, it means a complete intellectual freedom, a frantic, proud, uncompromising, and hedonistic joy of freedom. His praises of “charm and elegance” seem to echo Dezső Kosztolányi’s hymn to a seemingly immoral easiness, to the depth of a seemingly empty surface, and to the seemingly immoral independence, which the poet articulated with an ingenious radicalism in his *Song of Kornél Esti*. The dandy – who is seemingly indifferent to everything – rebels against deceptive hypocrisy with the weapons of irony and total intellectual independence. Naturally, this radical sovereignty and such a subversive irony were alien to the “official” spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. It was not without reason that a secret service report denounced Kovásznai as “a dangerous literary hooligan”.

Despite all these literary affiliations, aesthetic and emotional links to the culture of the 1920s and 1930s, György Kovásznai mediated the narrative of his time, a contemporary narrative *par excellence* in his works; the Budapest of his time was a metropolis undergoing a radical process of modernisation during the 1960s and 1970s. It was a city full of contradictions, which evinced the early signs of a consumer society and the vitality of pop culture. In the milieu and atmosphere of the consolidation period of the Kádár era, with its New Economic Mechanism, a gradual opening toward the West, and its developing cultural-political tolerance, Kovásznai occupied a transitional position in more than one sense. His peculiar melancholy, psychological sensitivity, hidden reticence, refined humour, highly articulated manner of speech, his erudition, his entire outward appearance and elegant behaviour generated a sort of anachronistic aura around his personality, which seemed to connect this solitary “contemporary artist” *par excellence* to the past. In a radically transforming and modernising, creative and neurotic society, with its unsolved or unspoken ethical and ideological problems, this sophisticated, witty, sarcastic – and subversive – dandy epitomised intellectual independence.

Judging from a contemporary perspective, György Kovásznai could actually be considered as an artist who foreshadowed our present society’s – postmodern, post-utopian, post-industrial – cultural orientation and eclectic sensitivity. Through several points, he forestalled the contemporary cultural paradigm resting on modes of deconstruction. He might have failed to give a clear definition and a viable theoretical consideration to numerous elements of this novel approach, which is based on the interpolation, blending, and overlapping of anthropological and cultural-historical discourses, different sign systems, linguistic conventions, and different levels of connotation, but he was nonetheless able to pinpoint the direction of change. In his paintings and in the material of his unfinished animation films made during the last phase of his artistic creation, we can clearly detect the early germination of a new visual culture determined by the most disparate micro-cultural sign systems, subcultural communication systems, the most radically disparate cultural, ideological, and linguistic references as well as by the independently functioning referential systems that exist side by side or in connection with one

another, flowing into one another in order to conjure different parallel interpretations. In his large format paintings sporting multiple figures, imbued with a hectic, paradoxically dramatic, and at the same time, grotesque effect, the compositional solutions of mannerist or baroque painting are the most dominant, combined with a consciously emphasised, provocative theatricality. The artificiality, the grotesqueness based on exaggeration, and the overlapping of different layers of signification, with its subversive dualism between the visualisation of a spectacular cultural product as if viewed from the “outside” and the simultaneous suggestion of potential intimacy and psychological involvement through a type of hidden, internal narration, are the features that bind Kovásznai’s latest painting style to the radical eclecticism of different postmodern schools that appeared at the end of the 1970s. Kovásznai’s painterly narrative thrives on the experience of the disintegration and fallibility of all kinds of monolithic – and thus necessarily reductionist, exclusive, and ultimately teleological – narratives. His references tend to include the different layers of the limitless cultural simulacrum into the visual reality of the picturesque painterly texture.

In this eclectic layering, the cultural simulacrum – with its fictional-imaginative, artificial realities – fills in the void that was created by the disappearance of the great utopias, by the disintegration of the real *sensus communis*, and by the indifferent parallel existence of various referential systems. It is along these lines that I wrote about him in 1990 that “Kovásznai’s painting is narrative and mannerist”. Kovásznai’s new narrative is the suggestive expression of the mannerist simulacrum that would become omnipotent, all pervasive, all encompassing, and that would be capable of integrating all cultural phenomena. In this regard, György Kovásznai’s painting from the 1970s can be paralleled with the neo-mannerist painterly paradigms, such as the American Bad Painting, or the subversively ironic narrative painting, and the German “Heftige Malerei”, as well as with the French “Nouvelle Figuration”, and the Italian “trans-avantgarde”. Paradoxically, his provocative irony, the confrontation of painterly paradigms derived from different cultural contexts, the absurdity of the anecdotal fragments, and the grotesque, quasi-autonomy of the figures do not negate the prevalence of a latent dramatic mood, which is presumably due to György Kovásznai’s search for an original intensity, his basic critical attitude and, to some extent, his loneliness. His unique painterly style is at once a part of an omnipotent, irresistible, boundless, all-pervasive, and integrating cultural simulacrum as well as its subversive, critical commentary.

In his animation films, we encounter a provocative, eclectic, quasi-heroic and hedonistic, subversive and intellectually complex, ironic, and multi-layered neo-mannerism coated with a theatrical artificiality, which is most forcefully depicted in the painting sequences of his film about the French Revolution, and in the above-mentioned large-format paintings made during the last years of his life. It is here that we see the materialisation of the gigantic simulacrum that pervades all cultural spheres.

There are several possible messages and interpretations of György Kovásznai’s life and work. In my opinion, the most authentic reading is the essay entitled *Charm*, which is centred around György Kovásznai’s engaging, intelligent, ironic, but always courteous, fine, and nuanced articulation of his personality. The individual who was once deemed a “dangerous literary hooligan” by the one-time secret report is in fact a prolific, cultured thinker representing an independent intellectuality, who reflects on contemporary life with a quiet, but subversive humour in a form of a slightly fatalistic commentary. He was also a solitary intellectual dandy, who early on had a fine sensibility for the emerging changes of the postmodern value system as well as for an antihierarchical, eclectic cultural orientation.

As I mentioned before, this elegant and innovative, creative and erudite, sarcastic and dedicated literary dandy, this painter, who daringly experimented until his last breath, and who reinterpreted the painterly traditions of the avant-garde as well as anticipated the postmodern radical eclecticism and its anti-monolithic, anti-hierarchical artistic approaches, was one of the most unique Hungarian animation filmmakers. It is maybe hard to imagine today that his creations were part of the 1960s and 1970s’ Budapest movie repertoires, scheduled between the news and the feature film, and were mostly followed by enthusiastic applause. After the screening of *A Painter’s Diary*, I was witness to a real collective catharsis, when for a moment, the perturbed audiences sat in silence, which was then followed by an enthusiastic ovation. This spontaneous enthusiasm, a sign of the audience’s gratitude, is rarely granted to an avantgarde filmmaker, or even more rarely to a painter or a writer. Presumably, this spontaneous success was due to György Kovásznai – and his partner, Dezső Korniss’s – creative genius, but there is another more deeply imbedded reason, which is the authenticity of narration! What Kovásznai set out to tell in the language of pictures and with the help of text and music was something that was experienced by the Budapest audiences of his time as their own true, heartfelt story, considered as their very own reality, or their very own emotional sphere.

In this respect, Kovásznai’s experimental animation films succeeded in translating a truly unique intellectual narration pertaining to Budapest into a popular, and visually absolutely contemporary, topical modern form. Moreover, he provided his audiences with one of the first visual commentaries of urban pop culture with its specific connotations and concretised emotional motives. The fact that this very specific, early pop culture of Budapest seemed to correlate in many ways to the one-time – and somewhat nostalgically regarded – old literary and coffeehouse culture of Budapest clearly proves the surely unique authenticity and cultural-historical relevance of Kovásznai’s narration.

It was at that time that Kovásznai’s friends and contemporaries – the filmmakers, fine artists, musicians, philosophers, and the friends of culture – were living their own modernist, existentialist, avant-garde life, paradoxically, within the parameters of a consumer culture. From the mid-1960s, a type of consumer society was taking shape – within the existing socialist framework – in the wake of the economic reforms and different consumer mechanisms that were introduced in Hungary in order to instigate the development of cultural tolerance and political consolidation. György Kovásznai functioned in this very intellectual milieu, in this immensely rich, vital, contradictory, exciting, conflict-laden, fully urban, modern, pop, hedonistic Budapest aura, feeding on the spirit of the Sixties; in a milieu that was at once uniquely prosaic and adventurous, changing, open, and critical. He functioned as a specific and particular micro-institution, with his own multi-directional connections and preferences, while he was, at the same time, able to preserve his position as a melancholic outsider, as an elegant, solitary, sarcastic and fatalistic dandy.

György Kovásznai had this rare capacity to continuously preserve his position as an outsider without it being offensive, hurtful, demeaning, or arrogant for the people around him. Kovásznai was seen to embody the position of a sensitive thinker, who was absolutely devoid of any prejudice, and was maximally open, tolerant, with a daringly and uniquely eclectic sensibility, whose way of thinking extended to highly disparate artistic orientations and preferences in taste. This nonchalant and elegant eclecticism was based on a unique anthropological generosity and wisdom: in fact, it was based on the realisation that no existing structure, no really functioning system is able to fruitfully prevail in isolation, confinement, or unnatural autochthonism, but is only able to thrive in constant reciprocity, in the tangible and changing, vanishing, and transitory forms of the existing systems of micro-communication. This is the type of wisdom that is rooted in a warm, lively, concrete, and instinctual anthropological sensitivity, supplemented with the faculty of self-irony, erudition, and brilliant witticism, paired with the elegant and sarcastic generosity of an intellectual dandy from Budapest.

## PREFACE

### **‘PERCEPTION IN TERMS OF MOVEMENT’: KOVÁSZNAI – AN ANIMATED SOUL**

You never know when history will insist upon its recovery; when the past will reassert itself and suddenly draw attention to something only some had valued, only some thought was lost, only some knew of in the first place. When Hungarian art historian, Gergely Barki noticed Róbert Berény’s exquisite ‘Sleeping Lady with Black Vase’, an art deco portrait of Eta, his second wife, in the background of one of the sets in the part-animated Hollywood feature, *Stuart Little* (Dir: Rob Minkoff, USA, 1999), he ignited interest in the popular press worldwide. Berény was a polymath across the arts and sciences; a contemporary of Henri Matisse; a friend and portraitist of Béla Bartók; a lover of Marlene Dietrich; a post-First World War émigré; a doyen of Budapest arts culture. Like many artists, though, his works left Hungary with Jewish owners fleeing incipient racism and persecution, and entered a cultural diaspora, and he himself saw little financial, social or even proper artistic recognition. Few outside of Hungary, or the narrow interests of art historians, have heard of him, yet his work is extraordinary. His story in many respects is not unfamiliar.

Animation scholars may well have been watching *Stuart Little* for different reasons – the impressive computer animation, for example, or the representation of a mouse, another in the long procession since Mickey, and the rise of the Disney studio in the 1930s. In recent years, though, the animation scholar, if not preoccupied with theoretical nuances or genre analysis, is looking to excavate, to recover, to celebrate animators and artists long in need of recognition and promotion. Radomir Pavičević’s single-minded attention to the work of Croatian Oscar winner, Dušan Vukotić; Ondřej Beránek’s documentary study and curatorial work on Czech director, Karel Zeman; Tjitte De Vries & Ati Mul’s exhaustive research on British stop-motion pioneer, Arthur Melbourne Cooper; Birgit Beumers’ important intervention on Russian choreographer and animator, Alexander Shiryayev; and the National Media Museum’s work in association with the Animation Academy, Loughborough University, making documentaries about TVC’s John Coates, producer Claire Jennings, animation director Geoff Dunbar, puppet-making studio, Mackinnon & Saunders, and former ASIFA president, producer and director, Hungarian, John Halas – of whom, more later.<sup>1</sup>

Brigitta Iványi-Bitter’s work on György Kovásznai is another necessary step in the recovery of absent but significant artists in the animation and broader arts field. Passionate and hugely invested, the discussion uses, reproduces and interrogates important elements of Kovásznai’s œuvre, analysing his largely un-exhibited paintings, unpublished essays and creative works, and his little seen animated films. The Animation community owes her and her research colleagues a huge debt of gratitude in that reassessing and drawing attention to Kovásznai’s work also opens a window on so many other contexts – pre- and post-Stalinist arts culture in Hungary; animation and its currencies across Europe from the 1950s onwards; the role and function of the animator-artist in the arts and society in general; the vital investment of scholars and practitioners as researchers and historians in preserving and conserving ‘lost worlds’. Bizarrely, the social and cultural status of animation particularly has stayed persistently low even as its works have unpacked across multimedia platforms and become the quintessential aspect of moving image culture in the contemporary era; an art then, constantly hiding in plain sight. Iványi-Bitter’s efforts, though, insist that Kovásznai is the latest significant artist through whom philosophic, aesthetic and cultural principles can be read via the prism of animated film, and equally, his paintings and writings.

György Kovásznai was clearly a gifted animator-artist; his paintings like his films imbued with mutability, motion and liminal images. Animation merely facilitated and extended the mobility of his figures and

forms in his drawings and canvasses, placing the world in both impressionist and abstract expressionist flux. His essays, ‘Self Interview’, ‘A Few Notes on Total Cinema’, and ‘Homeland Animation: Adventures with Takamura in the Hungarian Disneyland’, among others, are all revealing in unfolding a highly personal vision. The latter, written late in Kovásznai’s life, and shared with Japanese animator Takamura, places him in an imaginary dialogue with Walt Disney, here not subjected to the easy biases of conventional biographical narratives but constructed as a conduit through whom creative feelings and ideas flow through, seeking to find expression and a potential recipient. Not for Kovásznai, then, the conventional arguments about Disney’s commercial acumen or folksy outlook, or his understanding of animation as an industrial form and a film art. For Kovásznai, this is the Disney of Eisenstein, almost embodying Eisenstein’s principle of ‘plasmaticness’; a figure free from ‘once-and-allotted-form’, flowing through and between ideological and cultural idioms, dedicated to ‘animating’ life itself.<sup>2</sup> There is no great distance between Kovásznai’s vision of Disney and an understanding of Kovásznai himself. Trapped between the oppressive imperatives of Socialist realism and the uncertain and constantly shifting imperatives of the avant-garde, both in Hungary and abroad, Kovásznai was obsessively compelled to create; to remain endlessly curious; to remain unresolved in his deep enquiry about existence in anything but the attempt to find the means of expression to best exemplify his perception of the world and its reception of him.

It is this, of course, that tells us much about the fate of Kovásznai, and indeed, about animation itself. One need only look back to the course of action of another Hungarian émigré working in animation, John Halas. János Halász, was born in 1912. By 1930 he had already worked with George Pal in Budapest, learning the rudiments of animation, but the most important influence on Halas though, was the work of the Bauhaus, and the ideas of Walter Gropius, Herbert Beyer, and particularly, László Moholy-Nagy. Halas thus joined the Studio Műhely in Budapest, headed by Alexander Bortnyik, which followed entirely the Bauhaus principles; its early animation reminiscent of French pioneer animator, Émile Cohl, using the primacy of the line and animation’s intrinsic qualities of metamorphosis. The films also bear comparison with early American cartoons, but drew on playful Eastern European folk tales and dance idioms. Between 1932 and 1936, Halas left the Műhely and established another Budapest based studio, Coloriton, working with Gyula Macskássy and Félix Kasowitz, specialising in colour advertisements. Though Halas became acutely aware of the rise of anti-Semitism across Europe, his emigration from Hungary was less about being persecuted, and more a recognition of the real opportunity to develop his talent in England, making *The Music Man* (1937). Halas had both a commercial sensibility and an artistic outlook, and ultimately sought to realise his inherent utopianism in a more conducive context. Kovásznai, for all of his own utopianism – seen readily in his science-fictional interests and social philosophy – never saw himself as a commercial artist, nor someone who did not want to resolve his artistic and cultural challenges in anywhere but Hungary itself. For all his commitment to aesthetics and ideology, in deed, word and practice, Kovásznai was invested in his own material reality. For him, recognising and resolving ‘the universal’ was ultimately about what he could achieve in ‘the concrete’.

This may have been related to the specific politics of post-war Hungary simply in pragmatic ways, but it nevertheless consolidated his independence. As Dr. László Végh remarks, ‘He generally avoided the company of visual artists. He consciously avoided any attachments. He wanted to remain unbound at all times. This freedom had its positive and negative implications. The positive aspect of it was the choice of places where he

<sup>1</sup> See Beumers, Birgit, Bocharov, Victor, & Robinson, David. (eds), *Alexander Shiryayev: Master of Movement*, Pordenone; Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2009; De Vries, Tjes. & Mul, Ari. *They Thought It Was a Marvel: Arthur Melbourne Cooper (1874-1961) Pioneer of Puppet Animation*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009; Halas, Vivien & Wells, Paul, *Halas & Batchelor Cartoons: An Animated History*, London: Southbank Publishing, 2006 – book includes DVD; Pavičević, Radomir (ed) *Dušan Vukotić: The Forgotten Visionary*, Zagreb: Nacionalna Zajednica Crnogoraca Hrvatske / Skaner Studio 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See Leyda, Jay (ed), *Eisenstein on Disney*, London: Methuen, 1988.

turned up. He frequented a lot of groups, but belonged to none. He remained outside every circle'. Such autonomy, fuelled by his own unwavering convictions and contradictions, almost certainly compromised much greater recognition for his work locally, nationally and worldwide. When watching his short films made at the Pannonia Studio with Dezső Korniss, for example, this is hugely regrettable. In the banned *Monologue* (1961), Kovásznai possesses the playful wit of the Bob Godfrey collage films and the Polish scepticism and aesthetic irony of Jan Lenica; *Metamorphosis* (1964), like John Halas' *The Magic Canvas* (1948), starts with a statement of artistic intent, as if Kovásznai is insistent on the understanding of animated expression as a different kind of film-making; and in *Young Man Playing the Guitar at the Old Masters' Gallery* (1964) he uses popular and eroticised cultural forms to challenge and parody the embedded ideologies of state-approved or sponsored art, echoing some of the visual invention and implied critique in the compositions of Norman McLaren and Stan Vanderbeek.

In one of his essays, 'The Philosopher Steinberg', writing about illustrator Saul Steinberg, Kovásznai suggests,

The secret behind the Steinbergian art is eventually very simple: in his work, it is the idea that generates the style, which means that in his opus the dilemma of 'pressing it or making it quiver' is only a secondary priority. Steinberg is a philosophically inclined master-mind; his style is philosophy itself.

The idea of 'pressing it or making it quiver' relates to the intensity of the pressure in the pen or brush as indicator of the integrity of the artist and the idea expressed, and further that the very style of expression can carry with it philosophic principle. Clearly, Kovásznai's own work is invested with this concept – his own Steinbergian line in *Mirror Images* (1964) and *Tales from the World of Art* (1965) attests to this, bringing simplicity yet critical observation to arts culture, and the wider social world he felt inhibited by. It was a social world, however, that he was eager to imbue in his art.

One of his finest short films, *Joy of Light* (1965), is reminiscent of the animated films made by Len Lye and Norman McLaren under the auspices of John Grierson in the 1930s. The great documentarian, Grierson, commissioned abstract and experimental films simply because they *embodied* the freedom of expression that his sociological agenda and commitment to social and economic democracy was informed by. Kovásznai's work not merely embodies idea of freedom of expression, but crucially, personal experience, as he once more sought to align material reality with aesthetic style and philosophic idealism, all part of his own desire to apprehend the reality of 'social realism' and the 'modernist' freedoms it was *supposed* to represent. In this work, Kovásznai properly anticipates the preoccupations of 'animated documentary', both engaging with 'real world' activity and politics, and simultaneously, psychological and emotional experience. As Kovásznai himself stresses, 'According to our understanding, the word 'experience' expresses a psychological situation whereby one suddenly senses and comprehends something from the surrounding complicated world; a moment when you become overwhelmed by emotion and feel that your life has not been spent in vain'. It is clear that in all of Kovásznai's paintings, films and writings is a desire to capture the immediacy, clarity and feeling of such experience, but arguably, in his animated films, this is where it is best achieved and observed.

*The City Through My Eyes* (1971), *Nights on the Boulevard* (1972) and *Memory of the Summer of '74* (1974) are essentially Kovásznai's 'city symphonies', part of his own imperative to 'crystallise' the 'essence' of things as he perceived them, and the ambition to create an 'anima vérité'. This is not Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) or Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), but a hybrid of both; an animated version of the subjective perception of material culture. This more formally translates into the historical focus of *Song of the French Revolution* (1973) and his TV series, *This is Just Fashion* (1976) where documentary fact translates readily into experiential fiction in Kovásznai's caricatural style. Though it might suggest that Kovásznai lacked a signature style that defined his authorial credentials – and that, anyway, this was perhaps best represented by his painting – it is clear that he was absorbing other illustrative and graphic idioms that helped refine both his design and animation. In this he echoes the cartoonal freedoms suggested in TVC's *Yellow Submarine* (1968) and exploited by Ralph Bakshi in the USA in films like *Fritz the Cat* (1972), when the American animated cartoon seemed exhausted; and anticipates some of the caricatural iconoclasts of the contemporary era like Jerzy Kucia, Priit Pärn, Igor Kovalyov and Don Hertzfeldt. Kovásznai's virtually unseen animated feature, *Bubble Bath* (1980), best represents this tendency, seeking to push the boundaries of theme, expression and graphic effects, exploring the space between the expectations of the 'cartoon' and the graphic narrative avant-garde.

Kovásznai once stressed that 'Perception in terms of movement, in terms of a series of non-isolated phenomena, is a life philosophy'. In this one observation alone, Kovásznai could have been defining not merely his own style and outlook, but how animation itself becomes a rhetorical illusionism in the service of the subjective apprehension of material reality and the socio-cultural zeitgeist. Seemingly embedded in Hungarian culture, and unable to properly find the context in which he might best present his work and his own life-long engagement with the dynamics of both aesthetic and ideological dialectics, Kovásznai is not as known or celebrated as he should be. Thankfully, this welcome text helps to speak to this anomaly, and will hopefully stimulate further research and recognition.

Professor Paul Wells is Director of the Animation Academy, Loughborough University UK, and Chair of the Association of British Animation Collections. He has published widely in Animation, Film, Media and Screenwriting Studies, and is an established writer and director for film, TV, radio and theatre. He recently curated the major exhibition, 'The Beautiful Frame: Animation & Sport', which took place in the UK, Japan and China, based on his book 'Animation, Sport & Culture'. He is currently completing a fully revised and updated 25th Anniversary Edition of 'Understanding Animation'; a book on screenwriting drawing upon his worldwide workshops and developing projects for the global 'Digital Animalities' project.

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## PREFACE

### KOVÁSZNAI TODAY

‘It’s cool to wait’ is the title of a film by György Kovásznai made in 1969. We have waited too long, however, to discover this painter, filmmaker and theoretician. Now, thanks to Brigitta Iványi-Bitter’s wide-ranging and focused research, Kovásznai takes his place within the widening circles of his European and indeed American contemporaries. Illuminating comparisons and the reproduction of Kovásznai’s own writings, drawings and related documents add to the richness of this monograph.

The artist’s earliest experiments show him learning lessons from Cézanne and the post-impressionists at the Art Academy where he studied from 1952 to 1957. His penetrating if melancholic self-portrait of 1956 — that fateful year in Hungarian history — shows him penned in, yet with a sensitive hand on a sill; a window’s edge between two worlds. His graphic skills, the ability to capture the complex glance of a labourer in a café in pen and wash, are particularly striking at this time.

Then, however, with the move to Komló, and his experience of the harsh life of the miner, something changed. Although a convinced Marxist, with friends in the Lukács circle, Kovásznai’s disaffection, verbalised in his play *Rio*, his dissatisfaction with the quality of his comrades’ lives and the ‘hazy notions and empty words’ of theory led to a position of sharp critique. Even contemporary, politically-committed modernists such as Picasso who inspired colleagues and teachers would not do; he dismissed the giant as an ‘elderly Goethe’. The inspirational turn to caricature, the disjunctions of photomontage and the world of early animated films in Hungary came together to create an excitingly original œuvre. In the drawings of the *Miners* series, humour and exaggeration are added to works which maintain a certain pathos in labour and documentary detail. Strange perspectives anticipate the zooms and blow-ups of the camera lens; the relation to cartoon and film bestow a sense of speed and animation upon each individual drawing. In major oils, like *In the Mine* (1965) composed around the blue-lit, circular mine-shaft, these bold, perspectival games and characteristic handling completely reanimate well-known themes. Kovásznai’s figures, with wiry outlines, curved with muscular effort, make a huge contrast to the grimy upright miners in György Dobray’s photographs (their humanist equivalents, Bill Brandt in Britain or Willy Ronis in France, are well known). Cut and mounted on backgrounds with almost violent moments of pure colour, particularly red, these men from the past — frozen briefly in Kovásznai’s animated film — contrast with the aggression and the self-consciously wry, toothy grimaces of his contemporary worker-heroes. Their energy creates movements whose after-shock is felt in later films: the sense of militancy, of night-time protests and assaults on adversaries continued.

We must not forget that these were the years of Pop, and the years of Hungarian Pop, so splendidly revealed in recent exhibitions, where Kovásznai’s Academy contemporaries such as Ilona Keresü also underwent both formal and political metamorphoses, participating in the spirit of their times. Kovásznai was perfectly acquainted with the international art and film world, thanks to his job as art editor for the review *Nagyvilág*. His films dialogued with Eastern European contemporaries: the late surrealist tendencies of Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk (*House*, 1958), Witold Giersz’s splodgy, oil-painted animations (*Horse*, 1967), or Jan Švankmajer in Czechoslovakia, and even further from home, the collage films of the American Stan van Der Beck. (One imagines Kovásznai’s fun, cutting and choosing collage elements with his collaborator, Dezső Korniss in the Pannonia Film Studio from 1961 onwards). In 1967, the artist won a prize in Canada for his *Hamlet*, and participated in Montreal’s Expo ’67 with its ‘Man and the World’ theme (his 1966 contribution to the world Expo, *Thought*, is alas lost). Already, then, an international artist, could he have believed that at home, his friend and collaborator, László Végh, who provided the concrete music for his mining film and saved his sound archive, was informing upon him to the authorities from 1958 onwards. Kovásznai’s position as both ‘talented’ and ‘tolerated-supported’ artist is explained here.

While earlier films such as *Young Man Playing with Guitar* (1964) demonstrated a deep love for his Hungarian artistic heritage, and he worked with Korniss’s own brightly-coloured, Miro-like abstractions, Kovásznai’s own work as a painter continued. His *Sci-fi scene* (1967) offers a secret wink to ‘high art’ — to the nudes of

Michelangelo or Pollaiuolo’s famous *Battle of the Nudes* (1465) — as well as a nod to cartoon-heroine Barbarella’s male entourage, though the sensual handling is far from the flat world of the *bande dessinée*.

Kovásznai later turned to his city and its daily life. He becomes the epic poet of Budapest, with the immensely evocative *Diary* (1966), *A City through my eyes* (1971) or *Nights on the Boulevard* (1972). His characteristic black grounds not only suggest night life — with its bright neon contrasts — but the very depths from which his populated universe emerges, and an overall sense of melancholy, tempering his irony and eye for detail. Yet the loss of gravity of his figures — in all senses — offers simultaneously a ‘lightness of being’: we think of the writings of Milan Kundera in 1960’s Prague. An intensely beautiful black and white photograph, taken in 1969, shows Kovásznai frowning deep in thought — somewhere in-between Hamlet and Bob Dylan: the melancholy and the light, contemporary touch come together.

The ‘Eastern European’ artist’s homage to Budapest in fact inscribes the city within the network of capitals across East and West with their interchangeable lovers in cafés, in discos, or taking night-time strolls past ancient monuments or modern buildings. We are offered a city with its present and its pasts, whose specific cultural textures fuse certain unutterable memories with life in the political present.

Kovásznai reached out to not only the West but the Western revolutionary heritage. *Ça Ira: The Song of the French Revoution* is a film of perennial appeal, with its sharp-faced painted Voltaire, bloated green Danton, heroic Marat, and full-breasted, stripy Liberty. Bright complementary colours and bold, expressionist handling continue to energise our gaze. The possibility of exhibiting the individual paintings as sequences, in conjunction with film extracts or seances, goes beyond the parameters of this book; but here we can linger over individual portraits, each one an individual moment of creation, as we cannot do when watching a Kovásznai film.

Though the 1960’s revolution failed in Paris, as had the revolutionary protests in America, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* are Kovásznai’s watchwords.

He is indeed our brother, the brother in Britain for example of the Monty Python’s Flying Circus crew, with their hilarious, politicised humour and post-surrealist, wildly coloured TV films dating from 1969 to 1974. And of course, it goes without saying, when politics and the animation of drawings is at stake, he is the brother of William Kentridge, the South African artist who exhibited with Kovásznai in Budapest in 2011. Kentridge was himself astonished to find an unanticipated precursor, kindred spirit and political activist, so far from his own country in far-off ‘socialist’ Hungary.

Rather than see Kovásznai from the point of view of a Hungarian — an ‘intellectual dandy in Budapest’, as Lóránd Hegyi has characterised the artist, the view from the outside is one of discovery, analogy, sympathy. The crossing of genres and periods, Kovásznai’s hybridity and his audacity, once the source of contention, bring him so close to us: he is our contemporary.

Professor Sarah Wilson (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London) is an art historian and curator whose interests extend from post-war and Cold War Europe and the USSR to contemporary global art. Recognised as the international English-language expert on art after 1945 in France, her publications include Matisse, (Barcelona, Ediciones Polígrafa, 1992, 2009), Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968 (principal curator, and editor, London, Royal Academy, 2002), The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations, (London, Yale University Press, 2010; Paris, Les Presses du Réel, 2018); Picasso, Marx and Socialist Realism in France, (Liverpool University Press, 2013).

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD EDITION

György Kovásznai's work was extensively shown in international exhibitions and film festivals during the 2010s and early 2020s. Due to this wide scale interest his lifework is inspiring for so many people who are interested in art and animation. Kovásznai's legacy is relevant for film makers, painters as much as creative thinkers and art directors whose work blends concepts and practical processes from different disciplines such as painting, 2D animation, documentary film, drawings and illustration.

In 2006 when I set out to research Kovásznai's then hidden oeuvre, the scattered pieces of a puzzle slowly started to assemble through the video interviews of friends, colleagues and relatives, as well as through the research conducted in archives, libraries and film archives. A unique lifework unfolded in front of my eyes as I was reading his writings still sitting in a table drawer, and observed his paintings and drawings, I was fascinated by his sagacity and alertness already detectable from the time he was in his teens. I was taken by the way his works captured the very essence of this vivid life feeling throbbing in him and in the Budapest of his time, by which he created an opportunity for the future generations to see the 'city through his eyes'.

This unclassifiable solitary artist, who never joined any artistic movement, was simply working with such a degree of freedom that mostly precipitated perplexity and aloofness in the fine arts field of his time. Presumably this was what generated the suspiciously reigning silence around his work during and after his life. Today, however, it is exactly this bold and sincerely free 'language' that binds the curious future generation to him. The puzzle that I aimed to assemble in this book is mainly comprised of paintings that were wasting away for decades – mostly without titles or dates – in mouldy garages and sheds, as well as of films hardly shown after his death.

György Kovásznai worked as a filmmaker outside the institutional domain of fine art. In terms of the cultural representations of the era and in the cultural context that surrounded him, he was categorised as an animation filmmaker. Thanks to his painterly and playwright's approach, however, both his artistic and cinematic work developed in a direction that pointed beyond the established genres of art, with its complexity

breaking from the narrow category of being an animation film director. As a result of the changes that have occurred in the institutional, social and cultural position of art during the forty decades that have passed since his death, his oeuvre can be studied within the interdisciplinary framework of the visual arts. While the strategy that György Kovásznai chose for his art practice was quite exceptional in his times, it has become a more prevalent art practice. Thus, in terms of the present status of our culture, one could regard the institutional system of fine art as the unified receptive sphere of his work, being able to embrace and present the material and the contexts of this complex oeuvre both theoretically and physically.

In the three chapters based on chronology (1, 3, 5) the reader is introduced to the visual works. Furthermore, four chapters are centred on a theoretical problem in order to reveal the system of thought and discourse behind the paintings and pictures. However, the narratives in question have not been investigated and introduced from every possible point of view in this book, since Kovásznai's extensive literary legacy would require a book of its own: his novels, plays, short stories and poems would be able to fill another separate bulky volume.

I paid special attention to the process of recording seemingly mundane details, not just because I am a resolute anthropologist, but also because of the joy to see the era of the one-time Cold War Budapest through the lenses of the artist, through his thoughts and feelings.

My constructivist approach prompted me to elaborate a complex system of considerations that extended to film theory, culture theory, cultural anthropology, the history of institutions and ideas, in addition to traditional art historical classification.

This publication is special in the sense that in addition to presenting the artist's paintings and drawings, it comprises the entire body of Kovásznai's cinematic oeuvre, as a further undertaking aiming to rescue a highly valuable material ([www.kovaszalai.org](http://www.kovaszalai.org)). As a result of a long, devoted work, which involved the re-touching of negatives that were often in a rather poor condition, all the films were digitalised, thanks to the Hungarian National Film Archive.

cause we only had a light coat on and we were shivering from the cold,” reminisces Ilona Moizer, György Kovásznai’s younger sister.<sup>2</sup> The impoverished father, however, did not give up passing on his extensive classical erudition to his children. Oftentimes, at the cost of the parents’ even harsher indigence, the three children were able to frequent classical concerts, museums, and – despite their poverty – they were persistently nurturing the family’s upper middle class cultural identity established prior to the war. It was with a warm heart that Kovásznai remembered this when he lovingly said farewell to his stepfather Árpád Moizer in a letter:

*I received the first encouragements from you, father, regarding painting and drawing, you were the one to plant a deep appreciation for art and good taste in me, it was thanks to you that I grew up surrounded by tasteful furniture and paintings, and that I was able to learn to deem spiritual values higher than those transitory material ones. I also think about the fact that with what efficiency did you father manoeuvre us through the hardships of war, and the years after the war, setting an example of tenacious endurance and willpower in the midst of privation. And even under such circumstances, father, you were able to find time in order to reflect on my paintings, and in fact, your encouragements felt good and provided me with utter support.*<sup>3</sup>

The encouragement worked its miracles: he did not find the Grammar School with Italian specialisation satisfying. At the age of fourteen, he wooed his parents to enrol him in a free art school, while from the age of sixteen he intended to frequent an Art High School specialising in painting.

## “The curse-mannerism is something deeply foreign to art.”

In retrospect, he thought much positively about the free school run by Piroska Szántó and Jenő Béres, considering their work as a true art pedagogical achievement that prepared students for the fine arts profession with humanity and love. In fact, he rarely spoke with such appreciation of people in his life.

*I’m thankful both individually and jointly to my Masters, but I have to say that it was my first teacher, Piroska Szántó, who made a determining and till this day resonating effect on me in the winter of 1949, at the OTI [National Social Insurance Institute] Free School, where as an underage student, I needed my parents’ approval in order to be allowed to draw nude figures. Here, my teacher was instructing together with Jenő Béres. Piroska was imbued with an inspiring atmosphere – charm – simply because she was kind enough to lead her students, a few of those young beginners and retired dilettanti, into the Dark Forests as well as to the springs of joy on the bumpy road of artistic creation. Later on, throughout many years, I was in vain looking for the same charm in my other masters, from the death of Master M.S., the*

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from a talk with Ilona Moizer (B.I.) Eger, July, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> It was in 1970 that György Kovásznai wrote this letter to his stepfather, Árpád Moizer, whom his mother married in 1939, after her short troublesome marriage (when Kovásznai was five years old). The letter was made available to me by Ilona Moizer in 2008, at the time of our encounter in August.



Self-Portrait, ca. 1950, graphite on paper, 25 × 22 cm, signed at lower right, “Kovásznai”



György Kovásznai at the age of ten, 1944



József Kovásznai, the artist's father, 1933



The wedding of his mother and stepfather, Budapest, 23 September 1939



Family vacation (György Kovásznai in the centre, his younger sister and mother beside him, and on the other side his aunt and her children) at Lajosmizse, 1950

### 1.1. EARLY ENGAGEMENT

## “I have learned to deem spiritual qualities more valuable than those transitory material ones.”

“In 1956, when meat and bread ration cards were implemented, there was nothing to eat, and suddenly the news came that a train, packed with food, was stationed at Rákostrendező [railway station], so the people immediately flocked there from the neighbouring places in order to acquire some food for themselves. Gyuri [Georgie] also joined the people. Thus, the entire household returned with large, stuffed bags with goose and bread. Mother asked Gyuri, well son, what did you get a hold of, what are we going to eat? So, Gyuri revealed a litre bottle of ink, saying that this was all he brought along. Because this was what he needed.”<sup>1</sup>

Kovásznai’s resolute personality laden with a strong calling for the arts was soon to manifest when, at the age of fourteen, he announced his family his intention to become a painter at all costs. This meant a considerable ordeal for a family just barely getting by. During the war, his parents (his mother and stepfather) lost their stylish flat in Zugló (an elegant neighbourhood in the Pest side of the capital), along with their fortune, so from 1945, the family with three children lived in a one-room apartment (consisting of one common room and a kitchen perhaps, without a bedroom) in Angyalföld, a traditionally working class district.

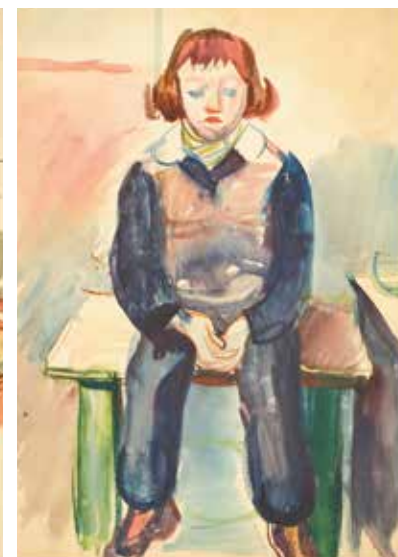
“Those were hard times. Gyuri didn’t even have a winter coat; also for several years, father was surviving the winters in a trench coat, us girls were sent home from the paper gathering organised by our school, be-



Mária Hamvai, György Kovásznai’s mother, 1956, watercolour on paper, 32 × 24 cm, unsigned



Mária Moizer, the artist’s younger sister, 1956, watercolour on paper, 32 × 24 cm, unsigned



Ilona Moizer, ca. 1956, watercolour on paper, 32 × 24 cm, unsigned



Árpád Moizer, György Kovásznai’s stepfather, 1966, crayon on paper, 32 × 24 cm, signed and dated at lower right, “Ez az atya! [This is Father!] Kovásznai G.Gy., 66-6-3”

<sup>1</sup> The writer’s talk with György Kovásznai’s stepsister, Ilona Moizer. Eger, July, 2008.



*The Exam*, ca. 1950, watercolour on paper, 19,5 × 20 cm, inscribed at lower right, "A vizsga" [The exam]



*On the Border*, ca. 1951, watercolour on paper, 28 × 38 cm, unsigned



*Still-Life*, ca. 1952, 30 × 30 cm

<sup>4</sup> György Kovásznai, *Charm. Reflections on Piroska Szántó's book*. Manuscript, Budapest, 1982. This short essay created in connection to Piroska Szántó's book, *Balaam's Donkey* (1982), is a reminiscence of the high school years, the professors, the colleagues, and Szentendre.



*Still-Life*, ca. 1952, 30 × 50 cm

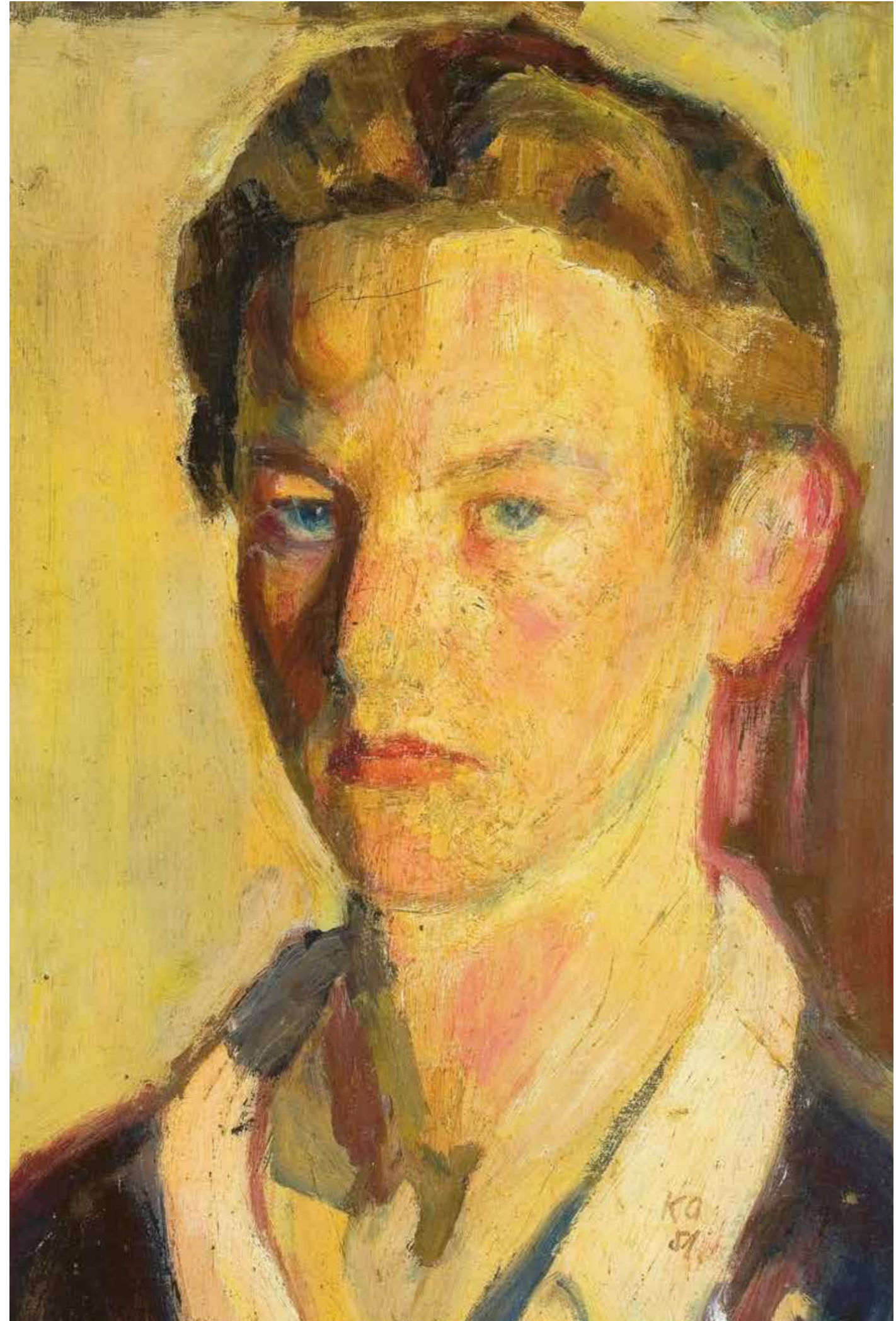
»  
*Self-Portrait at the age of seventeen*, 1951, oil on canvas, 44 × 31 cm, signed and dated at lower right, "KG 51"

*Hungarian art practice was by no means characterised by the divine – Hölderlinian – affability, but instead, by some crossness, mordancy, savage self-destruction, grieving smothered in pipe-smoke, narrow-mindedness, and sedateness. I was never able to decide whether these 'notable' characteristics were the offsprings of bone-crackling and blood-freezing sense of duty or simply the outcome of time-serving cleverness, or more likely, the profane appropriation of Vörösmarty and Ady's prophetic rage against the "Hungarian Wasteland" and upon the cursed Magyar fate, put to practice.*

*But luckily, Piroska Szántó enlightened me much earlier, making me understand that this curse-mannerism is something deeply foreign to art, and that the most natural medium of art is – after all, this is was its raison d'être – gaiety, affability, sunshine, happiness, gracefulness, in other words, charm; the charm with which she presented us back then, her meek and open-mouthed spiritually impoverished ones. She opened our eyes to Rippl's heart-warmingly intimate pastels, in order to accentuate, above all, the tame, tolerant, affable, delicious, humane features of our respectable tradition. And all this was done during the winter of 1949, Good God!<sup>4</sup>*

## “We just didn't feel up to the asphalt”

His critical attitude, paired with a sense of deep introspection, was further strengthened at the Art High School. All of this later set the backdrop for the controversial reception of his artistic œuvre, which was usually followed by wonder and conflict. Between 1950 and 1952, he spent two inspiring years eagerly preparing for the artistic path at the Art High School, which was the nationalised legal successor of the Fine Art School (Licée) in 1950. At the school, Kovásznai specialised in the highly regarded and liked branch of panel/easel painting under the director of studies Andor Kántor. The talented classmates keeping together as much in student pranks as in studying were: Ilona Keserü, János Major, József Bartl, György Kovásznai.





Art Academy report card,  
dated Budapest,  
1 September 1952



György Kovásznai's high-school class  
before the school-leaving exam, on the  
stairs of the National Museum,  
Budapest, in the spring of 1952

“Two or three mornings in a week we painted, primed canvases and learnt the techniques; drawing was separately taught by Ferenc Sebestyén. We were able to paint freely without the constraint of any determining attitude; in fact, we were a happy bunch,” reminisces József Bartl. “Kovásznai was soon to stand out with his personality, perception of colour and knowledge. He introduced us to the art of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Picasso, with music and literature, and this knowledge followed us through life. Kovásznai was drawing with a certain slackness and ease; we were all marvelling at his unique vision of colour.”<sup>5</sup>

“At that time, the National Gallery’s collection was kept in the Károlyi Palace near the high school. Kovásznai would snuggle some of his portrait studies into the museum under his coat in order to compare them to a portrait by Ferenczy or to some other work he found good. From the Hungarian painters we liked Ferenczy, Rippl-Rónai, while Kántor also drew our attention to Nagy Balogh and Kosztka. We frequented the Fine Arts Museum and its library. We were exploring the impressionists and the old masters, Raphael, Goya, and Greco. Cézanne was his god. We surely went a few hundred times to the museum on Sundays to see Cézanne and the impressionists. By this time, the official critics deemed Munkácsy the utmost example to be followed, but we refused to give it agency, we did not feel up to the asphalt. Gyurka’s paintings always filled me with a sense of wonder; for example, the way he would use colour to depict an apple, it was imbued with life and mass like a sculpture. While painting, Gyurka always whistled tunes of Mozart or Beethoven.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The writer’s talk with painter József Bartl. Budapest, July, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> József Bartl, *Reflections on György Kovásznai – Art High School, 1950-1952*. Manuscript, Budapest, 1994.

»  
*Still-Life, Study*, ca. 1956, watercolour and ink  
on paper, 38 × 25 cm, unsigned



*Self-Portrait*, ca. 1956, mixed technique on  
paper, 38 × 25 cm, unsigned

Kovásznai reminisces about those years in his essay, *Self-Interview*:

“At the art high school’s painting department, Andor Kántor taught the ins and outs of handling pigments, priming the canvas and observing reality. It was also there that my honourable teacher and school director György Z. Gács, with his respectable erudition in art education, assured an art-historic continuity during the “Rákosi era” by overlapping and transforming the then mandatory naturalist landscape painting with the grand old masters’ grandiose unveiling of reality. In other words, instead of Laktionov and Sándor Ék, he focused our attention on Velazquez, Goya, and Cézanne, and well, what can I say ...he has brought about a joy of creativity, which spared us from the dogmatism of both naturalism and avant-gardism... and during these significant years he taught us things that we couldn’t have possibly learned anywhere else.”

“Who else were your ‘fortunate’ classmates?”

“First of all, I think of János Major and Ilona Keserü.”

“How were your works classified at the high school?”

“All the way through our academic years, the three of us were the most eminent students. A year before the entrance examination to the Art Academy, my high school teachers had informed the professors of the Art Academy, Domanovszky and Bortnyik, saying that I paint like Gauguin and draw like Dürer.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> György Kovásznai, *Self-Interview*. Manuscript, 1976, p.1.



*Portrait (Dávid Farkas)*, ca. 1952, oil on canvas, 73 x 57 cm (Collection of József Bartl)



*Woman against a Red Background*, 1952, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm, signed at lower right, "Kovásznai"



*A Moustached Man*, 1952, oil on canvas, 73,6 x 57 cm, signed at lower right, "KOVÁSZ"

## “Amidst the most rigorous political surveillance thrived the most incredible artistic and pedagogical dilettantism.”

At this time, the Art Academy was imbued with a different atmosphere from that which Kovásznai, admitted straight from high school, or any of his class mates, would have previously been acquainted with. During the Rákosi era, the Art Academy was the institution responsible for replenishing the official artistic life functioning under the surveillance of a strict party state. This was to the utter surprise of the eighteen-year-old artists: *Maybe we were a bit overly presumptuous in those days, or better said, me and a few of my colleagues I mentioned earlier. We perceived all this as natural, but then it soon dawned on us that this was the end of our merry and innocent high school times as we found ourselves exposed to a completely different value and thought system...*<sup>8</sup>

“By that time, the Academy was ruled by the atmosphere of strict Munich academism. Here, the bitumen was taken quite seriously. We were made to draw a single gypsum head with a sharp pencil for three weeks. It was only in the second semester that we were allowed to draw with coal. It was difficult for Gyurka [Georgie] to come to terms with this Munich mentality, no Van Gogh, no Cézanne. One would be met with suspicious looks once reading books of such content.<sup>9</sup> Not only József Bartl, but also János Major evoked similar memories about his close friendship with Kovásznai, lasting until 1960, and their mutual school experiences: “I regarded him as highly as my paragon with whom I shared a common ground. I always imagined that the two of us were like Goethe and Schiller, only I did not know who was which. While we were friends, I got to know and learn everything about the world through Gyurka; the very awkward and helpless boy as I was, I would never have dared to go alone to those places he frequented. Already, at a reasonably young age, Gyurka had a well rounded education; it was from him that I learnt about the impressionists and Cézanne. I have a favourite anecdote in regard to this<sup>10</sup>: “One day we went to the Fine Arts Museum with Gyurka, as he had an idea that we should look at the prominent masters again, but this time comparing them to his own paintings. Before we entered the museum, he hid one of his paintings under his coat and then we stopped before a Cézanne painting – where luckily, the guard was unable to see us. He took out his painting and bid it against the masterpiece. I was cheering for Cézanne, for his painting to win. But Gyurka kept reasoning until his painting actually seemed more superior to that of Cézanne. I’ll never forget this. He was so inventive to think of such

### 1.2. ART ACADEMY: 1952–1957

<sup>8</sup> Kovásznai ca. 1976, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> The writer’s interview made with painter József Bartl. Budapest, July, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> József Bartl recounted the same anecdote.

Kovácsnai was unable to comply with the curriculum developed under the Rákosi regime's cultural/educational policy. During the Stalinist dictatorship, not only the Academy, but also the art scene in general, was expected to serve and do justice to the prevalent propaganda art under the banner of socialist realism. The Moscow *ukase* prescribed realism and the national tradition as the compulsory model to be followed; this is how 19th-century Hungarian realism and Mihály Munkácsy became the invariable protagonists of the official art scene. It is worth noting the different layers of signification comprising this certain realism, since it was only superficially supported by the easily acceptable ideology of clarity.

Meanwhile, the nature of representation was nonetheless determined by the party (see the list of suggested themes for the orientation of artists in the magazine, *Free Art*, published in 1950<sup>14</sup>); thus this ensured the control over the depiction of reality. At the Academy, they taught the students what the acceptable themes were and how they could be accurately executed. By the end of the first year, Kovásznai already understood that this education had no agency whatsoever. He voiced his objection in an openly provocative manner: *The Tragedy of the Freshman*, his genre-like play unmasking the Academy professors, was presented in the Academy's banquet hall in the spring of 1953.<sup>15</sup> The play was entertaining but also offensive to many, so it was only presented twice as mock ceremony for the first-year students. The roles were played by Kovásznai's classmates.

*The play begins with the school director's speech:*<sup>16</sup>

«  
*Self-Portrait, Kovásznai's Mother from Profile, and  
Hand Studies, ca. 1956, watercolour and ink on paper,  
25 × 38 cm, unsigned*

<sup>11</sup> The writer's talk with János Major, October, 27, 2007 (On the occasion of János Major's exhibition opening at the Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest).

<sup>42</sup> István Hajdu's interview with János Major, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> The writer's talk with Ilona Keserü, September 30, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> *Szabad Művészet [Free Art]*, 1950/1-2, p. 60–61.

*The Tragedy of Man*, a seminal poetic drama by Imre Madách from 1859 is considered one of the poetic works of Romanticism dealing with universal problems of humankind. In 1913, this prominent play was re-written by another prominent Hungarian writer, Frigyes Karinthy, who imbued the momentous historical periods in the play with humorous and ironic overtones (*The Tragedy of the Little Man*). This revised drama became a popular genre from the 1930s; thus, Kovásznai resorts to the same form in order to ridicule the history and the ruling situation at the Fine Art Academy.

<sup>16</sup> Translator's note: Translations of excerpts from Kovásznai's body of literary work are only illustrations, and were by no means meant as official poetic translations.

invitation to the second performance of  
the play, *The Tragedy of the Freshman*  
("Introductory for New Colleagues"),  
dated Budapest, 1 September 1952



BORTNYIK:  
 The dark mist of the past still lingers  
 here,  
 The extinct past engulfed in dark sepul-  
 chre,  
 The past of chaos and confusion where,  
 Oh loathsome misery, was breeding what  
 You know as formalism, poor history!  
 Distorted was the face of art and grim,  
 Without a human, oh misty clouds and haze,  
 To venture forth and hit upon new ways.  
 May he be cursed! To the hell with him!

CHORUS:  
 T...  
 To the hell with him!

BORTNYIK:  
 Should they discern a patch of green so  
 pale,  
 They rushed for blue and soaked the canvas  
 through,  
 Racking their brains: oh what a common-  
 place  
 To have the nose above the lips,  
 So let's put it on the hips  
 And stick the navel in its place.

*The devil argues with the director as follows:*

LUCIFER:  
 The spirit of individual freedom  
 And the phantom of modernity am I,  
 I came to negate and deny,  
 Not to spend time with empty talk.

BORTNYIK:  
 Negation? Is that all you know?  
 Make a drawing if you can.  
 I ban you from this house and  
 Be happy as a clam  
 If you may save your skin.

*Lucifer is trying to woo Adam, the first-year student:*

ADAM:  
 Mr. Bortnyik, give me strength to compose,  
 Is it tone or light under the nose?

Lucifer:  
 What is art, after all? Would you know?  
 Art is unlimited, bondless freedom,  
 Squatting, reclining, dancing to your  
 daddy,  
 Throwing snowballs in the summer paddy,  
 A pocket full of posies and manure of the  
 horses,  
 Distanced substance,  
 Paintings, statues by the dozens,  
 Embroidered muzzles on the brothers,  
 Underwater portrait of your mothers,

Triangular clouds over meadows,  
 Auntie Suzy behind huge walls,  
 Triangles and pentagons, quadrangles and  
 hexagons  
 One after the other, queuing up for butter  
 cakes and rolls!  
 Can't you gather from my voice, what a  
 ridiculous task you have undertaken, my  
 poor thing? Come with me, I will take you  
 to a more edifying location

*A while later, after Adam is scared out of his wits by the  
 Registrar's Department:*

ADAM:  
 Ah, Lucifer, please tell me why it is so  
 That the office, an unavoidable evil,  
 Is made so cumbersome and numinous,  
 With severity and sneaking insinuation,  
 Cops-and-robbers terror and malicious joy  
 To replace humanness?

LUCIFER:  
 It's high time you open  
 Your sad and dreamy eyes,  
 Can't you see, my little fool,  
 They are enemies of yours?

*Kovácsznai did not only choose to mock the Academy but also  
 the artists' main patron, the Picture Gallery National Com-  
 pany, which was presented with great irony in scene seven:*

/Picture Gallery National Company. Counter.  
 People standing in line. Grand Juror who  
 collects the paintings. Adam is standing in  
 queue, with Lucifer at his side.

CHORUS OF THE QUEUERS:  
 To the counter, to the counter,  
 Let's make our way to the counter,  
 Our work is promising,  
 Hear the money tinkling,  
 We have left no canvas empty,  
 Mass-produced is every entry,  
 Tractors, buildings, railway stations,  
 Kept in line with expectations,  
 Edifying every inch.  
 Quality? Don't you worry,  
 If you painted all through summer,  
 Just line up here, to this counter!  
 Long live the National Company!

A BEARDED MAN /TO A MADE-UP WOMAN/:  
 And why are you jostling? When did you get  
 here?

MADE-UP WOMAN:  
 I have been here since 1950.

SOMEBODY:  
 That long ago?

MADE-UP WOMAN:  
 Yes, only, at times I would go to Csepel<sup>17</sup>  
 to paint...

THE BEARDED:  
 Csepel, Csepel...Are there any sheep in  
 the sunset?

MADE-UP WOMAN:  
 No, there are no such things. In Csepel  
 there is "The car factory on the Side of  
 the Danube", in Csepel there is the "First  
 of May in the Királyerdő forest," in  
 Csepel there is the "Comrade Muszka Get-  
 ting out of the Fast Train," and in Csepel  
 there is the "Portrait of István  
 Szodorai."

THE BEARDED /DUMBLY/:  
 So there are no sheep.

MADE-UP WOMAN:  
 If you go there, there will be.

BEARDED /WAVING AROUND/:  
 What kind of a language is that? I beg  
 your pardon! I would like to see what you  
 painted before the liberation. Women play-  
 ing guitar with their breasts hanging over  
 the strings! I know your shades of pink!  
 Aren't you Mária Szántó? You used to paint  
 orchids in in-laid flower-pots.

ADAM:  
 Lucifer, I'm in such a dilemma.

LUCIFER:  
 What's the matter, darling?

ADAM:  
 Are...are these the bearers of the social-  
 ist culture?

LUCIFER /MOCKINGLY/:  
 What is socialist culture?  
 What is socialist realism?  
 From the enemy of Holy Individualism  
 They named their boxes,  
 As a stifle for inspiration.

GRAND JUROR /TO ADAM/:  
 Well colleague, let's see: what did you  
 bring?

ADAM /SHOWS IT/:  
 Here you go.

GRAND JUROR:  
 I need the title, it's most important.

ADAM:  
 Why should it be baptised? It is clear  
 that  
 The painting carries a sense of feeling  
 and life in it.

GRAND JUROR:  
 The title please, we are in a hurry!

The dimensions are to follow, it is very  
 easy.

ADAM:  
 Well, anyone could see from a mile  
 The female bricklayer's lovely smile.

GRAND JUROR /TAKING OUT A NOTEBOOK/:  
 So, a bricklayer girl. And smile, ha?  
 What could we do without her? /He is look-  
 ing up the word in the notebook/.  
 Blooming Fields, Boardroom with Comrades,  
 Boilermakers at Work, Bolsheviks, Brick-  
 layers, Ah, I've got it. Bricklayer girl!  
 Let me see /He starts gabbling./  
 "The bricklayer girl as an obligatory  
 figure at construction sites. Good spir-  
 ited and roaring laughter is what keeps  
 her going. An optimistic forehead, on  
 which blond hair shines in the sun; fiery  
 red blouse and ultramarine boiler-suit  
 complement her snow-white teeth. A yellow  
 folding yardstick over her left breast is  
 an essential element to complement her  
 colours; she stands in the background, be-  
 hind symmetrically heaped mounds of sand.  
 Above her head, two fleecy clouds smile at  
 one another; behind her back, sinewy-  
 necked bricklayers move to the momentum of  
 good working spirit. On hearing the sound  
 of the steam horn, the foreman is filled  
 with exhilarating passion for life, and he  
 straightens his back, just for a moment,  
 to wave farewell to a white dove in  
 flight. The usual dimensions are 2 x 1,5  
 m, or at least 170 x 30 cm. The theme  
 lends itself to placement in public  
 spaces, office waiting-rooms as well as  
 table-tennis halls."

Now then, let me see the picture. Hmm.  
 Well, well. First of all, this is too  
 small. Secondly, this woman does not smile  
 at all. There is some smile in her eyes,  
 but none on her lips, let alone a roaring  
 laughter. As to the colours, it does not  
 look like it was painted in the summer,  
 and moreover, I can only see three people  
 in the background This is not how things  
 should be. Take it home as it is, paint it  
 in double size, and don't spare the vivid,  
 reddish and bright colours!

See you later!

<sup>17</sup> Csepel is a large island in the  
 Danube, south of Budapest, a working  
 class borough with industrial com-  
 plexes. The "Red Csepel" workers were  
 "the mythical avant-garde of the prole-  
 tariat" during the communist era.



*Self-Portrait, ca. 1957,*  
watercolour on paper, 43 × 31 cm, unsigned



*Self-Portrait, ca. 1957,*  
watercolour on paper, 43 × 31 cm, unsigned



*Study of a Nude, 1956, oil on cardboard,*  
35 × 25 cm, unsigned

It becomes obvious from the play’s overtones, written at the age of nineteen, that already at the end of the first year, Kovásznai understood that his “masters” will hardly be able to provide him with the knowledge he was seeking. This is how he reminisced about these experiences two decades later:

*“You were kept on a short leash...”*

*“But this wasn’t the problem. I would have loved it if they have had me on a short leash, as I’m able to be manically diligent, and find hard discipline reviving...This was about something completely different... Instead of being kept on a short leash, they mauled us about; the masters enjoyed a total autocracy, although – with all due respect to the exceptions – they were unworthy of any professional title... It was a hell of a story... A hundred times more talented professors would not have been able to find their way in this overly complicated moment in art history. Amidst the most rigorous political surveillance thrived the most incredible artistic and pedagogical dilettantism.”*

*“Thus, would you all together discredit the art pedagogy of the fifties?”*

*“Not in the least. I completely agree with my former colleagues, that we, who suffered the most in that art academy (even though coming from the art high school, our marks in professional subjects were better than average) were not wasting our time there. Even the professors, such as Fónyi, Kádár, also Sándor Ék, not to mention Bernáth and Barcsay, were all smitten with a sense of stubborn, often rigid and distorted, almost touching devotion – excuse me for my somewhat pretentious phrasing ... To what end?... For the sake of unveiling reality, the unfolding of the spectacle, the phenomenon, and all this for the sake of unravelling the essence, this being a kind of avid obsession: to stick to the model, inch by inch, progressing nuance by nuance, to develop, to refine and to perfect, and finally to bring the study to the highest state of identification with the model. This was just as much a categorical imperative and an Archimedean point as the epoch’s unquestionably simplified, schematised and forced social agendas... The aim was right and magnificent, but the methods were tragically primitive.”*

*“Sounds like in retrospect you think of those schematic times with a sense of nostalgia...”*

*“Ha-ha-ha, yes, certainly there is something to that, as it is always with a sense of softness that one recalls periods in one’s life when things seemed so innocently simple...There was, nevertheless, in this predominantly bad art education a latent ingenuity... How could I put it ... You see, the eyes of the art students had to be cemented onto the model ... The students were not to move away from the model ... they had to watch... If they couldn’t go on and felt like escaping, they were chased back ...and their nose thrust into the model... If they turned away, they were hit on the head and forced to turn back to the model... If they stepped back to acquire some distance from the model, they were kicked back closer... Even if they could no longer breathe, it didn’t matter... and then the student comrade was either suffocated... ha-ha-ha... the poor wretch...”*

*“Or?”*

*“Ha-ha-ha, or... developed gills... in the midst of this misery, developed and grew a peculiar, shortwave antenna out of their flesh...”*

*“And you? Did you also grow that?”*

*“Ha-ha-ha-ha, have you ever heard of Husserl? Yes, the philosopher Husserl... Well, it would be a bit long to go into this now... Any given segment of reality is a model for phenomenological inquiry...”*

*“And?”*

*“Ha-ha-ha-ha, no, no... the painter should be dumb, as Károly Lyka would say: the painter should be dumb, or else, he’s going to be slapped, ha-ha-ha...”<sup>18</sup>*

At the end of his first year, Kovásznai was recommended to leave his specialisation in painting, while they intended to transfer him to the graphic art department. One of the reasons for this was his play mentioned earlier in this chapter; on the other hand, as a pupil of the Fónyi class, he chose to paint with clean colours, while he was trying to negate the mandatory use of the greyish colour scale in the Fónyi class. All of his classmates would recall the anecdote, according to which, as a sign of his contempt, Kovásznai would often remark of Fónyi that “if one brings an apple into Fónyi’s class, by the end of it even that would turn grey.” At that time, the *sfumato* was raging among the students; many of them used asphalt as a base. That was in vogue.<sup>19</sup>

During the September of 1953, Kovásznai wrote a letter to the rather authoritative director of studies about his transfer to the Graphic Art Department:

*Dear Director of Studies,*

*From your letter, sent on July 30th, I was informed that you transferred me to the Graphic Art Department. The measures taken in this case have resulted in my utter disappointment, more so because my studies at the Art High School and the year spent at the Academy firmly assured me that I was on the road to become a painter. In my case, this is not a fleeting idea but a long germinating decision.*

*If there is a way, would you please allow me to continue my specialisation in painting? Please take into consideration my paintings made at the art colony in Karcag.<sup>20</sup>*

He was granted to continue his second year of studies in Fónyi’s class, but as time went on, he could hardly bear to subject himself to this master–pupil relation in a class where he was unable to value his professors.

“From early on I realised that nobody was able to influence me pedagogically; I was usually always well-mannered and perfectly stubborn.”

In 1954, his constant confrontations with Fónyi’s expectations and his voiced views on painting led him to pursue his studies at the Liberal Arts College, but he did not gain permission into the program. He was unable to feel one with the atmosphere and the ruling mentality at the Art Academy. He was yearning for more viable experiences; this is why he decided to leave. This is the way he expressed this in a letter: “To gather real experience from the proletariat.” From August 1954, he worked in the mines as a trammer and hewer up until the spring of 1955; then moved back to Budapest, and for months he continued living as a factory worker. This yearning to physically become one with the so-called proletariat, this type of committed and eager pursuit of experience was hardly at all characteristic of Kovásznai’s contemporaries, especially the artists. These types of individualistic life-paths became more frequent at the end of the 1960s, due to the ideological resonances of 1968. Kovásznai’s committed Marxism, curiosity, and his belief in the possibility of ‘socialism with a human-face’ (this is the original terminology) was the strongest in 1954, up until when he finally experienced the miners’ disillusioning quotidian reality. Two decades later, while reminiscing about those years, he thoroughly explains the reasons for his seemingly eccentric decision: *At the end of the second year, with a high average in my report card I went to the registrar’s office and announced that I do not intend to continue my studies at the Academy... Are you interested to hear further?...I was intrigued by the proletariat, I had an incessant yearning for the proletariat as for an ideal that was always being referred to, but from which we were completely isolated – just as from real life – at the hermetically sealed Academy, except for a few clumsily organised field trips to factories. [...] But at that time, as an Academy student I would have expected them to wisely nurture this belief and enthusiasm that developed in me. And here comes perhaps the most important thing I would like to say: I expected to get from society something more avant-garde than the Western avant-gardism, something more novel from the Western novelties. This, however, I did not get; so I was overcome by a wild hunger for life, which was somehow connected with the fact that I fell in love with the working classes and, slightly madly yet sympathetically, I thought that if I had immersed myself into the life of the factories, mines, and industrial units, through personal experience, thrown directly into the everyday dimensions of the workers, circulating in concrete life, and acquiring real, human, working connections – if I had come into contact with the Real Model – well, then my anyway truly logical and correct presumptions would have surely proven to be true and I would have taken part in an art school that was finally more avant-garde than the avant-garde, and more novel than any novelty.”<sup>21</sup>* (To be further elaborated in the second chapter.)

It was during the time he spent in the mines that Kovásznai, at the age of twenty, began to concern himself seriously with Marxism and the analysis of the interrelatedness of socialist art and the avant-garde tradition. During this time he kept a correspondence with Aurél Bernáth, whom he deemed the most respectable among the artists teaching at the Academy. Aurél Bernáth was one of the most prominent, but also somewhat contradictory, figures of the Academy and the contemporary artistic milieu. His firm attitude against abstract art, his affiliations with the leftist movements before the war, his considerable professional knowledge and his loyalty to the system made him apt for the title of Head of Department after 1945, when the Academy was reinstated. His name always came up during larger state commissions; for example, in 1952–53, together with Szőnyi, he was commissioned to create monumental mural paintings at the newly built Népstadion (People’s Stadium) subway station. On the one hand, his public appearances were marked with a determined, overt critique of contemporary West-European artistic trends, and on the other, he was most supportive and loyal to his “modernist” students at the Academy.<sup>22</sup> For the twenty-year-old Kovásznai, Bernáth represented an idealised connection to a prospective sympathetic – softer – sphere of Hungarian art scene, which at that time, appeared to be the sole acceptable alternative toward pursuing an artistic career. In October 1954, in a letter to Bernáth, he writes the following:

<sup>20</sup> The original letter was preserved by József Bartl.

<sup>21</sup> Kovásznai, *ca.*1976, p. 3–4.

<sup>22</sup> György Szűcs, “Így jöttem. Altorjay Sándor indulása” [The Way I Got Here. How Sándor Altorjay Started]. *Altorjai Sándor* (2003: Budapest, Műcsarnok – Első Magyar Látványtár) Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Research Institute for Art History, Budapest 2003. Occasioned by Sándor Altorjai’s retrospective exhibition.

<sup>18</sup> Kovásznai *ca.* 1976. p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> A talk with painter József Bartl. Budapest, July, 2007.



Cabbage Field with Trees, Study, ca. 1953, oil on canvas, 19 × 35 cm, unsigned

## “Contemporary Hungarian art keeps gesturing ahead, while limping backwards.”

*The most considerable fault of art pedagogy is that it does not provide the students with perspective. I want to be honest with you, Master: You are the only leading figure in our contemporary art scene. Of course, you can afford to do it because of your vast knowledge. [...]*

*Master, many from the generation after Derkovits and Attila József intend to continue the work of their grand predecessors with true faith and fervour. It solely depends on them if they are to follow, while there were never so few living paragons as now. [...]*

*I’m writing and reading at the moment. I’m also mining, but it serves me well, since I spend every moment among the people, amidst a rain of experiences. And a future writer is in a great need of this. [...] I have only been working here for three months and already wrote ten short stories. Besides, I took over all the local libraries, and my friends from the Liberal Arts College in Budapest are also sending me the newest books and the best topics of debate. I am trying to catch up with things. [...] You, Master, got all the way to Petőfi, while the most of us got till Attila József (I don’t know your views on this subject), but we are incapable of surpassing Attila József.*

*We would need to keep awakening the sensibility of a common faith, and beyond ensuring complete artistic freedom, we also need to establish appropriate forums for those whom ‘God allowed to bemoan their sorrow!’*

*As Attila József said: ‘Weigh yourself with the universe!’<sup>23</sup> Passion is what contemporary art lacks the most.*

*Sometimes one would like to see the face of Hungarian art in the second half of the twentieth century. But it is covered by mist or some kind of a heavy fog, so that without a certain degree of familiarity, one would think it is bespectacled and has expressionless fish-like eyes, it is motionless while screaming, it flings about in the air*

*with its wilted hands, and it is gesturing ahead, while limping backwards...*

*We need to be careful to keep the interaction between life and art healthy and vivid. And everything will work out. We need to help socialism so that it can help the artists in return. [...]*

*Colour and form, colour and form – this is the rhythm my classmates follow. Do something to stop this! They believe that those who would be able to conceive a monumental ideological work are unwilling to do so, while those who would want to, alas, are not apt enough. This is why they feel discouraged.*

*They need life! They need to indulge in elaborating the staff of life and different themes!*<sup>24</sup>

His next letter was written from a different mine in December 1954:

*I’ve transferred to Tokod, it is closer to Budapest, although I would live in Paris most of all. Once the danger of war is over, I shall concentrate all my liberated energy on clarifying what human responsibility entails in this life. In fact, there are no positive or negative heroes, good or bad, blue, red or yellow, only the ones with reflexes that depend on their environment. But nonetheless, it is essential to hold ourselves responsible.*

*It is with such versatility that Picasso depicts humans and life, just as they are. I believe, this sensibility will be the basis of the upcoming socialist art.*

During the spring of 1955, Kovásznai returned to Budapest from the mines where, according to the accounts of his friends, he wrote close to thirty short stories. Only a few of these manuscripts survived. These literary works are the proof that Kovásznai thoroughly investigated the effectiveness of the proletarian ideology in everyday reality. But at the same time, this did not result in his disappointment with Marxism at all. Not yet, though he was more readily tormented by bad premonitions about the general political atmosphere after Stalin’s death. His poem, *Toward 1955*, voices the premonition of a new war, the feeling of solitude, the individual’s desertedness within society, and the sensitive artist’s melancholy evoked by the ignorance of the masses as well as the prevalent fear of the Cold War. This poem, which Kovásznai sent along with some others to Aurél Bernáth when he moved back to Budapest, was preserved by Aurél Bernáth.

*Security was here; now it’s gone.  
No one talked of it in the street,  
slowly they walked home  
to retire for the night.  
Drops of mist fell into the narrow tree laps.  
[...]  
Radioactive blood: spurting and bursting,  
It is you that gushes from our mouths instead of speech...  
Reasoning and arguments  
we have given enough  
always ready for compelling reasoning.<sup>25</sup>*

In May of 1955, he approached Bernáth to help him enter the third year of studies at the Fine Arts Academy. He wrote the following letter to him:

*If they take me back, from ‘55/56, I’ll be, once again, a student of painting (third year).*

*My practice, memories, and my unchanging determination call for this specific genre of expression. I’m obstinate in my diligence and determination.*

*In the course of this year, I have strengthened my Marxist world-view; I would easily confront any quasi-Marxist bluff. My temper and experiences would make me surpass the limits of ‘X.Y. Master’s Correcting’, the ‘Mother in the Kitchen’, or ‘The Homecoming of the Student Labourer’.*

*Of course, it’s not about the thrilling, colourful illustration of miner stories, but about colours and forms, faces and the city: a new interpretation of the motifs of my environment.*

In the autumn of 1955, with the help of Bernáth, he once again enrolled in the Fine Arts Academy, joining Bernáth’s class. Although, at the end of his fourth year, shortly before graduation, in the summer of 1957, he was thrown out of school due to unsatisfactory marks.

This is how he reminisces about this event in a later biography: *Bernáth was utterly surprised that he had no influence over me whatsoever. During his practice of many decades he had never encountered such a case. Half jokingly he warned his students not to listen to me, as I was Satan incarnate. But at the same time, he urged me to paint the way I wanted to, and promised to cover for me. But what shiny example of gentlemanly spinelessness he demonstrated when, during the distribution of final marks, he cowardly retreated in front of Domanovszky and others, so as a result, I was kicked out.*<sup>26</sup>

The most viable reasons for his expulsion from the Academy were due to his rejection of the contemporary art pedagogy, his harsh critique of the nonsensical Zhdanovian aesthetic imperatives, and his constant opposition and arguments with the professors.

It is from a fragment from his writing, *Self-Interview*, that we can understand more closely Kovásznai’s views about this period:

<sup>25</sup> Fragments from the poem entitled, *Toward 1955*, preserved among the correspondences of Aurél Bernáth. MTA Manuscript Archives.

<sup>26</sup> *Curriculum Vitae*. 19 September 1962. Written for the Pannonia Film Studio on his employment.



*Miners*. 1955-65, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), irregular trapezoid format, approx. 18 × 23 cm, unsigned



*Miners*. 1955-65, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), irregular trapezoid format, approx. 18 × 23 cm, unsigned



*Miner Working in the Mine Tunnel*, 1955-65, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), 31 × 42 cm, unsigned



*Miner*, 1955-65, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), 22 × 31 cm, unsigned

“Well, of course, I was full of speculative nonsense! But from whom could I have expected an answer?... From whom could we – talented classmates – have gotten an answer?...From poor Mr. Fónyi, who painted those wretched pictures?... Or from poor master Barcsay, who altogether sidetracked the drawing class ...”

“Barcsay?”  
“Uh-huh, Barcsay. Barcsay and his atelier anatomy. The unfortunate drawing as such, as professional knowledge objectified into a thing, the workshop-bonelets and the workshop-muscles, orthopaedic shoemaker’s workshop, the corpus, as lecture hall phenomenon.... my friend, reality was cooked and presented as de-concretised soap. He sidetracked the kids in one shot!... And yet, the old man was good, I still love him, I’m still grateful to him... He helped, and certainly not only me, to launch our antennae, if we didn’t want to drown among the common draperies, the stained cubes and the bones that belonged to a crypt! Those disgusting graphite studies with their black-lead lustre, those unhappy Barcsay-women and men in their own cruel clumsiness, which would count as excruciatingly badly drawn figures even if they were meant as puppet-theatre puppets! [...] These statically defective formal complexes crippled everyone who came anywhere in their vicinity. Mule forms, you see, mule forms.”

“What do you mean by mule forms?”  
“God forgive me, the mule forms come into being precisely due to a lack of philosophical clarity. The problem itself is extremely complicated. If I remember well, Lajos Németh writes in his brilliant essay in the memorial album, ‘Csontváry–Anno 1975,’ that Csontváry strived to reconcile the sensualist axiom with the concept of the idea... [...]”  
“[...] The Renaissance idea conception finally crumbled to pieces under 19th-century positivism. In Csontváry, it was just this that was unprecedented and fantastic, that even with the passing of universal faith, he behaved as if universal belief still existed, upon which a monumental œuvre could be constructed. And with this, naturally, he humbled his contemporaries, who – in an understandable defence – ridiculed him.”

“But let us return to Barcsay...”  
“All right. Most importantly, the practice of drawing – professional knowledge – can be derived from two sources. Either from universal faith, i.e., on the basis of the idea conception, which implies a collective ideal; or on the basis of a non-collective, individual-sensualistic, positivistically–individualistically solitary venture of discovery. Perhaps I would modify Lajos Németh’s extremely profound train of thought only in that the idea conception did not simply flow into 19th-century academism. What actually happened was that from the idea was formed, or more precisely, was deformed, the so-called “professional” knowledge, the paraphernalia of whose establishment was ensured by an academic curriculum, which in turn, was based on the pedagogical foundation of natural studies and figure drawing, which however, contrary to its own idealistic origins, is sensualistic–naturalistic. The result – Lajos Németh, I believe, is again completely right – is academic eclecticism. And it was precisely Barcsay who would become its later practitioner. Thus, if I dare to speak to you about atelier anatomy and mule visual art, I don’t do it out of disrespect, but rather because I feel bitterness for the reason that in our revolutionary era, an antiquated and orthopaedic ideal, an ideal alienated from life, a pseudo-professional ideal was inflicted on a series of generations.”



György Kovásznai and his best friend and academy fellow student Sándor Juhász (to the right), 1957

# 2.

## THE MEETING OF MARXIST AND MODERNIST UTOPIAS IN KOVÁSZNAI'S WORK



György Kovásznai, 1972

### 2.1. THE STUDY PERSPECTIVE

“We have to concern ourselves a great deal with politics and that in a proper manner.”

Thirty years after the democratic change took place in Hungary, we necessarily consider the attitude of the 1950's emerging generation to modernism from a perspective that is different from the way they defined their relation to it, whether they referenced it as Marxism or humanism, or perchance as Western decadence or technocratism. From the distance of all these years, we have to posit that modernism can be conceived as an invariant of the Cold- War era. Whether one speaks of its Eastern or Western version or of the prestige of science and an unchallenged belief in the necessity of development, the crucial elements of modernism served as key points of reference in both “halves of the field”; the fabric of culture was produced within this paradigm here as well as there. In the epoch following modernism, the outcome of the Cold-War era's cultural competition is regarded from a different critical position than back in those years. What makes this issue so relevant? First of all, since Kovásznai was concerned with the legacy of modernism throughout his life, by exploring his approach to it, one may gain a clearer idea of his artistic position as well. On the other hand, any artistic output during the socialist regime should also be interpreted according to its relation to modernism. How can we reconstruct Kovásznai's approach to art? What domain of references did he employ in his contemplation about art?

Kovásznai's relation to modernism cannot be unequivocally described as that of acceptance or refusal. While at times he uncritically internalised the position of an avant-garde artist, at other times he strongly negated this position. In order for us to clearly see such a wavering distance between himself and the modernist artist's position, let us examine what the credo of the avant-garde artist consists of. As Rosalind Krauss contends, “The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic. He has also preached a variety of creeds. One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. (...) More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.”<sup>1</sup> Kovásznai's relationship to the concept of originality, of uniqueness, cannot easily be determined. One should just think of his frequent practice of utilising earlier works as quotations, like, for instance, the expansive series of paintings he made for his film *Ça Ira: The Song of the French Revolution*, which is a remake of the French Impressionist topics and method of painting in a more expressive form. One cannot



*Socialist Industrial Landscape*,  
ca. 1950, oil on canvas,  
32 × 46 cm, unsigned

clearly state that he would strive to mark out a radical zero point in his own works, in rejection of traditions. Both in his films and his paintings, he explicitly marks his relation to different traditions. At the same time, this relationship is often intertextual, whereby the indexed period/style/artwork of the past becomes the subject of his own interpretation, which he attracts to himself through an alienating gesture, simultaneously marking its place in relation to himself. Kovásznai does not uncritically identify himself with what Krauss names as the two fundamental functions of the avant-garde – namely, the illusion of the artist's originality and the illusion of the original state of the painterly surface; on the contrary, Kovásznai's intertextual and intermedial practice may most often be viewed as a postmodern gesture. In her exploration of the avant-garde as a historical construction, Krauss regards the deconstruction of the modernist notion of origin, like the discourse of the copy, a postmodern position, which is sharply distinguished from the modernist practice. She draws our attention to the fact that we examine the relationship to modernism from the direction of the postmodern, which acts “to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition”.<sup>2</sup> It is through a similar gesture of distancing that Adorno contributes to the interpretation of the relation to modernism, prompting to examine the decisive influence of the historical and social space surrounding the art practice.

<sup>1</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England: The MIT Press, 1985), 157.  
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.



A Soviet Soldier, ca. 1956 (a page from a sketchbook), ink on paper, 30 × 21 cm, unsigned

Socialist-Realist Composition, ca. 1950, watercolour and pencil on paper, 25 × 26 cm, unsigned



The Miner Series, ca. 1955, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), 22 × 31 cm, unsigned



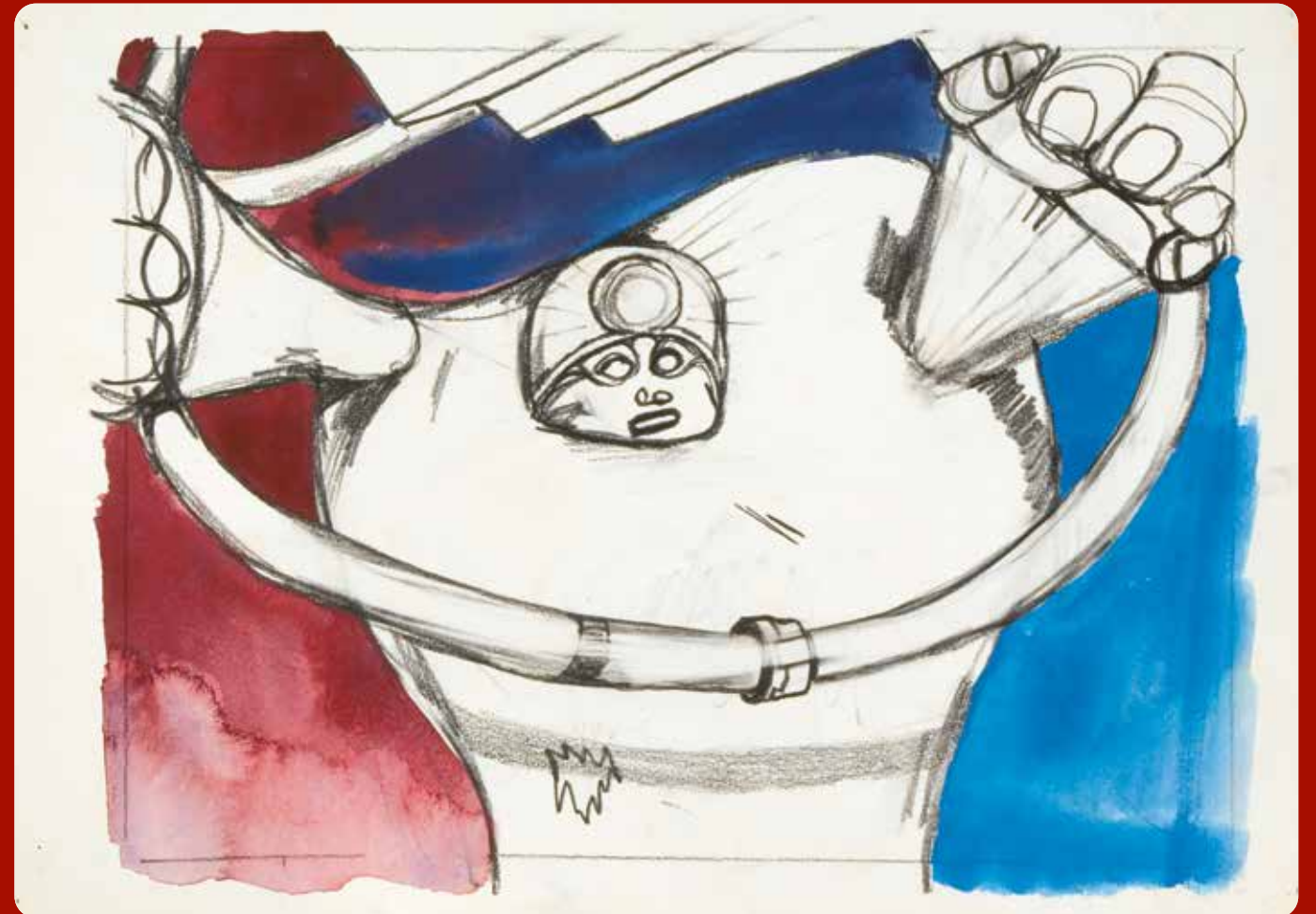
Hanging, ca. 1956 (a page from a sketchbook), ink on paper, 30 × 21 cm, unsigned

“Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not,” Adorno wrote.<sup>3</sup> “...we need to acknowledge that the constituent components of the concept of art are made up of ‘a historically changing constellation of elements.’”<sup>4</sup> For a better understanding of Kovásznai’s work, one must take into account the conditions of the contemporaneous art scene, such as the all prevailing state financing, the nature of state-monitored meeting points for artists (e.g., the Young Artists Club, the Association of Hungarian Artists, and film clubs), the complete lack of an independent art market as well as the specific structure of the public sphere. Consequently, in an attempt to position Kovásznai’s work within the cultural arena of Cold-War Europe, it must be made clear in the first place that it will not be done by adopting the modernist concept of art but by its very deconstruction. Although today we cannot perceive Kovásznai or anyone of his contemporaries as an autonomous artist the way it was understood in the modern period, we nevertheless should not neglect the fact that for a progressive artist of the time, such as Kovásznai, the concept of autonomous, i.e., independent art valuable in its own right, was a fundamental proposition. “Although the assertion of aesthetic autonomy was central to art in the modern period, it is open to dispute whether it is a *necessary* feature of art in post-traditional societies. Just as we can trace the emergence of aesthetic autonomy at a certain period in human history, so we can chart its decline in advanced art practices after the loss of the authority of canonical modernism in the 1960s.”<sup>5</sup>

Taking the concept of site-specific art as a point of departure, we are placing the Cold-War era’s modernist concept of art as a moveable frame around our analysis of Kovásznai’s work. Only by placing and removing this frame can one fully comprehend the change of meanings his œuvre has witnessed since the demise of Communism in this country. The present chapter aims to explore Kovásznai’s relation to the prevalent concept of art of his time.

Leftist engagement, which is essentially a classical avant-garde artistic position, certainly remained Kovásznai’s attitude as well.

It is worth examining more closely how Kovásznai responded to the major intellectual debates of his time, to the leftist discourse that until the fall of Communism refused to abandon the practice of drawing a parallel between Marxist doctrines and the “actually existing socialism”. Such an investigation is all the more indispensable because Kovásznai extensively wrote about his attitude to both Marxism and modernism. This is why this chap-





*The Miner Series* - paintings, ca. 1955, mixed technique on paper (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), 22 × 31 cm, unsigned



ter, through reconstructing his involvement with the mainstream leftist intellectual debate, strives to highlight those points that demonstrate his individual position.

Initially, Kovásznai had fully entered into the spirit of a warrior fighting that cultural war, but from the 1970s onward, it was from an increasing distance and from a growingly relativist perspective that he viewed the place value of his own activity within an arena readily shaped by cultural politics. According to his friends' reminiscences, from the start he was rather an existentialist than anything else, refusing to be part of any group-in in his striving to retain independence from ideological indoctrination.

During the early 1950s, one could seldom find an emerging artist with an in-depth knowledge of Hungarian literature, history, and art history, who would also devote a large portion of his time to analysing the then prevalent political situation. It went without questioning in those years that the first thing one had to learn was socialist ideology on the bumpy road of political orientation.

So did Kovásznai, who began to study Marxist doctrines very early on. Subsequently, he maintained a close friendship with the members of the Lukács circle, first of all with the philosopher Ferenc Fehér, but he was also a frequent visitor at the "orthodox" Stalinist group's meetings at the Százéves (Hundred Year Old) Restaurant, where Lukács was also a regular.<sup>6</sup>

Kovásznai was twenty years of age when he began to voice his ambivalent relation to the proletariat and the reality of socialism in his private letters. He was increasingly concerned with the isolated university life and its academism. As a prospective writer and painter he felt an urge to look for real existential conditions and quotidian situations that he could utilise as points of departure for his texts and paintings. From the start, a crucial problem for him was the fundamental issue of historical avant-garde, that of reducing the distance between art and life. Tired of the narrow confines of the Fine Arts Academy, he quit the academy at the end of his second year, to work in the mines. Naturally, what he found there had little to do with the glorifying procla-

mations of party propaganda. As early as at the age of twenty, he put into writing his bitter and precocious experiences both in the form of letters and dramas.

His first surviving texts related to Marxism date from around 1954. This was the time when he broke off his two-year studies of painting at the academy, to move to the mining city of Komló (in Southern Hungary) so that he could gain personal, hands-on experience of the miners' life. Several of his dramas survived from this period, based on which he made the film *Joy of Life* in 1965. Set in the socialist mining city of Csorgó in 1955, his four-act drama *Rio* features paupers, migrant workers and party workers coming from different regions of Hungary, who express their increasing disappointment and dissatisfaction with the existing regime in an unpromising and bleak environment. He puts words of harsh criticism in the mouth of a character named Baracs, a fifty-year-old migrant worker from the Budapest Garay Square (in one of the poorest districts of the capital):

*The state is being built here. Right here, on our corpses! They economise on our self-rescue masks, but of course, the state needs the coal. Man is the most valuable asset, but self-rescue mask: there is none. [...] The system is equally exploiting both of us: Bolsheviks and Fascists alike. There's no difference, man! The material situation is determining; this we learnt from you. It is true. And we are both poor toilers. We are human, my pal Joe: we are worn out and exploited old coots above all. [...] The Communists derided the Bible because it contained Heaven, but what they themselves could come up with is again no more than the heaven of the future.*<sup>7</sup>

Protagonists of the play, the workers wander aimlessly about all their lives, having only two types of cure in mind for such a purposeless existence: frequenting the local pub, and weaving dreams about fleeing to relatives and friends who have already emigrated. The people presented by Kovásznai are frustrated and narrow-minded; they are as much unable as unwilling to live a life that corresponds to the Marxist ideal of the proletariat. The outlook on life outlined in these plays basically nails the prevailing regime down to the original Marxist principles; and as is natural, to no avail. Just as the characters of his writings would not live to see the rise of the proletariat to its life-altering heights, so did Kovásznai fail to stage his plays and publish his short stories.

At the start of his artistic career, Kovásznai was connected to the very intellectual debate that was most characteristic of the leading intelligentsia's critical position during the 1950s and 1960s; i.e., criticising the system from the left without suggesting any need for its improvement toward a possible "human" form of socialism, yet deeming it unacceptable in its existing form.

The characterisation of socialist workers that he met in real life was imbued with cynical overtones outside the literary context as well. He voiced a similar opinion in private letters to artist friends:

*I hope that you at the Academy show professional development. But please take into consideration the lessons I learnt here in Komló, among simple people.*

*These people are still underage, intellectually primitive, almost totally lacking an outlook on the world, wavering and unpredictable. As much as I strain my eyes, I cannot detect any clear-cut political standpoint. Public morale here always equals the wages. There are no positive or negative heroes. The standard of life is above subsistence level; consequently, not even God Almighty would find a worker who is an activist and loyal to the party. The people hate fighting, the big slogans, and politics. They would only be concerned with it as long as they suffer from it. We, however, who intend to do something for the people's sake as well as for our own glory, have to concern ourselves a great deal with politics and that in a proper manner.*

*Marxism itself rejects the big state traditions and customs as well as the transformation of the most salient fighting slogans into hazy notions and empty words.*<sup>8</sup>

Translating his experiential knowledge of the proletariat's situation into aesthetic views, he writes to his friends from the Academy about what and how it is worth painting for the people's pleasure by disavowing socialist realism's familiar range of topics during the early 1950s:

*Artworks born in the spirit of Dutch genre painting could meet with the greatest success these days. One must appeal to the emotions, to instincts.*

*Jancsi [János Major – ed.'s note], I think that instead of 'Liberation', you should rather paint 'Diners', 'Bathers', 'Hikers', and 'Lovers'!*

*Don't worry; it won't be 'apolitical' one bit.*

*If Jozef [József Bartl – ed.'s note] painted still lifes, he could make much bigger success than Ék or Kádár did. Once I proposed Jancsi to paint life as it was, if he had reservations about ideological subject matters! Jozef, you replied that you would, then, be kicked in the ass; i.e., the way you think of it, you would definitely be kicked in the ass. Life for*

## 2.2. THE PROLETARIAT FROM CLOSE UP

<sup>7</sup> György Kovásznai, *Rio*. Play in four acts. (Manuscript, 1955), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> György Kovásznai's letter to József Bartl and János Major, with the sender's address on the envelope: 1, Voroshilov Street, Komló, 2nd Floor, Room 21. October 1954. Information courtesy of József Bartl.

<sup>6</sup> According to information housed at the Lukács Archives (and based on discussions with Ágnes Heller), Kovásznai frequently met Fehér, as was also mentioned by many of his friends during our conversations.



Film stills from *Joy of Light*, 1965, celluloid  
(35-mm film), photography by György Dobray



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Paintings for the film *Joy of Light*, 1965,  
25 × 34 cm, unsigned  
(Collection of György Dobray)



*the masses is more beautiful than we believe it. You can only create successful work if you feel to be one with them; i.e., with the masses. If things work out right, you will know my views on this in depth from my short stories. Naturally – don't you laugh – in printed form.*<sup>9</sup>

At the age of twenty he writes his plays entitled *Rio*, *Paxit*, *Good Luck!*, and *Old Bums*, thematising the everyday life of workers as he witnessed it at the mine, with full inner identification with the role of a writer sharing the proletariat's experience of life, doing justice with an impetus similar to that of poet Attila József. His scathing remarks on the artistic output that reached a wider audience in the 1950s can be read in his letters from the mine:

*We are reluctant to go beyond Attila József. The examples of Zelk, Kónya or Kuczka are not inspiring. The atmosphere of literary periodicals is suffocating. They hack to death the progressive historical figures and events, along with the peasant problem. The road more travelled is the right one.*

*Besides that, there are quite many polemicists whose names often appear in the newspaper, although they compare to György Lukács or Mehring as the local parson compares to St. John Chrysostom, the Golden Mouthed. [...] I have tried, in all instances, to start from the classical figures of Marxism. I believe it is the only true philosophy. It's funny how apt the critiques are these days, and how bad the works are! Passion: this is what we are missing the most! [...]*

*Those who want to work in art today have a hard task. Our time simply raises unheard-of questions, but is compelled to postpone their solution to the future. We have never been so dependent on one another, on our mutual trust and respect, and yet, we are confronted with mistrust and malevolence all around. [...] I think we are archaic, transitional individuals of an unprecedented, new epoch.*<sup>10</sup>

In 1976, he renders his experience with the working classes during his years at the academy in more finely nuanced tones, tracing his own relation to the proletariat back to the very Marxist principles. In his text entitled *Self-Interview*, he assumes the role of both the interviewer and the interviewed, revealing his pro and contra positions. Here he is even more critical about the direction painting took in the 1950s, with its striking controversy between the agitating, exclamatory rhymes of propaganda and the freeze-framed, limited visual vocabulary of socialist realism. At the same time, he does not strive to sound scientific; he writes about his recollections in a soaring essayistic style, whereby he is often explicitly carried away while generalising certain conceptions. His style is characterised by sudden rushes of memories and baroque-like periodic sentences of irony and nostalgia.

*"Let me remind you that the precursor to the aestheticising mentality of our present painting and its alienation from life is 'socialist realism', which is referred to nowadays with a certain degree of contempt. It is odd, indeed, that things have become so complicated, but the truth is that our painting, from Rákosism all the way up to today, is in essence of an 'atelier' mentality. At most, the difference is that in the fifties it was the 'workers' ateliers' that were made, while today there are 'atelier ateliers'... If only the painting of the fifties had truly been militant, leftist, and loyal to the party... Let me correct that: if only that painting had truly gone to leftist, militant and propagandist extremes!... Well, then, I would not have left the academy. But instead, that painting became..."*

*"It became what?"*

*"It became distilled."*

*"There is no contradiction in this: it is not your discovery; socialist realism's alienation from life is a commonplace."*

*"Well, if this were truly such a cliché, then all the years that have passed since, which were spent with a painstaking avoidance of the previous mistakes,... well, these subsequent years, would not have passed in the spirit of further distillation, hermeticising, de-politisation, and what is most disastrous, de-concretisation. Hungarian visual art collapsed not as a consequence of party ideology, but owing to its being historically de-concretised."*

*"The situation of visual art in Hungary was never particularly glorious..."*

*"Of course: of course, we should steer clear of inflated declarations. [...] I was overcome by a wild hunger for life, which was somehow connected with the fact that I fell in love with the working classes and, slightly madly yet sympathetically, I thought that if I had immersed myself into the life of the factories, mines, and industrial units, through personal experience, thrown directly into the everyday dimensions of the workers, circulating in concrete life, and acquiring real, human, working connections – if I had come into contact with the Real Model – well, then my anyway truly logical and correct presumptions would have surely proven to be true and I would have taken part in an art school that was finally more avant-garde than the avant-garde, and more novel than any novelty."*

*"And what experiences did you gain in life?"*

*"First of all, I realised that all those who partake in productive labour stand in the frontline of a civilisational–human fight with Mother Nature, as it were, being in direct contact with dead matter through bodily and nervous sur-*



<sup>9</sup> Letter from György Kovásznai to József Bartl and János Major. Komló, October 1954. Courtesy of József Bartl.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from György Kovásznai to Aurél Bernáth. Komló, 25 October 1954. MTA / Hungarian Academy of Sciences Manuscript Archives.

Film stills from *Joy of Light*, 1965, celluloid (35-mm film), photography by György Dobray



*A Mine in Red*, 1955-65 (included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), watercolour and pencil on paper, 31 × 43 cm, unsigned

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*In the Mine*, detail, painted after the 1955 sketch in 1965, oil on canvas, 180 × 190 cm, unsigned

faces, which means an acutely coarse contact with the world. Their act of organising this dead matter is the very first gesture of exploration and organisation: they represent the triggering impetus in establishing contact with the material world, and it is through this very act, that is, through these primary operations, that they get to know something; more precisely, they can simply sense something that those who only represent the secondary phase of such a civilisational construction – whose work does not concern nature itself but the human world – cannot know and cannot sense... Well then, those who work and sweat in the first lines partake in such pleasures and experience such calamities due to sensual immediacy that it leaves every other life experience for me as pathetically defective, speculative, miserable, and evil. By way of its very directness and absolute freshness, more precisely, because of its immediacy, productive labour could match the level of supreme meditation. Compared to these qualities, secondary spheres of life, which are based on bits of information, are necessarily doomed to tardiness, since each piece of information is only a historical account. Consequently, the world of information is always somewhat disinformed, as the latest bits of information, knowledge, and communication are, to some extent, outdated. This means that such a truly well-informed state can only be recovered through the works of great artists, for they are essentially able to turn such rancid information into fresh images where, owing to the very fact that it is brought about through the work itself, information remains evidently fresh, much as it is at the initial, ‘perspiring’ phase of civilisational work.”

“All right, then; but it is the civilisational work that generates the phenomenon of culture, that which you consider defective and evil...”

“This thought is at a high school level: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Standing waist-high in surging matter, a worker grips these materials and rough-processes them, so that in the analysis of the antithesis, at the level of negation, questioning, dubitation, alienation, consciousness, i.e., at the cultural level, these will continue foaming and vaporising... Now, how am I to round off this somewhat circuitous train of thought? Artistic activity as such is utter nonsense if it aims at anything else than releasing culture now and again from this – otherwise entirely self-evident – state of alienation and division against itself. In short, a good piece of art provides us with fresh information, which means providing us with correct information; i.e., with true information. I think, this is not at all foreign to us who have studied Marx, because an art-work that provides us with passive information on reality goes beyond the passive speculations of metaphysics – just as Marx-Engels’ ‘change of reality’ does.”<sup>11</sup>

Even in hind-sight, Kovásznai perceives his experience of the 1950s in the light of a Marxist interpretation, while he examines the role of modernism from a similar viewpoint as well.



<sup>11</sup> Kovásznai 1976. pp. 4–6.



*The Miner Series*, ca. 1955, mixed technique on paper  
(included in his film *The Joy of Light*, 1965), 22 × 31 cm, unsigned

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*Mine Tunnel*, detail, painted after the 1955 sketch  
in 1965, oil on canvas, 150 × 250 cm, unsigned





### 2.3. HIS RELATION TO MODERNISM

*Revolutionists 1973* (included in his 1973 film *Ça Ira: The Song of the French Revolution*), oil on paper, 43 × 62 cm, numbered at upper right, serial number



*Workers at the Shipyard, ca. 1956*  
(a page from a sketchbook), ink on paper,  
30 × 21 cm, unsigned

It is important to clarify the perspective from which Kovácsnai approached art: from the side of socialism or from the Western version of modernism? The question must also be posed, from which perspective could the artist, living as he did under the socialist regime, see his position as “more avant-garde than the avant-garde”? From the point of view of socialism or from that of modernism? Would this dilemma be resolved by the fact that Kovácsnai started out from Marxist theory?

While Kovácsnai became engrossed in Marxism, he raised objections to the bigoted socialist state ideology, under whose aegis Bernáth, in line with his official duties, rejected everything created outside a precisely determined form of socialist realism, i.e., all that which was allied with the contemporary Western approach to modernism. In a letter to Bernáth dated 1955, he brings forth Picasso as a positive example: *Picasso depicts man and life as diverse as they are. I think, this approach will serve as a foundation for the new socialist art.*

The integration of a celebrated star of modernist painting into the framework of socialist aesthetics was an outrageous idea for Bernáth, and one to be rejected. Other artists, however, including another professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Gyula Hincz, openly imitated Picasso.<sup>12</sup>

This idea introduces Kovácsnai's theory of rapprochement between Western modernism and Eastern socialism to create an art that is “more avant-garde than the avant-garde”. In an article published in 1961, he still regards Picasso's work exemplary, considering its humanism and art that comes closest to life as the lowest common denominator within the Cold-War arena:

*Picasso has, by now, grown into a symbolic figure of modern painting. In the name of new slogans he can always be denied, to the extent as the young deny their fathers. Somewhat reminiscent of the elderly Goethe, he is a classicist who does not fall for the trendy demons of romanticism and turns a deaf ear to transcendent intimations whatsoever, yet keeping incessantly inspired. He has never cared for the tortuousness and precocious meticulousness of existentialism. Picasso has remained forever young, stentorian and optimist, just like the classic generation of the avant-garde. [...] Now it has become evident to everybody that, while taking such sharp turns amidst the highly intricate intellectual conditions of his age that his viler epigones were scattered in all directions, the artist has never missed the target and has never mistaken*

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the views of Bernáth and Hincz on Picasso, see: György Szűcs, “Így jöttem. Altorjay Sándor indulása” [The Way I Got Here. How Sándor Altorjay Started]. *Altorjay Sándor*. (2003: Budapest, Műcsarnok – Első Magyar Látványtár), 37.