



Ákos **Birkás** (1941)

Edit **Sasvári** (1962) *art historian,
director of Kassák Museum*

Photo by Hungarian Railways Buffet Car staff



Miklós **Erhardt** (1966)

artist, associate professor

Photo by Endre Koronczí



Simon **Zsuzsa** (1943)

librarian, arts writer

Photo by Tamás Eskulits, early 1980's



ÁKOS BIRKÁS

Photo works 1975–78

KNOLL GALLERY, BUDAPEST / VIENNA

Cover: The Angel, 1978

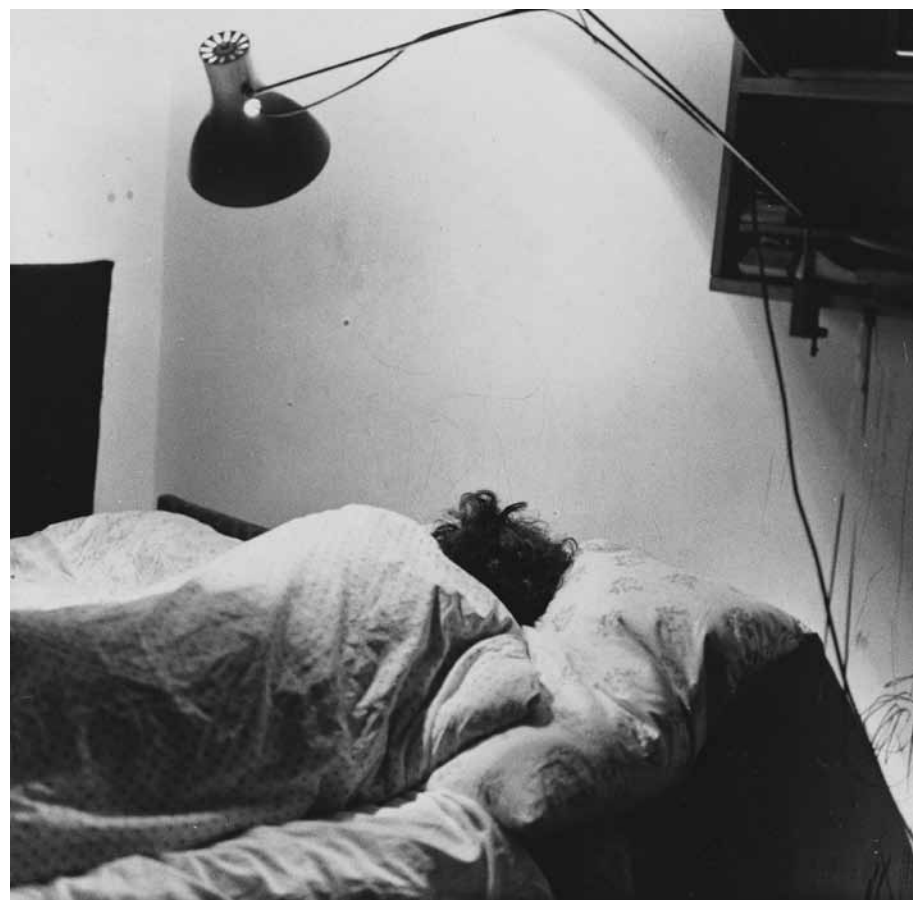
Back cover: Night Work – Anti-Textual Project 6, 1978

Inside cover: Ákos Birkás in Front of the Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest,
photo: Zsuzsa Simon, 1978



ÁKOS
BIRKÁS

Photo Works 1975–78



Night Work – Anti-Textual Project 1
1978

Miklós ERHARDT

The Role of Context in the Art of the Sixties and Seventies

What I know about the history of late modern and contemporary art is – with a little exaggeration – whatever has its own article in Wikipedia, and when it comes to the Hungarian story, there are not too many. The Hungarian art of this period has no history, if history is understood as something contextualized and consensual. What we do have are myths, legends, and facts, which are too meager and prone to be twisted to suit daily purposes, just like my opinion of the period is no doubt influenced by my own relationship to the people involved. The thoughts below consist of what might best be called hunches (many of them emerging in conversations with Ákos Birkás) and the sediment of experience gained in the course of my own work.

I.

No matter how functioning, mobile, documented, catalogued and reflected Western “early contemporary” and contemporary art is, its history still has its share of dysfunctions. It is perhaps the overdeveloped context, the institutions, the web of interests, and the dimensions of the ideological and apologetic apparatus that obstruct a reliable short-term memory. Small misrepresentations are especially characteristic in the case of periods that wanted to get to the bottom of something or, at times, did get there. For art prefers to relativize its own conclusions for numerous reasons. The sixties and seventies were undoubtedly such a period.

The intellectual space around art became denser than ever in the sixties and seventies. This is when the foundations of the academic art theory industry were laid. In the US it was spearheaded by Artforum and later by October, which separated from the former; in Europe the new magazines included Art Press (with Birkás among its subscribers),

which reflected on the linguistic turn of philosophy in the context of art. These journals and the academic circles in their orbit wished to provide a scholarly environment for art that was apparently undergoing radical transformations. The institutionalization of contemporary art theory took place post festum, mostly due to the demise of '68 and the narrower room for social imagination and action; American art theory, for instance, got radicalized in the seventies, and by the eighties it became a hyperactive secondary market for French leftist political and social theory.

The intellectual thickening of space accompanied the material reduction of art, a key concept in the dynamic of the sixties. Context becomes content, writes Brian O'Doherty in his *Inside the White Cube*, analyzing the historical process that led to modern art's alienation. One of the sources of negative energy in the art of the sixties was this "white cube," the cool antiseptic gallery space which takes over the contents (representation, illusion) shed by the art object and keeps generating them autonomously. This is the locus of Art and the impersonal thoughts focusing on it, which ultimately needs neither artworks, nor viewers.

And yet, there were artworks, rather large ones at that, commanding big walls and big sums of money. This was the trend of Abstract Expressionism and its various offshoots, Color Field or Hard Edge, which outlived itself and became overripe under the "political" protection it enjoyed for its merits in establishing New York's dominance in the international art market. In spite of its whole political-ideological fan club (Adorno, Greenberg, Fried, etc.), it would end up on the walls of banks and upper-class bedrooms.

This controversial situation provoked some emotions. It became the starting point for the murderous (suicidal) Situationist critique of art, while in the US Minimal Art, then Concept Art began to work directly with the context of prolonged aesthetic self-analysis, i.e. the autonomous intellectual space, developing its subversive potential. In her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object...* Lucy Lippard condenses a highly complex process from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies – essentially the establishment and (first) flourishing of conceptual art – into the term dematerialization. The members of the new generation of artists "lifted" the now no longer necessary artwork from the White Cube, putting on a fight against materialism in a metaphysical wrapping. They disassembled the image of the heroic individual, preferred austerity to hedonism, rejected the concept of authorship, analyzed the politics of reception and its mechanisms, and emphasized art as communication, its potential for rapid circulation, favoring vulnerable materials and technologies of reproduction. They created infra-thin concepts, environments, and happenings which, to the best of their knowledge, resisted co-optation by the market. They reflected on everyday life, work routine, and boredom in contrast to the sterility of art – they were probing the borderline where art's privileged existence and isolation dissolves, and it merges into everyday life. "To knock Art off its pedestal," as Allan Kaprow writes.

The subversive political charge that characterized the late sixties diminished by the seventies. "Recuperation" and co-optation seemed likely to win. Lucy Lippard voices the disappointment over the commodification of Concept or Idea Art, while in Europe the Situationist International gives up its revolutionary experiment. The main source

of gloom was the insurmountable fact that modern art, which was initiated as a project of emancipation was still producing "things," which unfailingly end up on the (luxury) market; the corrupting relationship with the bourgeoisie was unavoidable, and a meaningful real relationship with the public was nowhere to be seen.

The failure erupted into witty, at times mordantly self-ironic works and texts and also turned many artists toward reality: they increasingly gave up symbolic action and abandoned the institution of art. The revolution of context, which stayed within the aesthetic realm even with Minimal Art and Concept Art, now moved out into the public sphere: "Art's self-referential examination became (...) an examination of its social and economic context" (O'Doherty). Artists got even more politicized and joined forces with the rising emancipatory movements; activist art, institutional critique, collective anonymity, community art, dialogical art, and New Genre Public Art emerged at this time. (All of these valid and authentic outcomes would resist instrumentalization and not enter the mainstream until the turn of the millennium and the advent of globalized contemporary art.) Along with these responses of secession or radicalization, some reactions acknowledged the role of the market in the circulation and valorization of art, and attempted to regulate it in order to diminish the art works' alienation from the artists. The draft contract by art dealer and curator Seth Sieglaub ("The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement" – 1971) would have given the artist a degree of long term aesthetic control over the artwork sold as well as royalties on the net profit on any further sales of it.

At the same time, radical reductionism, dematerialization, intellectualization, and the rejection of conventions made art vulnerable and defenseless (already Minimal Art was criticized by Michael Fried on the basis that its objects did not distinguish themselves from objects of everyday reality once they were removed from the context of art). The failure of the escape attempt damaged its credibility even further (it is quite remarkable how prone visual artists are to professional self-deprecation; it is less common for writers or musicians).

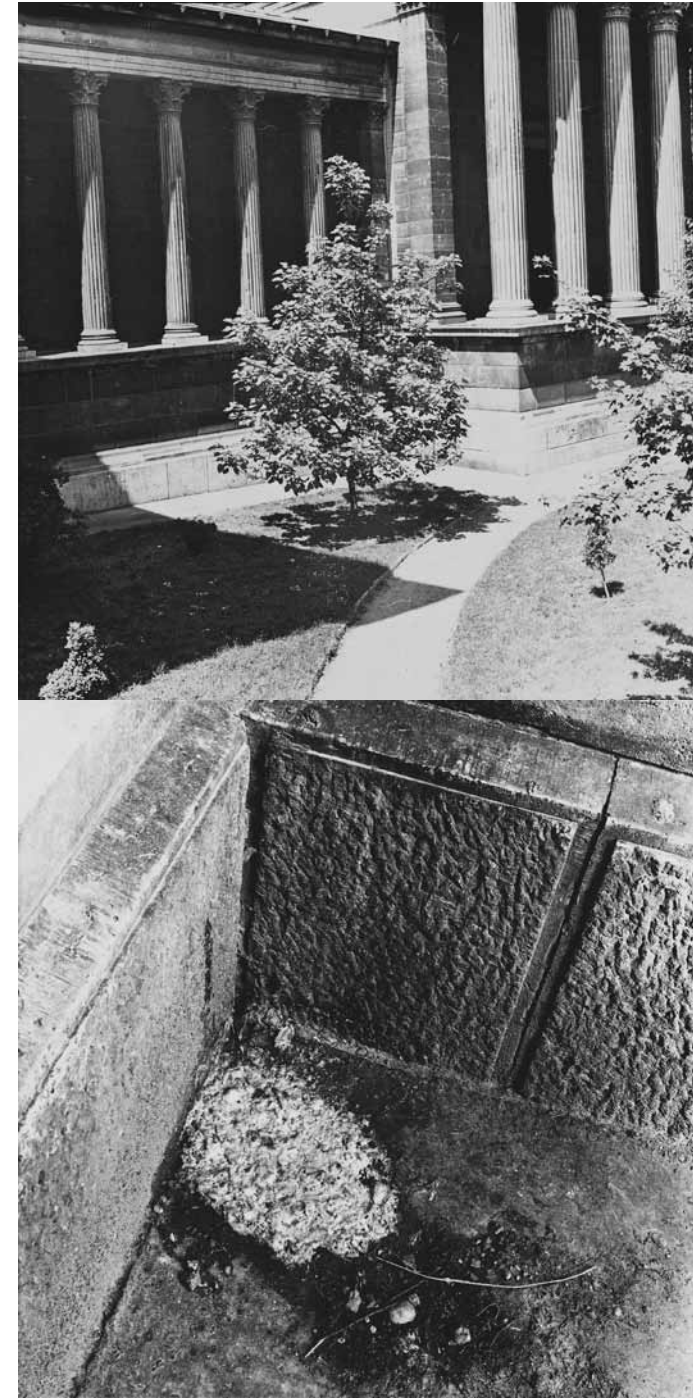
II.

The context of art in the sixties and seventies was mostly shaped in the West by the lack represented by the white cube (the speculative lack of the art object and art). For the progressive artists of the socialist shortage economy, lack was primarily a lack of the context of art (community, market, language, theme, discourse, embeddedness, reflexivity, correlation, control, etc.). There was no interchange between the official art of the period and its underground – obviously there was a connection, but an unreflected one, and research on it is rather thin. So there was virtually no shared reference point for a definition of art. Semi-official art and the underground were excluded from official reality; lacking visibility, they could not generate discourse.

Ákos Birkás gave up painting in 1975 and "moved" into the Museum of Fine Arts, turning it into his photo studio as it were. He photographed the classical works on display (the air between them), the space and the building and created unorthodox portrait series. The Museum walls are not "sticky" yet with the content transferred from



Readings 1
Traces of Life on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1976



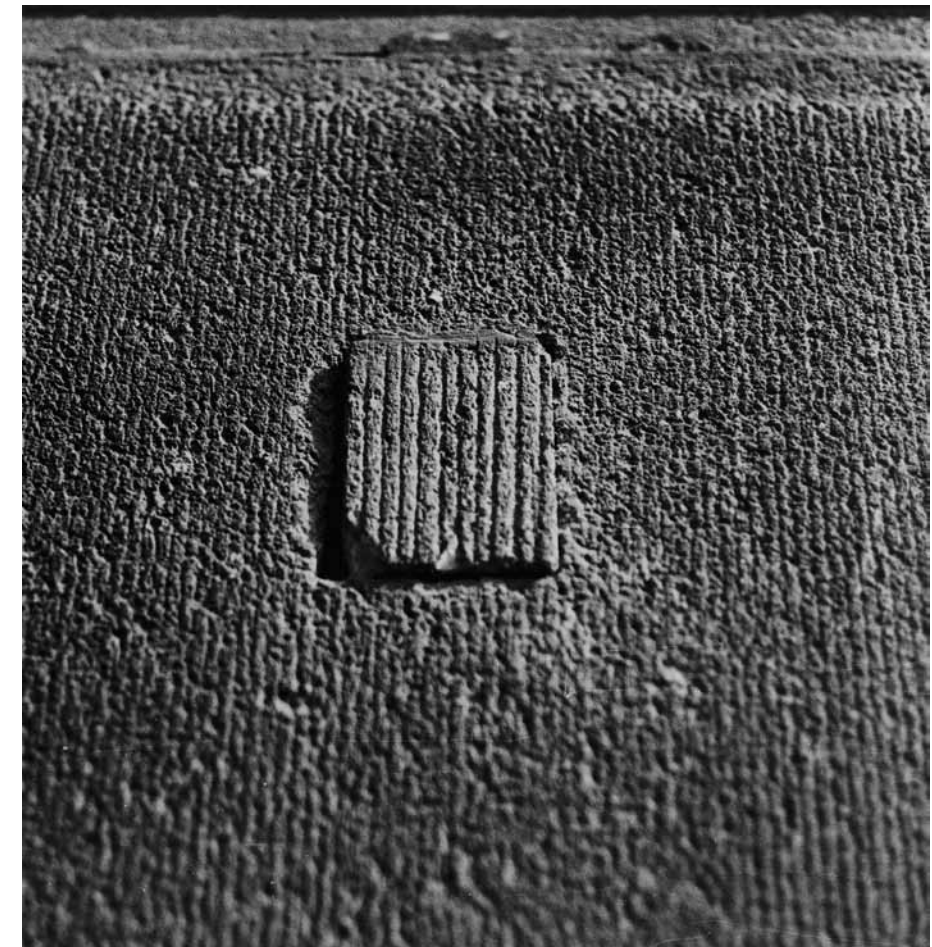
Readings 2
Traces of Life on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1976

the works, and the art horizontally displayed within the museum is reliable because it is dead; in its irrelevance it does not push itself before the analytic eye. Despite any kinship, this museum space with its laws and potentials is markedly different from O'Doherty's white cube, which American artists so wished to leave behind, which the Situationists never entered (stopping themselves several times at the gate), and which did not exist in Hungary at the time.

In the real world the white cube is primarily a commercial gallery space, which was only known in Hungary in a peculiar hybrid form, the depots of Képcsarnok Vállalat (Gallery Hall Company). Pictures jostled against each other on the walls as they once did in the Paris Salon on the 19th century (and similarly to Budapest shop-windows of the time, where form was shaped by the need to (mis)represent abundance). Since the gallery was missing here, the work of art that could not be displayed had to make do with achieving the greatest possible intensity within its own boundaries. This silence of context has an enduring effect: in comparison with its western counterpart, contemporary Hungarian art (and artist) is perhaps not "weak" (as it is often claimed) but unnaturally "strong": it has to take care of everything on its own, step by step, which sometimes includes even feedback, interpretation and reflection. ("The mark of provincial art is that it has to include too much – the context can't replace what is left out; there is no system of mutually understood assumptions." – O'Doherty)

From the vantage point of shortage, Western contemporary art could appear to the isolated East-European artist as a kind of undifferentiated abundance (the abundance of freedom? the economy of abundance?), a resource for several generations. In the local environment these formal impulses often ricocheted into different kinds of content and tendencies. The belatedness is actually not that significant: what is surprising in a comparison of Western and Eastern art in the cold war period is that, despite the enormous differences of the social problems and individual life experiences in the two systems, there were so many technical and formal overlaps and affinities. Conceptual art spread faster to begin with, thanks to its technologies (Mail Art, Xerox Art, Fluxus, etc.) and it held the (illusory) promise of letting eastern artists into the international circulation for the same reason. (Those who did not speak foreign languages were, of course, excluded from this.) Its attractiveness can also be explained by physical poverty, which favored gestures that required no financial commitment, and there was a natural intellectual market for the revolt and secession coded into it. It was a paradoxical situation nonetheless: where do you exit from if you are outside to begin with and cannot rely on the work of context that in the end re-elevated such actions into the realm of art in the West (thereby retroactively questioning their seriousness – see also Kaprow: "Art is very easy nowadays").

Semi-official and underground artists in Hungary devised various ways to appropriate the imported forms. Besides individual strategies to create private mythologies, an example was the Zugló circle forming around the traditionalist-esoteric philosopher Béla Hamvas with its tendencies of mythification and the instrumental use of folk art in an abstract or semi-abstract art. Ironically, Western (French) art theory at the time was influenced more by History and Class Consciousness (French 1960, English 1967), an early work by Georg Lukács, who famously fulminated against the avant-garde



Wall in the Wall 5

Details on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1975–76

(and Hamvas) and therefore made no direct impact on the development of the Hungarian neo-avantgarde. (His concepts of "totality" and "reification" were particularly influential in the West, where they could be applied in an analysis of culture-as-commodity.) The influence of structuralism and semiotics can be detected in the seventies as a counterpoint to the official discourse and its infinitely dumbed down teleological dialectic. Yet speculative, relativist structuralism is suffused with a certain existential significance (best documented by the passionate studies on signification written by a contemporary of Birkás, filmmaker Gábor Bódy). It has become a cliché by now that within the circumstances of socialism there were no proper artistic problems, only existential ones; everything became politically charged in the inescapable dichotomy of official power vs. opposition. Questions become weightier in a vacuum and when you are tumbling down, only structural answers can help. The leftist critical reading of structuralism – as an "illusion that all social practice is unconsciously determined by preexisting structures" (Guy Debord) – did not apply here, where such "preexisting structures" could appear as a negation of the existing system.

Even more interesting is the question of impulses. The anti-authoritarian rebellion of Western art could be adapted in the East with certain modifications, but what about the critique of the market, the anti-capitalist attitude, and the radical self-examination that are essential to Minimal Art or Concept Art? These processes brought inner conflict in the West. By contrast, the ethos of Art remained peculiarly intact in the Hungarian underground. Since there was no economic foundation, the underground was separated from the corrosive practice of market valorization to begin with. Besides the artists themselves, its audience was composed of censors and the "second public sphere"; this type of attention is intense but in both cases controlled by outside factors, and will validate everything in predictable ways. On the one hand, the underground was condemned to freedom as a tolerated and occasionally banned "phenomenon" (since it was the state supported art of the period that had to traffic in compromises, implications and conformity); on the other hand, it was a priori declared dissident no matter how apolitical its given subject was. And it often was apolitical, compared to the Western European emancipatory practice of being "political": it virtually never spoke out directly for or against anything. This was of, course, predetermined by the consensual lack of social agency at the time, but the phenomenon actually persisted well into the period of political transition: works directly addressing reality did not appear until the 2000's. Context benevolently envelops things and gives them autonomy, but it also implies restraint, which is not a natural virtue for artists working in a vacuum. The isolated Hungarian avant-garde/underground was a hierarchical formation that crystallized around charismatic father figures like Lajos Kassák, Béla Hamvas or Miklós Erdély. (Georg Lukács, whose condemnation of the avant-garde indirectly relegated all modernist and avant-garde acts to the sphere of political opposition may have been a sort of Super-ego.) It considered itself to be above the everyday rather than a part of it. (It may be a somewhat random example, but it was a rarity even in my generation if an artist had a job to make a living – as a waiter, material handler, etc. – something that was a matter of course in the West.) It became more generally and directly philosophical than the Western mainstream. The great artist here erected a different

statue of himself: it had something of the savior – spat upon and adored at the same time. Such circumstances effectively precluded the self-monitoring of the art scene, which has remained a major problem for Hungarian contemporary art that grew up on the insufficiently examined traditions of the underground.

Ethos, to be sure, will not feed you – not even spiritually, since it generates the disruptive sense of being a hero, or at best the sense of benevolence. While even the most rebellious figures in the West were typically kept within the sphere of art by the force of the context (and the market within it), Hungarian underground art is hardly a success story; it is paved with undeveloped ideas as well as minor and major human tragedies. The group was also decimated in the seventies, when its most radical members – artists, theater makers, and philosophers – were forced into exile by the powers that be. This increased the vacuum for those who stayed behind – if that was even possible.

It was this ethos that was renounced by the Hungarian trans-avantgarde, the loose group of artists managed by art historian Lóránd Hegyi in which Ákos Birkás's art will come to flourish. This group constructed a one-off context for itself and begins to achieve a measure of success in the international art market in the mid-eighties (right about the last time when the Hungarian national football team made it to a major international contest). At this moment, however, we still find Birkás in the Museum of Fine Arts, where he is searching for at least some surrogate for the missing context and his own place within it. He does this with a healthy dose of irony and a degree of understandable bitterness. He is not fleeing, but rather "returns" to the Museum like a Cézanne to dissolve his doubts and put his work on a more secure footing. Having rejected the career options of official painting and keeping his distance from the underground (despite all appreciation), he enters the metaphorical yet also prosaic space of Art, perhaps a linguistic equation for it, as it is right there that he finds the required external point of view.



Picture and Viewer 1, Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977-78

Edit SASVÁRI

Meditative Contemplation

A Conversation with Ákos Birkás

This publication is a collection of your photo works in the period 1975-78. Why did you choose this period?

It is time my works in the seventies were put in order. Almost forty years have passed, and some of this body of work has never even been exhibited. The 1975-78 period is the relatively better known part, so I wanted to start here.

Were these four years the only time you worked with photography?

I used photos for my paintings before '75 (I had taken the pictures myself). And I would keep exploring the possible connections between words and images for years after '78. But these uses of photography are different from the works of the period in question.

It might be a strange question in today's digital world, but were you skilled as a photographer? What equipment did you use?

I didn't know much. I only learned what I needed as I went along; I wasn't interested in the technical aspects. I had a Pentacon six, an East-German SLR 6x6, so a fairly large format, a somewhat clunky mechanical machine. It mattered that I did all the processing myself. I worked at home in a tiny darkroom at night in very crude circumstances, using cheap materials. But processing was not mechanical. I could make variations, and consider different tones, hardness, etc. In the late seventies Cibachrome papers in large sizes, color, and excellent technical quality appeared in the West. As soon as that happened, this kind of black-and-white DIY didn't stand a chance.

Why did you switch from painting to photography at this point?

It sounds as if I changed denominations ... Well, perhaps it was fashionable. And I returned to painting later on, because it was fashionable then. This is a pithy take on the matter, if also the dumbest take on it.

A little more detail perhaps?

I was a painter, I loved painting, and I was attached to it in a way, but I couldn't be. The problem was that painting was a language that belonged to the discourse of the official powers. Whatever you said in the language of painting somehow became a part of the ongoing dialogue between the political authorities and the intelligentsia, simply because the cultural policy of the day accepted painting as a language. And I felt that everything turned false in the texture of this dialogue. Granted, I managed to maneuver myself into a completely marginal position as a painter by the seventies, but I still couldn't help feeling that my paintings could always be used – independently of me – and they could sink into the disgusting sewer system of manipulated communication. So I slowly realized that I would have to use a language other than painting, a language not only frowned upon by the representatives of official power, but also one they didn't understand, because they did not consider it a language to begin with. The "alternative use of photography" was such a non-language at the time. Photography also seemed more suitable, of course, for approaching the kinds of new problems I reached in my prior work in painting. The experience of painting or, more precisely, of art history as a whole had become a sort of encased dead matter for me by then. I carried it with me or rather I attached myself to this huge parcel. This was perhaps my most fundamental and, at the same time, most noble knowledge of the world, which singled me out and differentiated me from others. But in the mid-seventies (or perhaps the late sixties when I finished my studies?) I gradually had to realize that this huge baggage was dead (from my perspective, at least). So I didn't see it this way from the start, out of some radical impulse, like a faithless person who wanders into a Catholic church and exclaims about how ridiculous this waxworks is. My attitude was changing step by step, in a negotiation with myself, as if I were dismantling myself, driven by a tortuous need to face the truth.

What truth?

That art history as a whole is something dead.



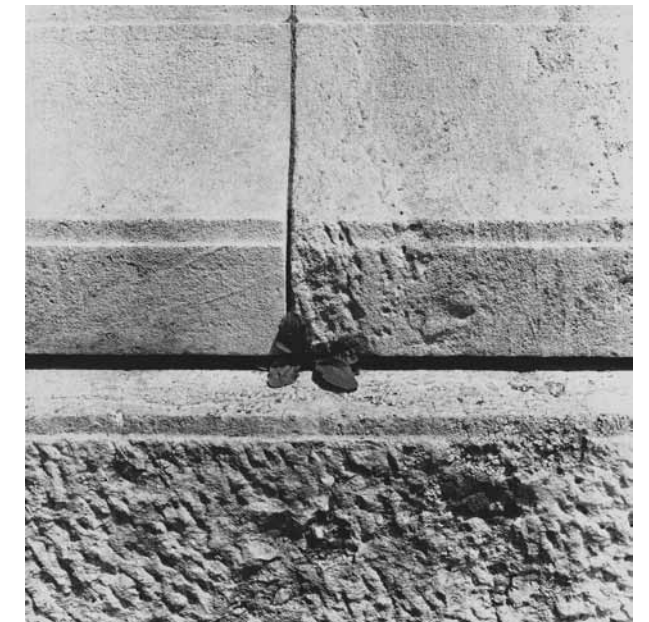
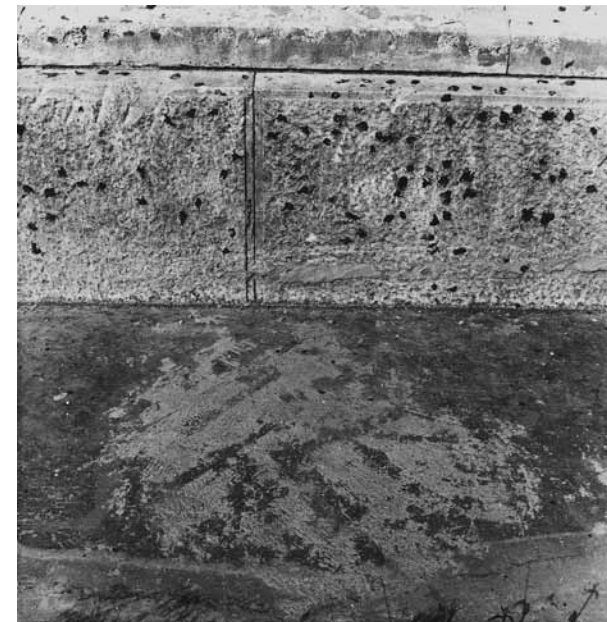
Looking in the Direction of the Museum from the Distance 1-2
1975

What do you mean by that?

It's dead, because no one speaks it any more. Except for a few researchers. Let me elaborate a little. My upbringing instilled in me that I would become an artist if I belonged to and continued art history. To be able to do that, you need to understand art history, know it well – and love it. But I had to realize that the true artists of my time were the ones who did not love or know art history, who did not even love art; in fact, they despised art. They looked at art from outside, the way an atheist looks at ridiculous things in a church, and this is exactly why they were the true artists: they declared that the emperor had no clothes. This realization was a shattering experience and it actually threatened with a total collapse if it were to remain unprocessed. Processing meant creating something against my totally negative self-image. This is when my museum photos were taken.

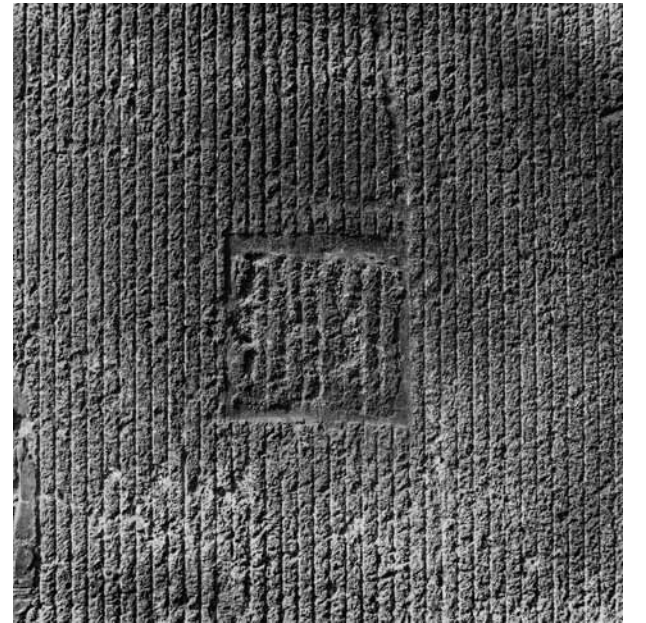
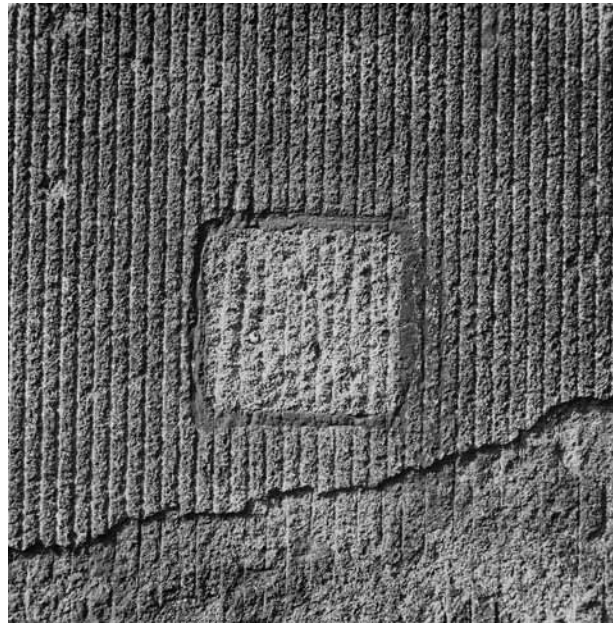
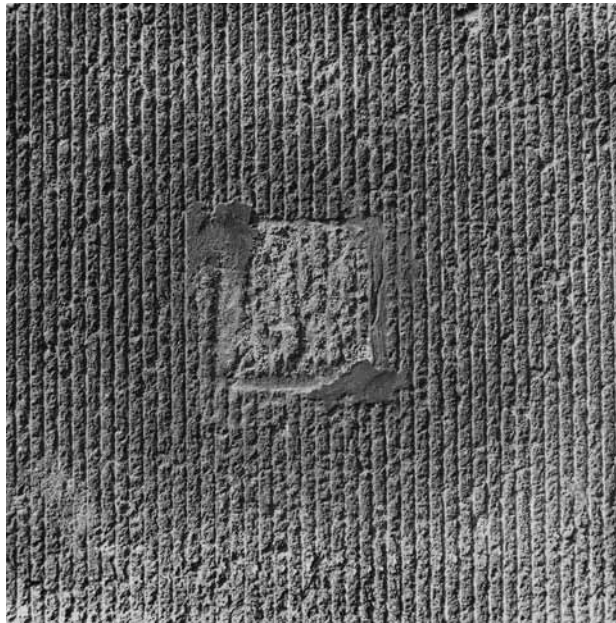
Did this help you rebuild yourself?

Despite the change in my attitude, I felt that the powerful original personalities of Hungarian art in the seventies, whom I saw as coming from outside visual art (Szentjóby, Erdély, Hajas, and Pauer) made my artistic position with the museum photos, for instance, weak by comparison. Beside their radical directness, my approach was complicated and marginal. I don't see this any differently today. There was a line of thought in Italian intellectual life -- I believe in Trieste in the seventies, though I might be wrong – that called itself "il pensiero debole." I really appreciated the negative ring to this self-assessment: weak thought. But I felt that such an attitude could only appear in a society that had a very solid cultural base; it didn't have a chance in Hungary.



Life and Art

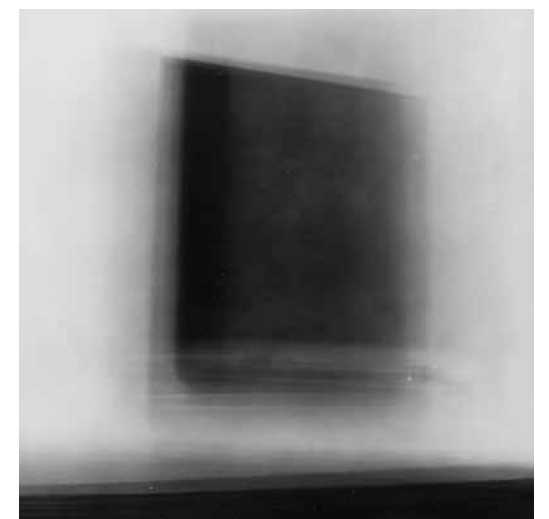
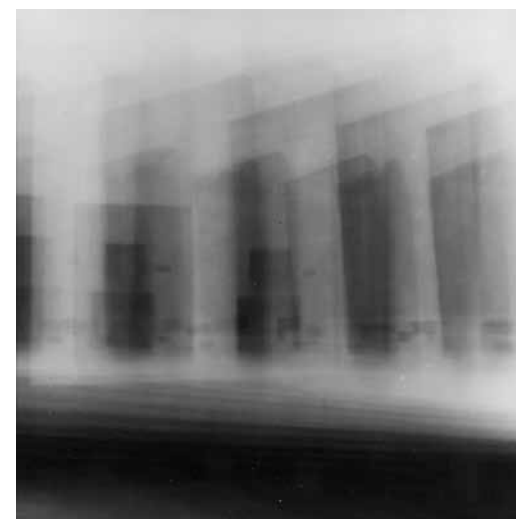
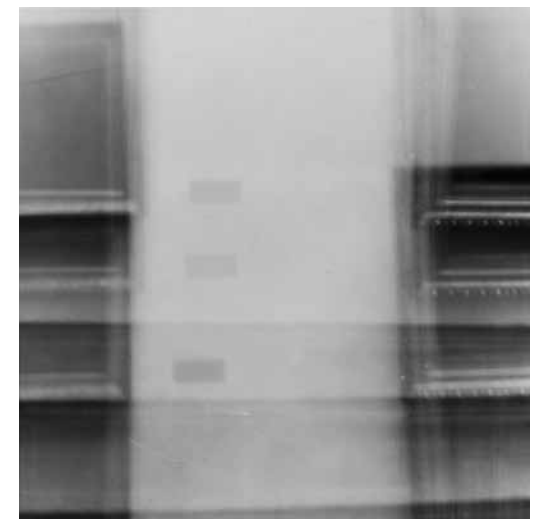
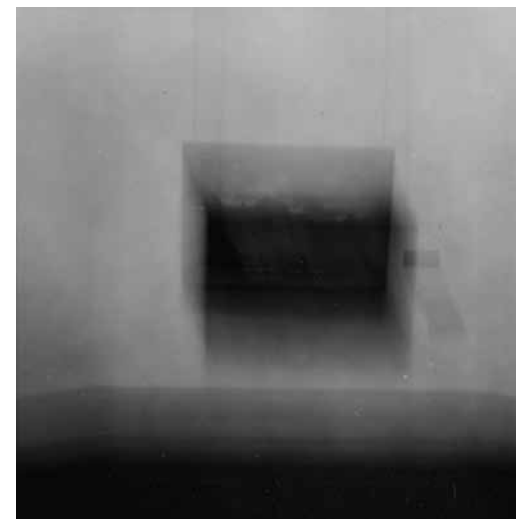
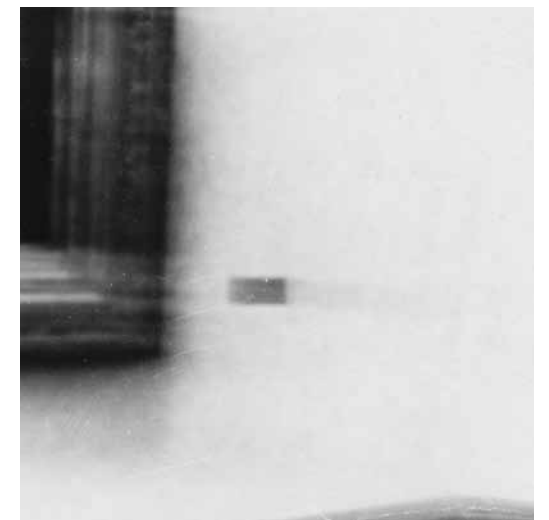
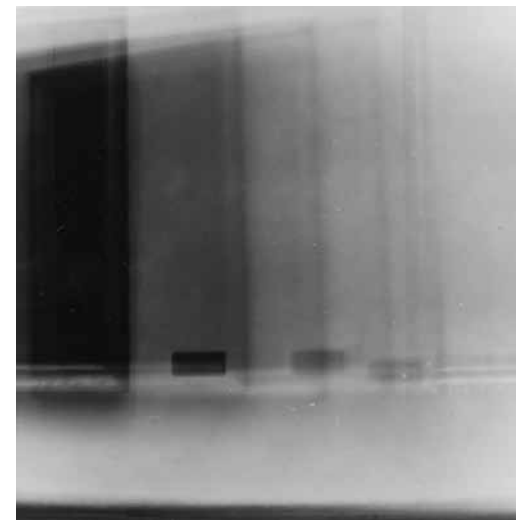
Traces of Life on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1975–76



Wall in the Wall 1-4
Details on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1975-76

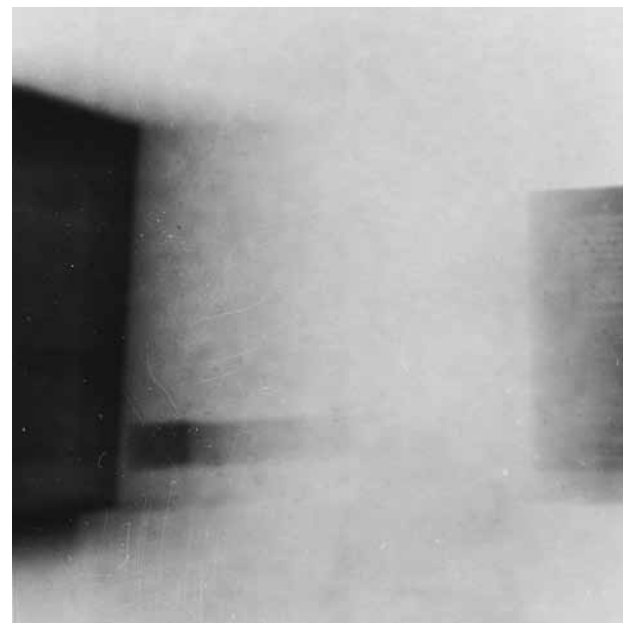
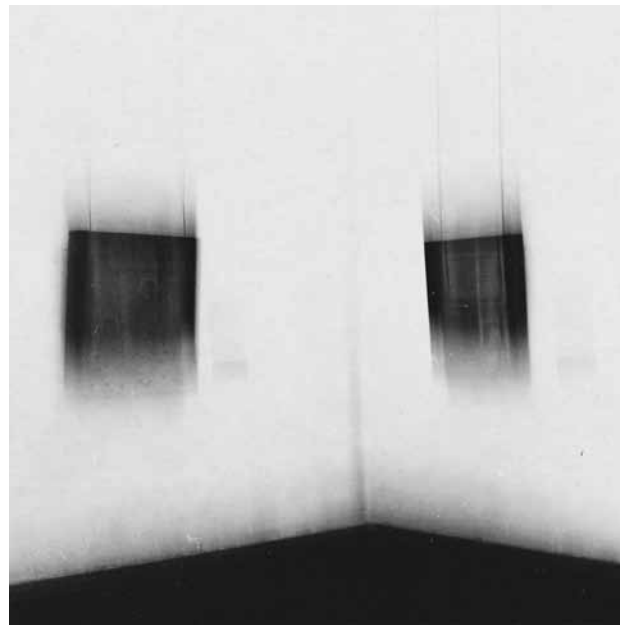
You mentioned how you were raised. What influences were decisive for our topic here?

I'll give you one typical example. I happened to spend about a month in Venice every year for a decade, from 1957 to 1966. This was wonderful, of course, but Venice is not a teenager's kind of place. It meant churches, museums and paintings to me – old things. And loneliness. You tend to feel really alone at this age anyway. I did not make any real friends there, and the situation at home prevented me from sharing this powerful experience with anyone. I developed an introverted attitude, a sense of separation, which was increasingly based on my relationship to art, especially to painting.





Mirror Situations 1-2
1975-76



Walk in the Museum 7-8

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

Zsuzsa SIMON

The Museum of Fine Arts as a Model of Art*

* This study was first published in: Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts / A Szépművészeti Múzeum Közleményei 73. 1990. 111-118.
¹ On Ákos Birkás' paintings from the 80's, see e.g. Gyetvai, Á., A föld szelleme, *Művészet* 24 (1983) December, 18-21; Skreiner, W., Die Kopfform als Metapher des Geistes / A fejforma mint a szellem metaforája, Hegyi, L., Die Macht des Bildes / A kép hatalma, both in *Kat. Ákos Birkás: Fejek / Köpfe*. Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz 1987.
² Art Museum Art/Művészet Múzeum Művészet, Budapest 1976.
³ Tükröződés [Reflection]. 1976. Béla Balázs Studio, 35 mm, c. 8 min. D.o.p.: Péter Vékás.
⁴ Budaörs: Jókai Cultural Center, 1977 ; Székesfehérvár: Youth and Young Pioneer Center, 1978; Budaörs: Jókai Cultural Center, 1979.
⁵ A major overview of this art photography in Hungary was an exhibition entitled Exposition: Photo/Art at the Lajos Hatvany Museum in Hatvan in 1976.

Ákos Birkás (b. 1941), who paints large colorful expressive paintings today,¹ used to do photo work in the seventies, when he spent three years taking photos exclusively of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. He took several hundred pictures, which he also used in a publication² and a film,³ all devoted to the subject, content, and model of the Museum of Fine Arts. These works were only shown in a few cultural centers in provincial towns,⁴ and the film had a closed screening for professionals at the Béla Balázs Studio, so the public had very limited access to this substantial and significant body of work. For the same reason, it could not raise the interest of the Museum either. The reason for this indifference was that neither the avant-garde, nor the official art of the seventies could relate to these works, even though most avant-garde artists worked with photos at the time. In fact, this was the heyday of experimental and conceptual photography in Hungarian art.⁵ Birkás' photos were not experimental, however; they were technically polished perfect enlargements. As for the content of the pictures, Birkás' unconcealed attraction to traditional fine art and its institution, the Museum of Fine Arts, was also viewed with reservations by the avant-garde. Official art was wary for the very same reason, if from the opposite direction: fine art photography was officially rejected for being an experimental art form. The officials' deep-seated prejudice against the self-reflexive artwork was due to its perception as a threat to art and therefore to institutions. Birkás was probably aware of the potential reception of his work, yet he obsessively worked on the topic for years. Though he has since returned to painting, the photographs are an organic part of his oeuvre and are related to his later paintings. Perhaps the time has come to analyze his work objectively, free of the distortions of contemporary prejudices, and to establish its position in the art of the seventies.

Birkás's work is a lengthy photo essay that consists of several chapters and branches out into other genres.⁶ By discovering innovative uses of photographic methods in the sixties and seventies, artists found a range of new expressive possibilities in art photography and enriched its language.⁷ Birkás was no less attuned to the special possibilities provided by the medium of photography; he copied 57 negatives onto each other to create the photo Rembrandt's Phantom*, and he used the imperfections of the enlargement as a compositional device of image creation in another photo series. Yet he refrained from such methods in the museum series; it was not the medium of photography that primarily interested him here, but its subject: the Museum of Fine Arts in particular, the museum in general, and art itself in the broadest sense. As a result, the series belongs to that line of self-reflexive artworks that ceaselessly try to define the concept of art. These have always been present in European art in the forms of the homage picture, atelier picture, self-portrait and allegories of art. Birkás's work is an hommage à Museum of Fine Arts then.

But what is the source of this passionate interest in the museum? Instead of the museum, Birkás was originally looking for painting – the painting once his, only to be abandoned and hopelessly longed for ever since. For he was known as a talented and promising painter after he graduated from the Academy,⁸ but he suddenly gave up painting after only a few exhibitions, no longer believing in the truth of instinctive, direct painterly expression. His last paintings at the time⁹ are not paintings in the original sense of the word, but rather despondent ironic demonstrations of this intellectual doubt and disillusionment. One of these paintings show a reproduction of Van Gogh's Sunflowers in a tacky environment – on a wall pattern-painted with a roller and in the company of a home-made long-haired carpet – attesting to the great work's multiple losses of value. The technical reproduction of art history's famous works as a cause of changed meaning and deteriorating value was a prominent subject of reflection on art in the sixties and seventies.¹⁰ Birkás, however, was less interested in the reproduction and its effect than in the essence of painting: he was researching the ontology of painting in order to find his own painting. Photography, seeming so impersonal and distant from painting, appeared to be a suitable device for such an analytical study of painting.

These were the precursors to his turn to photography and the project of photographing the Museum of Fine Arts. If he did not have a fully developed concept at the time he began, he did have a firm expectation that this new perspective on such a concentration of the museum, art, and painting will reveal something of the hidden essence of art to the objective camera.

First he took pictures from the outside (1975–76), searching for signs of art on the wall, on the stones of the building and at the foot of the walls. And he found what he was looking for: in the square frame of the camera, brushwork on the stone surface, paint and dirt stains, grouting, cracks, and the trash at the foot of the wall suddenly transformed into paintings – unfamiliar paintings no one had seen before. Soon enough it turned out these images were not that unfamiliar after all: the stains, cracks and dirt arranged themselves into painterly forms, tones, and ordered compositions. One could recognize the basic styles of abstract painting in them: those of geometric and expressive abstraction. More than that, one could recognize types of painterly representation in general, characteristic examples of line art and painterly representation, decorativeness and representation of depth – a set of examples for traditional painting. The seemingly simple and barely structured image he found

⁶ Its actual size is difficult to establish, as the lack of interest in the work resulted in the artist never having to give it a final form (title, order of images, etc.). First of all, there are several hundred shots (negatives), from which numerous test enlargements and final enlargements of various sizes were made, unrelated to any exhibition.

The sole exception is one series: *Investigations on the Exterior Wall of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1975–76*, Property of the Sárospatak Gallery. The concluding part of the work, the piece made for the exhibition *Leisure* (Budaörs, 1979) was destroyed as it was glued on the gallery wall.

⁷ See e.g. Neusüss, F. M., *Fotografie als Kunst, Kunst als Fotografie*, Köln 1979; *Kat. Mit erweitertem Auge*. Kunstmuseum, Bern 1986.

⁸ On Birkás' early works see Nagy, I., *Beszédes képek* *Művészet* 14 (1973) August, 40.

⁹ Van Gogh detail, 1974. 100 X 150 cm, oil, canvas; Elongated Van Gogh detail, 1974. 200 X 60 cm, oil, canvas.

¹⁰ Lipman, J. - Marshall, R., *Art About Art*. Whitney Museum, New York 1978; *Mona Lisa im 20. Jahrhundert*. Wilhelm-Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg 1978.

*This work is also referred to as *Rembrandt, the Phantom of the Self-Portrait* (Ákos Birkás)

¹¹ An account of Valéry's *Les problèmes des musées* (1923) is included in Hauser, A., *A művészet szociológiája* Budapest 1982, 579–580.

¹² Chastel, A., *Kép-a-képben*, in *Fabulák, formák, figurák*, Budapest 1984, 219.

in many exemplars on the southwest wall of the museum was also a model of traditional art. Within a vertically striped surface thin lines separate a square surface, the stripes of which are very similar to the basic surface, yet distinct from it. In this phenomenon of "similar, yet not the same" and in the square frame, Birkás cannot help but recognize the functions of traditional painting: imitation and composition. So this image, which he would photograph in so many versions, was a clear, visually simplified model of traditional, conventional painting, more specifically of the kind of painting found within the walls of the museum. Paradoxically, the unconventional circumstances and methods, the shapeless spots of dirt, the cracks in the wall, the imperfections, the accidental framing and the objectivity of the camera together produce a conventional model of painting. Shapeless chaos and accident draw the inevitable before the artist's eyes. Birkás touches on a crucial question of art theory and philosophy through this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon. Wittgenstein's philosophy had a major impact on Birkás and his generation at the time; they were particularly influenced by the well-known claim that the expression and description of the world was only possible within language, within a conventional sign system, and therefore no inexpressible, metaphysical questions existed. Applied to art, this meant that even the most extreme cases of art had to remain within a certain convention unless they wanted to risk being unrecognizable. The images Birkás discovered on the museum wall pose this question of art theory in a clear visual language: is there a limit to artistic convention and, if so, where? Can this limit be crossed and can one recognize what is beyond it? To put it in concrete terms, which imperfection, crack or stain reveals the metaphysics of painting? He obviously left the answer to the viewer.

Then Birkás began to search for the essence of painting in actual, real paintings, starting to photograph the Old Gallery. Once again, he worked from the perspective of the ignorant spectator, without bias, preconception, or prior knowledge, trusting in the accidental and the camera. A completely new face of the well-known gallery was revealed. It did not consist of individual works (as seen by the mindful spectator); instead, it was a fantastically complex mix of pictures, image details, picture frames, walls, doors, captions, wires and lights. This would not necessarily amount to more than a somewhat inventive art photographer's series on interiors showing the image of the museum so passionately condemned by Paul Valéry: a silent crypt in which artworks are isolated from life, like shadows of the dead.¹¹ In Birkás' pictures these shadows are very alive, however; the pictures and the other components of the gallery – the frames, doors, and winows – have complicated relationships with each other. The pictures are looking at each other, reflect each other, and the atmosphere of the gallery is dense with the complex interferences of the powerful auras of individual portraits, scenes, and still-lives. Each picture is a mirror or window, in which one can see further pictures, windows and mirrors. Each picture reveals a new space of complex perspectives, and the gallery is a labyrinth of space and mirrors.

In his study on the motif of the picture within the picture and reflections on art,¹² André Chastel quotes Alberti's famous definition according to which the picture, insofar as it was a mediated copy of reality, was akin to the mirror and the window. Chastel argues that all pictures using these motifs are always self-reflexive, providing "tacit theoretical commentary on the nature of painting." This type of image and artistic self-reflexivity became popular in the 17th century and was fundamental to 19th-century art. In his analysis of 19th-century homage and atelier works Siegfried Gohr finds that



Picture and Viewer 5
 Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1978–79

¹³ Gohr, S., *Der Kult des Künstlers und der Kunst im 19. Jahrhundert* Köln 1975, 130-132.

¹⁴ Kosuth, J., *Art After Philosophy and After*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1991, 18.

¹⁵ Beke, L., *Für ein „musée imaginaire“ des Spiegels*, Duisburg 1982.

the typical works of the period can also be interpreted as artistic self-reflexivity; he claims that it is, in fact, the recognition of “art as art” that links the 19th century’s otherwise contradictory concepts of style.¹³ This is all the more true of 20th-century art, which kept redefining art in its succession of isms in the spirit of breaking with tradition. In fact, Joseph Kosuth even claims that “the ‘value’ of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art, which is another way of saying ‘what they added to the conception of art.’”¹⁴

What is art then? What is painting? This is also what Birkás is asking with his pictures of the gallery. Yet, while his art historical forerunners offered at times quite definitive answers, Birkás’ options for an answer turned out to be illusory. “Painting is an imitation of reality”: even this minimalistic statement, which seemed so self-evident in the photos of the museum wall, turned out to be a mirage in the labyrinth of the gallery. Wherever we go in the labyrinthine museum he is representing, sooner or later we hit an appearance, the mirror turns out to be an image, the image turns out to be a window, though one opening on another semblance of a world that consists of images and mirrors, giving no access to the world outside.

The theoretical equivalent of Birkás’ image of the museum is László Beke’s study on the representations of the mirror in the history of art.¹⁵ Beke sets up an imaginary model of a museum composed of a mirror labyrinth; he places the topics related to the mirror (such as the science, mythology, psychology and art of the mirror) along the mutually reflecting and intersecting paths of this labyrinth, as if suggesting that no logical path can approach this topic, for within the mirror labyrinth everything is related to something else and to the mirror itself, which makes the mirror not just a metaphor for art, but also for life, death and thought.

It was on Gábor Bódy’s suggestion that he turned the photos of the gallery into a film: *Reflection* was made as part of the film language series of the Béla Balázs Studio. The director of photography faithfully followed the path of Birkás’ roaming in the gallery and authentically reproduced the combined view of pictures, mirror and doors. And yet, the result is a nice colorful film with musical accompaniment, a “walk in the gallery,” which lacks precisely the virtues of the photos on which it was based: reticence and mystery. The next large group of museum photos takes the picture and the viewer as its subject (1977). The viewer face to face with the work. This viewer is not the museum audience; it is the artist (or a model chosen as his or her proxy), who wants to uncover the secret of painting, detecting it in this simple immediate situation. What strikes one first in these pictures is that the complicated interferences of reflections and superimpositions of the earlier images are gone. The appearance of the human figure in the halls of the museum is a disturbance, even a brutal one, which silences the internal communication of the gallery: the pictures and mirrors turn inward and the windows close. The viewer stands before the picture like a stranger. The unknown factor that comprises the essence of art, which Birkás so earnestly sought both outside and within the museum, has evaporated at the first sign of life.

There are, however, a few pictures in this series, where a connection is formed between picture and viewer: the viewer suddenly enters the space of the image, walks into a landscape or joins a sacra conversatione. This actually changes the entire structure of relationships, for this is no longer a question of the viewer and the picture being viewed, but rather a new picture or a new reality. In other words, Birkás ends up once again where he ended up in the pictures showing an empty gallery without people; the

difference is that while the picture vanished in the mirror, now it changes as a result of the appearance of life. This failure of gaining knowledge is apparently inevitable; Heisenberg's famous tenet, according to which our devices of observation have an effect on the object observed, is apparently not limited to physics. Birkás' devices – the camera and the participants – created a new situation and a visual world at least as connected to the devices as to the phenomenon observed.

"Orsi at the Museum" (1977) is another viewer-and-picture series. In each photo of the series, the same young woman stands in front of a picture in the gallery, with her back to the picture, posing, living her exhibitionistic life without any awareness of the world behind her. Birkás takes a masochistic pleasure in observing and photographing how the mysterious, intangible and beloved painting pales into a mere decoration at the appearance of life, of the woman.

This is the allegro movement in this large essay on the museum – an ironic interlude where it is hard to tell what the true target of irony is: the model called Orsi whose attractive vulgarity is so out of place in the museum; the pictures which have turned out to be so weak in the face of a stronger impact; or is it him and his obsessive roaming in the museum?

The final chapter of the search for art comes after this interlude in 1979 with an exhibition in Budaörs. The single work on display here was made for the occasion. The exhibition poster itself was promising: Ákos Birkás Kneeling Before The Immaculate Conception by Zurbarán as Before an Altar. In fact, this would have sufficed for understanding the simple moral of the story: after (and instead of) the intellectual analysis of the concept of painting, chasing the mirage of the museum, and the attempt to dissolve into the picture, he cannot help but fall on his knees before art. Or is the lesson not so simple after all? The irony and self-irony in the picture marks a limit to unconditional adoration on the part of Birkás, or at least his attempt to express his adoration with a deeper, subtler, and more ambiguous gesture.

This gesture was the Budaörs exhibition: one of the walls of the exhibition space was completely covered by a life-size photograph of one of the gallery walls. The photograph, which showed a wall of the Spanish Hall in perspective, had an astonishing effect in the otherwise humble exhibition hall in Budaörs. It was as if one entered the gallery itself. Yet the black-and-white photo was only faithful in size and not in technique: it was as if the paintings (The Holy Family by Zurbarán, Ecce Homo by Mateo Cerezo) had been painted or re-painted in an expressive style with broad brushstrokes. This was an effect of using a brush to coat the light-sensitive paper with the developing solution in the process of enlargement. It was the experience that interested him far more than the result: having one painting by Zurbarán, then another, then a whole gallery wall appear in response to his brushstrokes, as if he was painting them at that very moment. This one-man action, which was not made for the viewers, let Birkás reach the most intimate stage of establishing a relationship with traditional painting and with the art of the museum. All disturbing mediating devices had been eliminated, intellectual doubt and sentimental respect had been equally abandoned, which is why this proved to be the truer and deeper homage than the "kneeling" picture. And this concludes Birkás's museum essay.

"Hommage á Museum of Fine Arts" is not only about the relationship of 1970's art to tradition, but also touched on a crucial question of museology at the time, unwittingly hitting it square on the head. The seventies saw the height of the museum crisis

Reflecting/Being Reflected 1
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



[or museum reform, depending on one's perspective]: the entire concept of European art museums – basically unchanged since the 19th century – founded on a traditional historical value system was now called into question. This was when the new disciplines emerging in other fields began to reach the theory and practice of museology. The non-historical approach to art in semiotics, the concept of creativity in modern art and pedagogy, the new trends of cultural sociology, and modern art itself with types of artwork defying definition with the old concepts – all of these were launching a siege against the traditional museum. Werner Hofmann, for example, bases his critique of the traditional art museum on the changing artwork which has no final, closed meaning: when the museum places the work into its own historical order and value system, it deprives it of its single most important characteristic, its openness. He argues that the museum of the future must be a free space (Freiraum) which allows the viewer a free interpretation of the artwork.¹⁶ Jorge Glusberg's analysis the museum relies on the terminology of communication theory (cool and hot media). The traditional museum, he argues, is a hot medium, supplying the viewer with too much prepared information. The museum of the future should be a cool medium, which supplies information as well as possibilities and motivation for a communication between museum and viewer.¹⁷ The effects of this new line of thinking appeared in the practice of museums. The principle of creativity, previously adopted in pedagogy, translated into creative workshops in the museum, especially for children. The new results of art theory were reflected in the large international multi-institutional exhibitions that arranged museum objects around non-historical concepts previously considered alien to art history.¹⁸

The same reform mentality has produced those much humbler exhibitions that examined the relationship between modern art and the artwork in the museum. It is worth mentioning them here, because thematically they are the closest to Birkás' museum homage. The National Gallery in London began a series called The Artist's Eye in 1977. Famous contemporary artists were invited to select works from the gallery collections based on their own taste and arrange an exhibition.¹⁹ The Slovak State Institute for the Care of Monuments and Nature Protection (Bratislava) invited contemporary artists to create artistic reflections on old archeological architectural ensembles and ceramics fragments, and the resulting works were displayed in two exhibitions in 1982-83.²⁰ It is abundantly clear in both cases that the museum is making an effort to open up its collection to interpretations different from the traditional concerns of the museum. It was most likely in the spirit of reform that Christo wrapped the Kunsthalle Bern in 1968, offering a witty solution to the problem of the museum: by wrapping it, he made it unusable and actually eliminated it, while he also elevated it into an artwork, effectively musealizing it in the end.

Although Ákos Birkás' museum essay does not comment on this issue explicitly, it is obviously opposed to the reform of the museum both emotionally and intellectually. It pays its respect to the Museum of Fine Art as a traditional museum, which does not necessarily have to change under the impact of constantly appearing new concepts; on the contrary, its mission is to preserve its art collection, which can still serve as a valid point of reference for modern art.

The time that has passed since then seems to have validated the final conclusion of the series. In any case, Ákos Birkás has returned to painting.

¹⁶ Hofmann, W., Kunstbegriff und Museumskunst, in *Das Museum der Zukunft*, Köln 1970. 116-121.

¹⁷ Glusberg, J., *Cool Museums and Hot Museums*, Buenos Aires 1980

¹⁸ A few examples: *Ägyptische und moderne Skulptur*, Museum Morsbroich, Morsbroich 1986;

Unter der Maske des Narren, Wilhelm-Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg 1981;

Eva und die Zukunft, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg 1986; *Exotische Welten, Europäische Phantasien*,

Stuttgart 1987; *Schrecken und Hoffnung: Künstler sehen Frieden und Krieg*,

Hamburg 1987.

¹⁹ I know of three such exhibitions from catalogs: Anthony Caro, 1977;

Richard Hamilton, 1978;

David Hockney, 1981.

²⁰ *Kat. Archeologické pamiatky a zivotné prostredie*, Bratislava 1982;

Kat Archeologické pamiatky a súčasnosť/Objets archéologiques

et présent, Bratislava 1983.



Reflecting/Being Reflected 2

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

Did you work on the topic of the museum, because you loved the “Museum”?

When I was taking the pictures? No, it was the museum’s silence I loved and the fact that I found a separate territory. Or did I love it? I’m sure I wouldn’t have dealt with it if I had hated it, but I know I didn’t like it any more when I stopped doing it three years later. I would not go to museums for a long time; it was something I got over with, and I was only interested in contemporary art. I do go sometimes these days and I draw one thing or another in my notebook, Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel or Bellini’s Resurrection... These drawings are not great, but the moment I start to draw, the whole system is not self-evident any more, which is really refreshing.

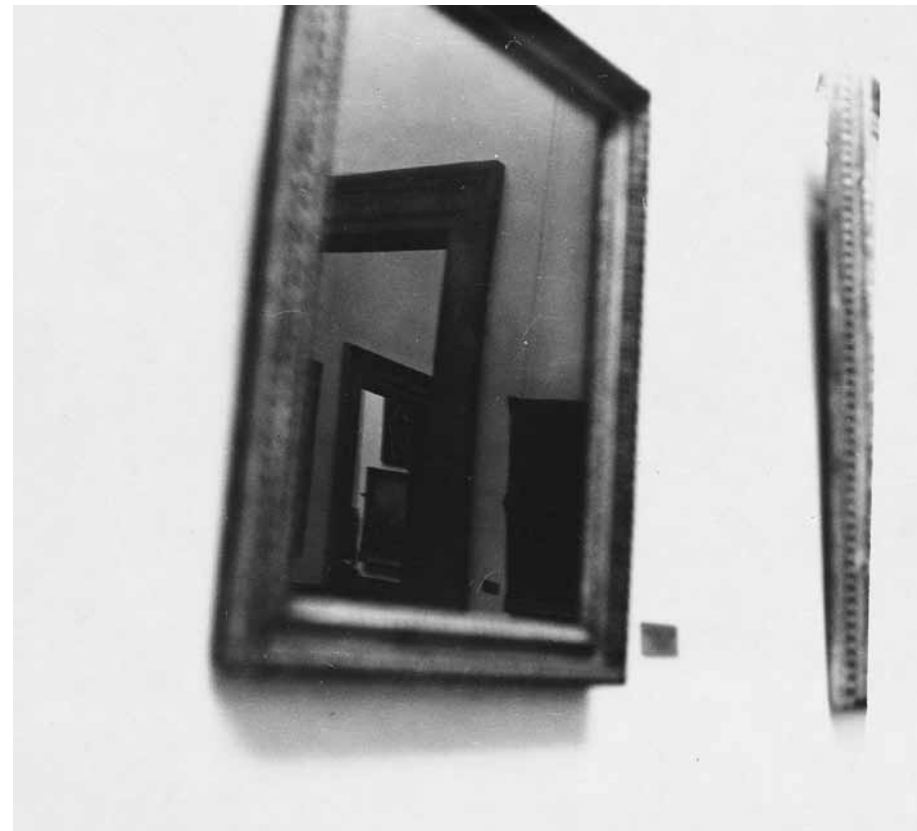
What do you mean by system?

The system of the institution, the passive consumer system of display is no longer self-evident.



Reflecting/Being Reflected 3

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Reflecting/Being Reflected 5
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Reflecting/Being Reflected 4
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Reflecting/Being Reflected 7

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

Reflecting/Being Reflected 6

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

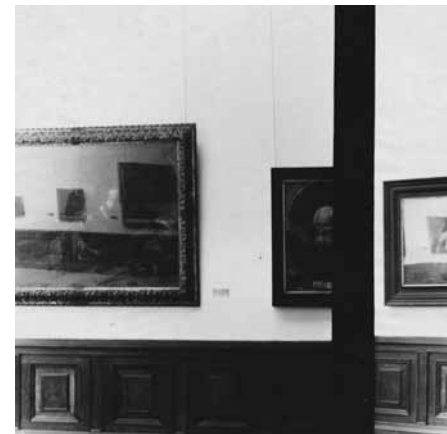
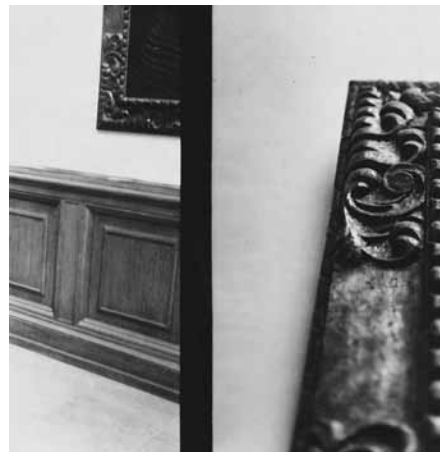


Reflecting/Being Reflected 8

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

There has been some recent interest in your museum photos in the spirit of institutional critique.

I think putting these photos in the context of institutional critique comes quite naturally. Other interpretations are possible, of course, such as the exact opposite, the nostalgic interpretation, from which I would like to defend myself. But honestly, it wasn't institutional critique that drove me, but rather a wish to meditate on this absurd affair of the museum. It is true, though, that the borderline between meditation and critique is rather blurry, especially in a world where meditation has almost become a critique in itself. But how far is that world now! And even if we do take it as a critique, what was its target? Relative to what? The obsolescence of the Museum of Fine Arts? Compared to what? Or the 19th-century concept of the museum that survived? The idea of the Museum in general? If it was the latter, it's something that no longer exists. I don't think you can talk about "The Museum" any more. Museums have been transformed since the seventies and their role has changed. It is irrelevant if the countless variants of the museum have resulted from grand conceptions or bricolage; such a transformation was not the aim of my critique at the time. I only say this for the sake of accuracy, and not as a critique of institutional critique. Besides, I think that the far from negligible intellectual potential of various kinds of institutional critique ended up playing a small role in the actual transformation of museums in Hungary. History played a bigger part: the 19th-century idea was that the state maintained museums in order to secure a stable value system. Or rather it wished to pose in the exemplary role of the guard of that stable value system. But what if the stable value system is so dubious that even the state loses faith in it, and it is no longer worth spending money on it, and there is no money left any more, perhaps no state either, just cliques posing as the state. Anything can happen to the Museum then – including the possibility that its name needs to be written in lowercase.



Reflecting/Being Reflected – The Film Reel's Walk in the Museum 1-6
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Reflecting/Being Reflected 9
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Reflecting/Being Reflected – The Film Reel's Walk in the Museum 7
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976

The Museum of Fine Arts was "The Museum" in Budapest in the seventies, wasn't it?

Absolutely. It was a magical place. The Museum of Fine Arts is a different institution from what it was in 1976. It looks different, it offers visitors something different, its visitors are different, and it sees itself differently. It even smells different.

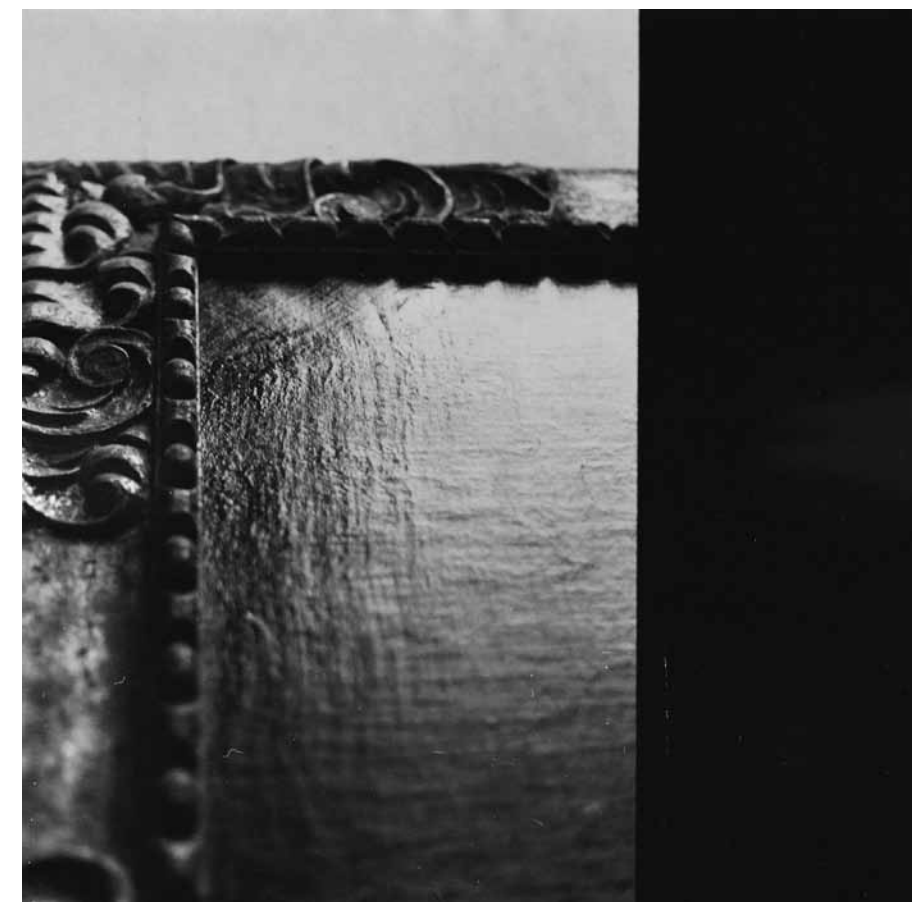
You can consider it a success story or an inventory of losses, but these words only mark trajectories of manipulation.

The changes are a fact, however, and they were inevitable. Theoretically, there could have been an alternative, but I repeat, only theoretically: turning the Museum of Fine Arts into the "museum of the Museum." This was a completely fictive alternative without the slimmest chance of realization, but it would be nice to think that I was contributing to this interpretation with my photos.

What about today? What do you think of this museum?

It is visited by masses of people to whom it offers this or that cultural delicacy. Even if it is absurd, I can't help thinking that it is contemporary art from which people flee into the museum – to find delicacies instead of something to chew on.

They flee today's contemporary art. But time is, of course, the toughest "context" that re-interprets things, so I must ask myself: if my museum photos were contemporary art in 1976 and so something to chew on, aren't they considered delicacies today?



Reflecting/Being Reflected – The Film Reel's Walk in the Museum 8
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1976



Picture and Viewer4
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977-78



Picture and Viewer 2-3
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977-78



Orsi at the Museum 6
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977



Orsi at the Museum 2
Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977

You have made several references to the connection between structuralist theories and your photo works in 1975-78. Saussure's language theory imagines the interpretation of a text fundamentally along two axes: the syntactic axis refers to the interconnections between words, whereas the perpendicular paradigmatic axis lists the connotations of each word. The concept of „opacité” plays an important role too, referring to the complexity of the construction of meaning, which results in opacity and multiple planes. You use these concepts in your museum studies as structures that can be visualized. You understand a row of exhibited paintings, the footing or architectural elements as a syntactic series, and add the image sequence of the film roll of the photos taken, also in a syntactic sense. I wonder if the reflection within individual paintings and the painting that can be glimpsed under the surface correspond to the world of the paradigmatic axis.

I was looking for a theoretical foundation for a more independent position at the time in order to free myself from Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. It was not some anti-Marxist position or the far left critique of the realities of socialism that I needed, because these seemed too compatible with the status quo. Structuralism was something different, something quite alien to Marxism (or so I thought). It was also a little fashionable at the time, so you could even find texts in Hungarian; of course, there were plenty in foreign languages. I studied my way into it to a point, and it was inspiring and gave me really useful ideas, such as applying the basic patterns of Saussure's theory of language to the museum. This grid only fit to a point, which resulted in shifts that occasionally generated (self-)irony. I am inclined to see this as the best part of my work -- assuming this humor is not too faint to appear to be what it is.



Picture and Viewer 6

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1978-79



Egy nyugdíjas, Goya: Kivégzés című festményét nézi,
miközben buborékok tapadnak a negatívra.

Picture and Viewer – A Pensioner...

Photographed in the Halls of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1977–78

A pensioner watches Goya's painting Execution, while bubbles are getting stuck to the negative.

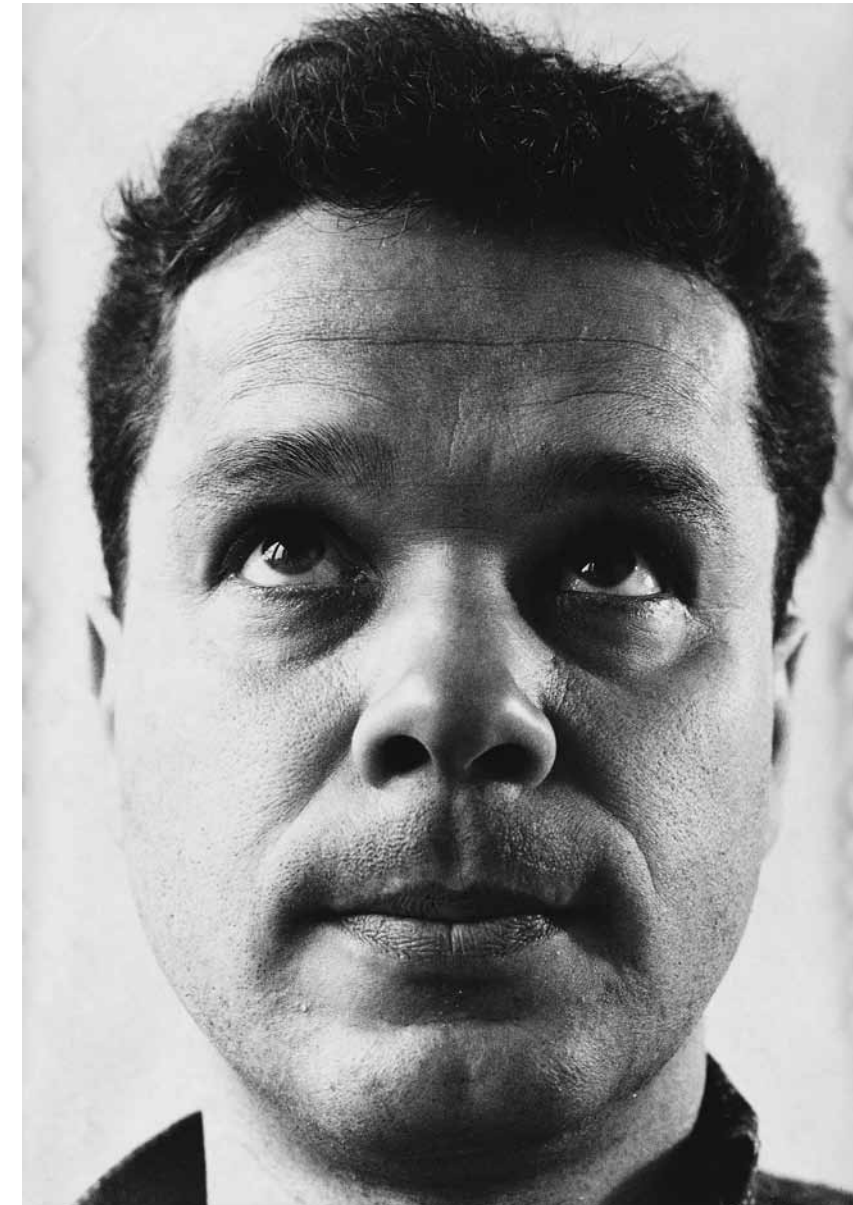
A good number of your photo works deal with the portrait. Can these be linked to structuralism too?

The museum body of work is a closed, three-year project; I never dealt with the museum before or since. The portraits (or the human figure) are an unbroken thread, something that has occupied me ever since the 1960's. This is a rather significant difference between the two topics. In any case, there were a number of things that interested me at the time, and I wouldn't like to unify them by force. It was part of the freedom of subcultural existence/subsistence that I could deal with whatever struck my interest. Considering that, I was pretty systematic. I thought for the longest time that the human figure – and particularly the human face within it – is some basic pattern or Gestalt of European art. This is how it seemed precisely on the basis of art history. I was wrong. The way I see it today, the Gestalt of the human figure or face plays no significant role in the visual arts. There are some artists for whom it does, but one shouldn't cling to these for self-justification, should one?

You said – not that we needed to hear it from you – that the portrait and the human figure had always interested you.

What attracted you in that special genre?

I painted portraits in the late 1960's. In the miserable crisis I was going through, I soothed myself by saying that another (the other) human being is always interesting. This is not only because of the respectable Gestalt of art history, but also because of its psychological imperative mode. We know that both the body (when it attracts through sex) and the face (with its mask of communication) elementally attract the gaze. I didn't start out in such a straightforward way; perhaps I didn't even know what I wanted. I kept painting these small-size portraits in my constant state of dissatisfaction, superimposing layers over and over again and always with a questionable result. This became a foundational experience of painting, which influenced me even when I tried to think about painting through photo.



Self-Portrait
1977-78

Your series “Ferenc K. – A Friendship” is about a single person and consists of approximately 250 shots.

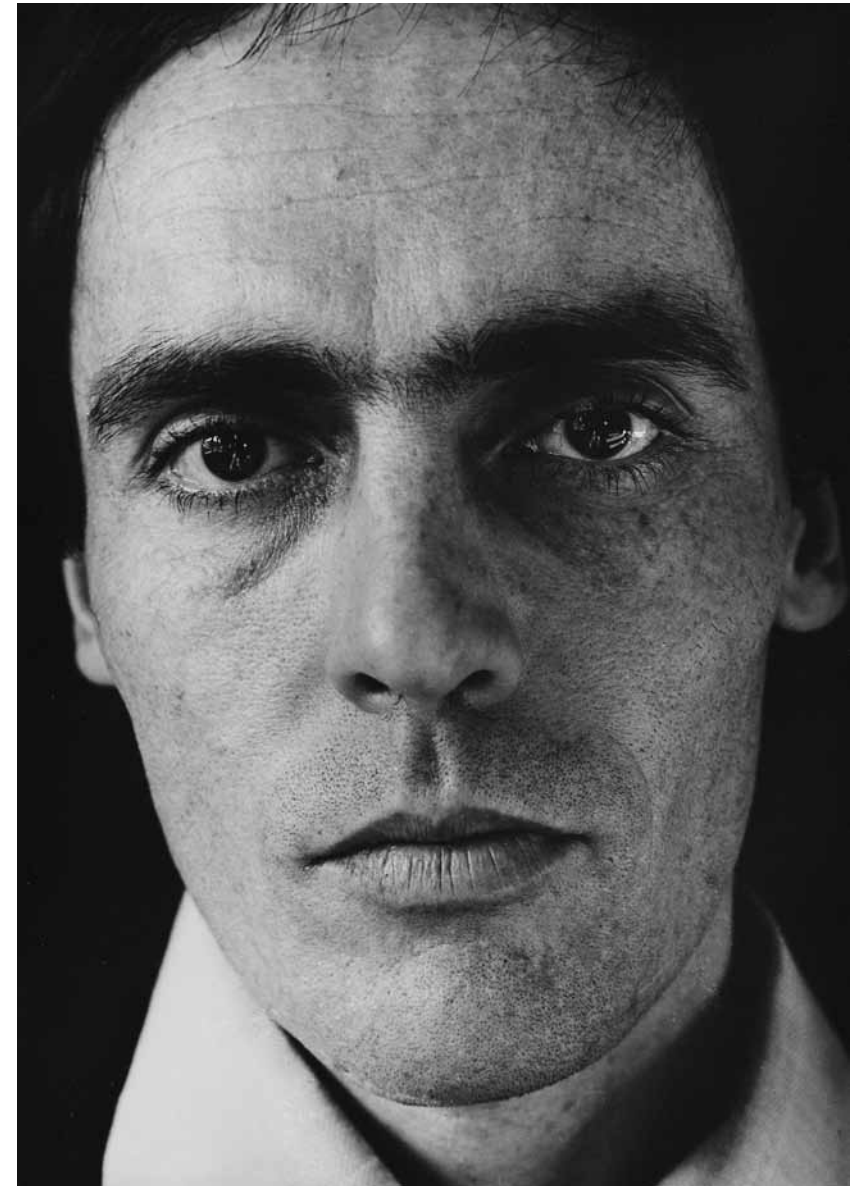
You enlarged about 170 of those at the time. The great number of portraits might imply a mechanical concept, but the tiny shifts of the model’s face are not phase documents strictly speaking. What concept of the series shaped this work?

Or was it some maniacal obsession that drove you to take so many pictures of him in such a reduced form?

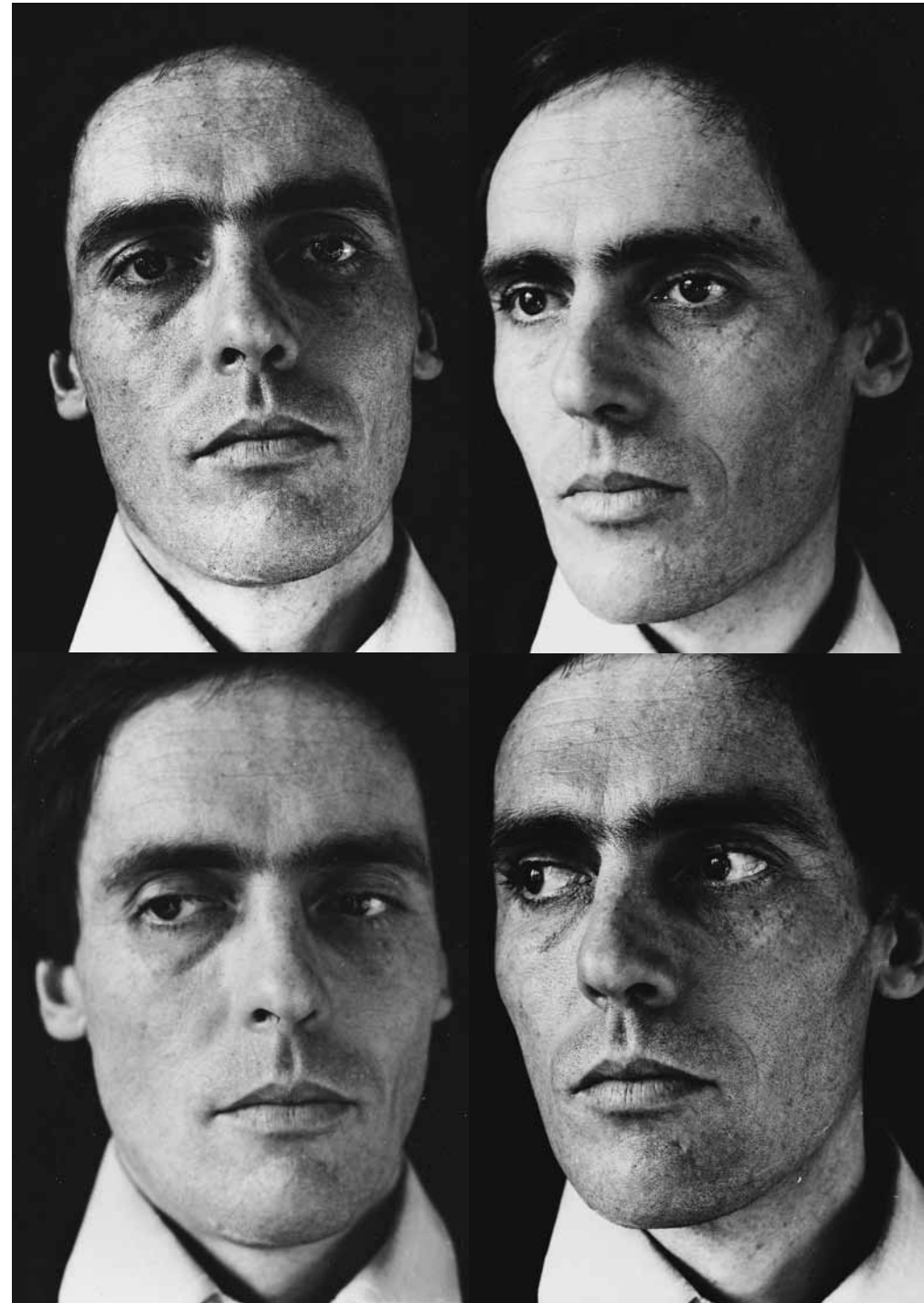
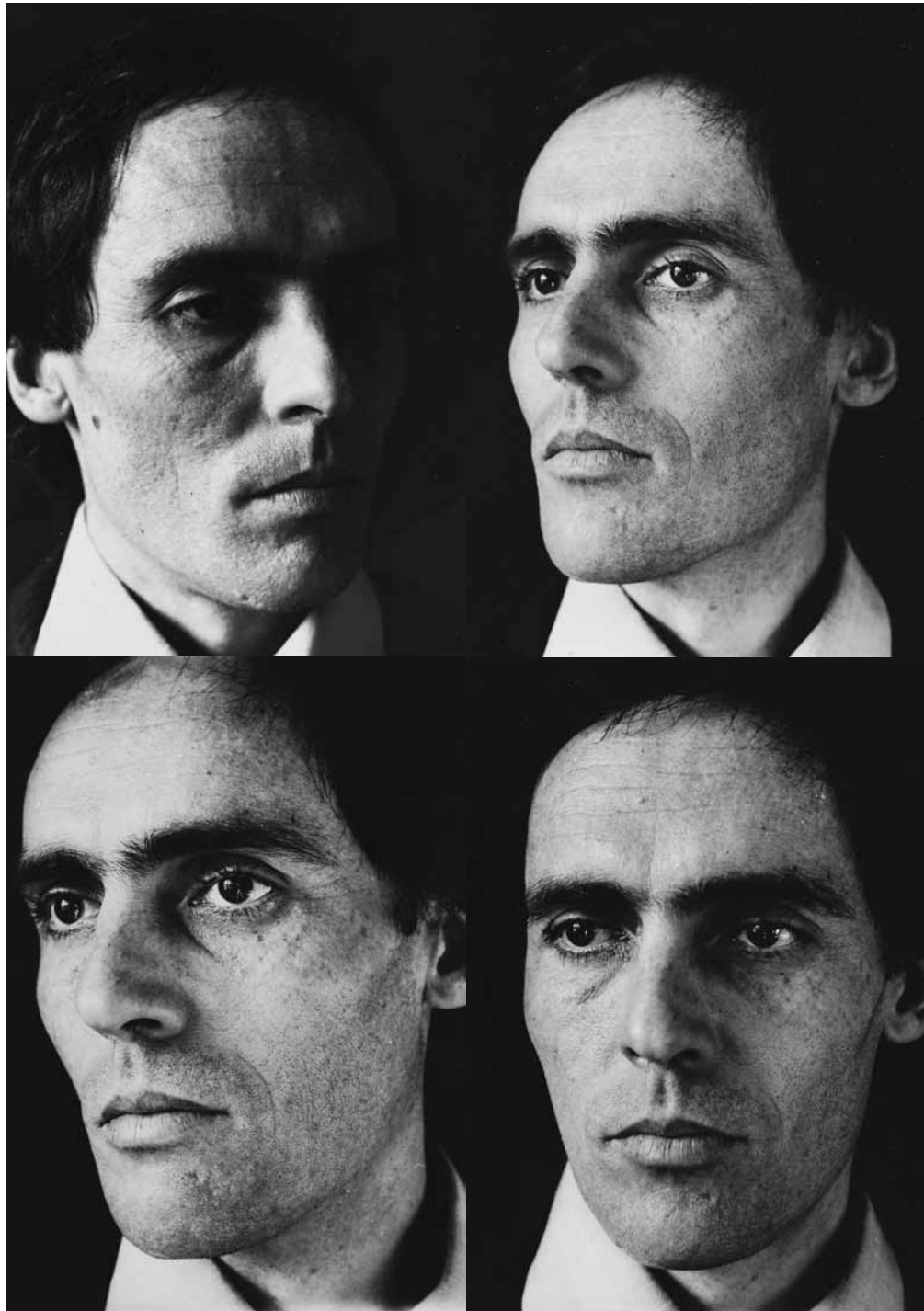
First of all, the series was a very common form in the 1970’s, as a formation used for formal analysis. But none of my portrait series are formal analysis in that abstract sense. This seriality helped me rather to prolong the time of contemplation through the camera. They are not series perhaps, but sets. Painting, or more precisely a painting, devours time; it is canned time, so to speak, its own time in a can. Photo is not that different in this respect, though a photo does not conserve its time, but displays it, innocently and factually presenting the moment of exposition, the “point of its time.” A painting is a labyrinth of hours, days, and months after all. I wanted the photographic portrait to become such a labyrinth too. Eliminating all elements of reportage and movement (the photo’s magic tricks of expanding time), I wanted to rely exclusively on economical changes of background and light to imply “real” time beyond the framework of meditative contemplation. For me this giant set of pictures is a single portrait.

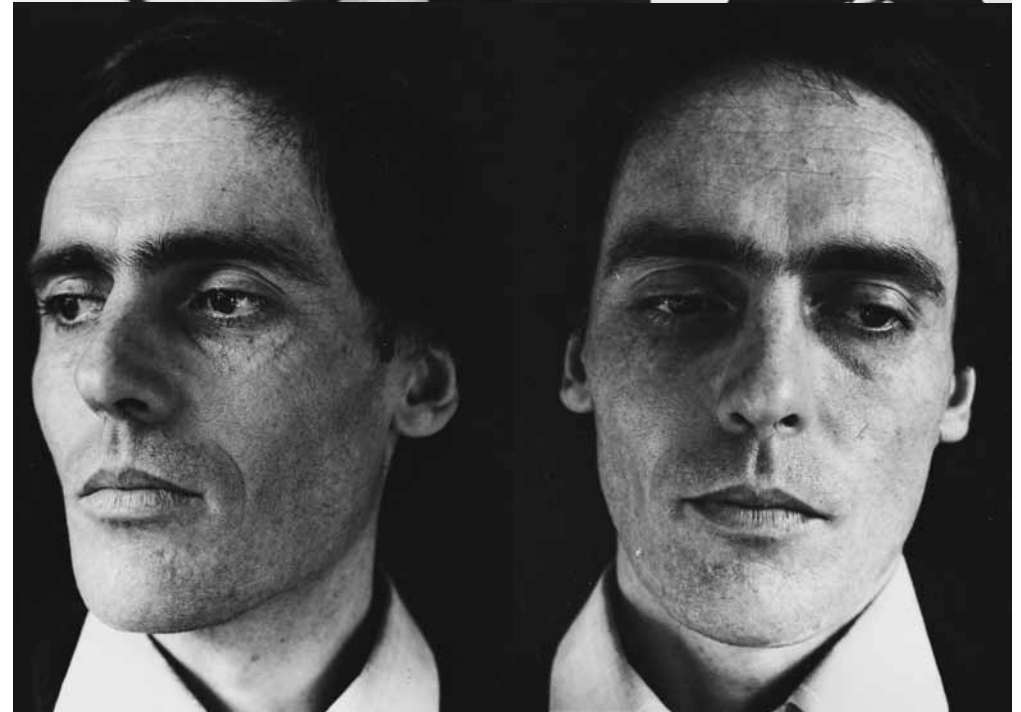
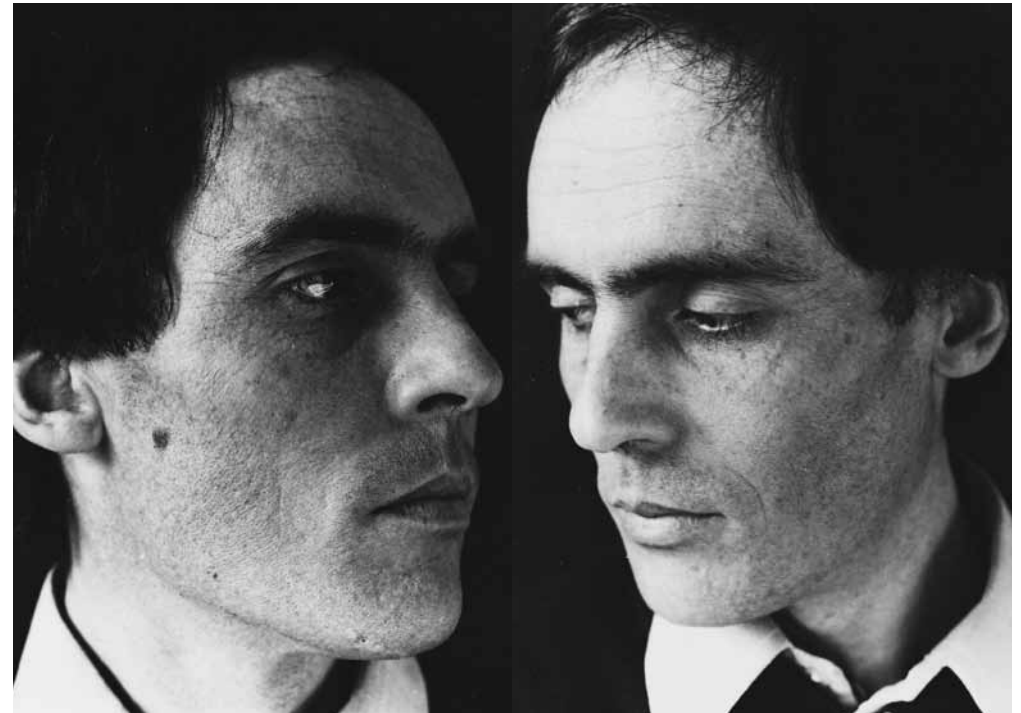
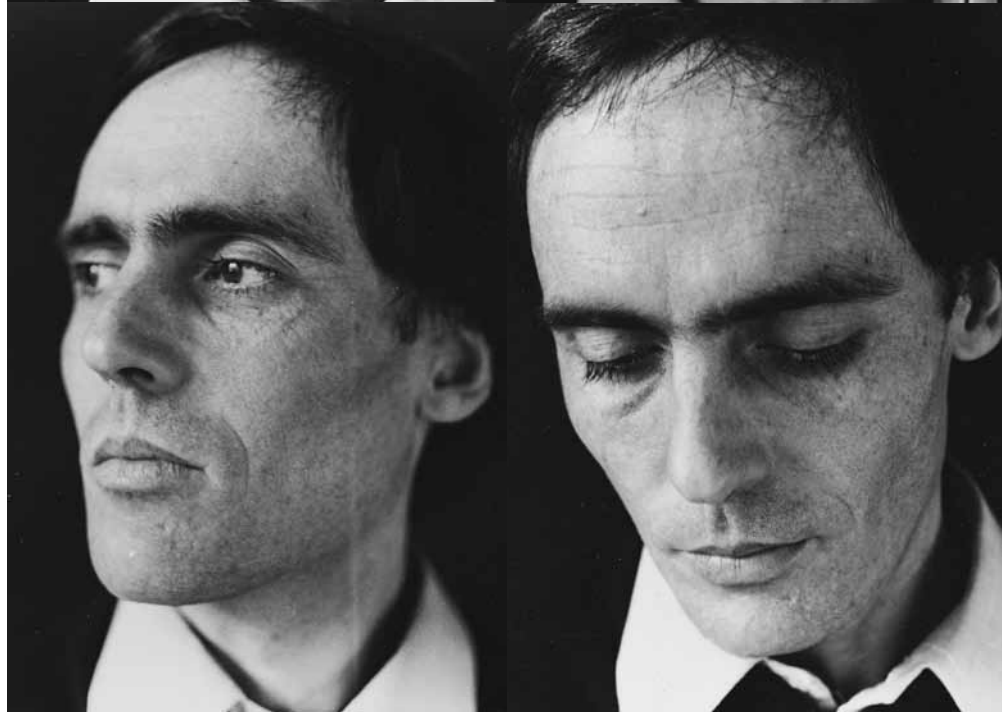
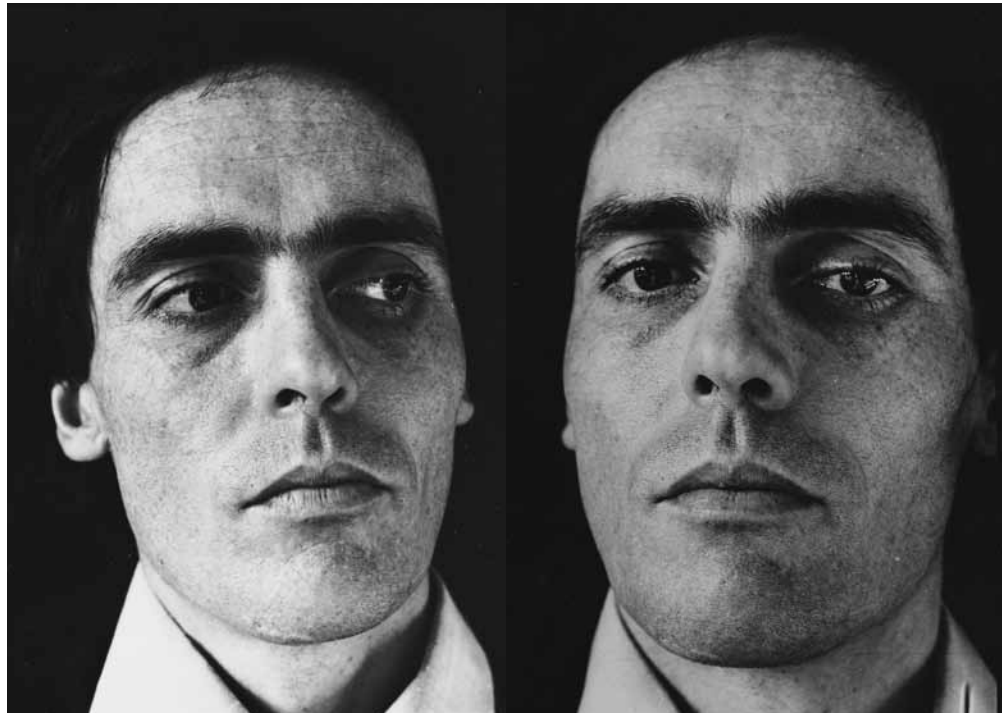
What does the beautiful expression “meditative contemplation” refer to? It is something I noticed in the museum photos too.

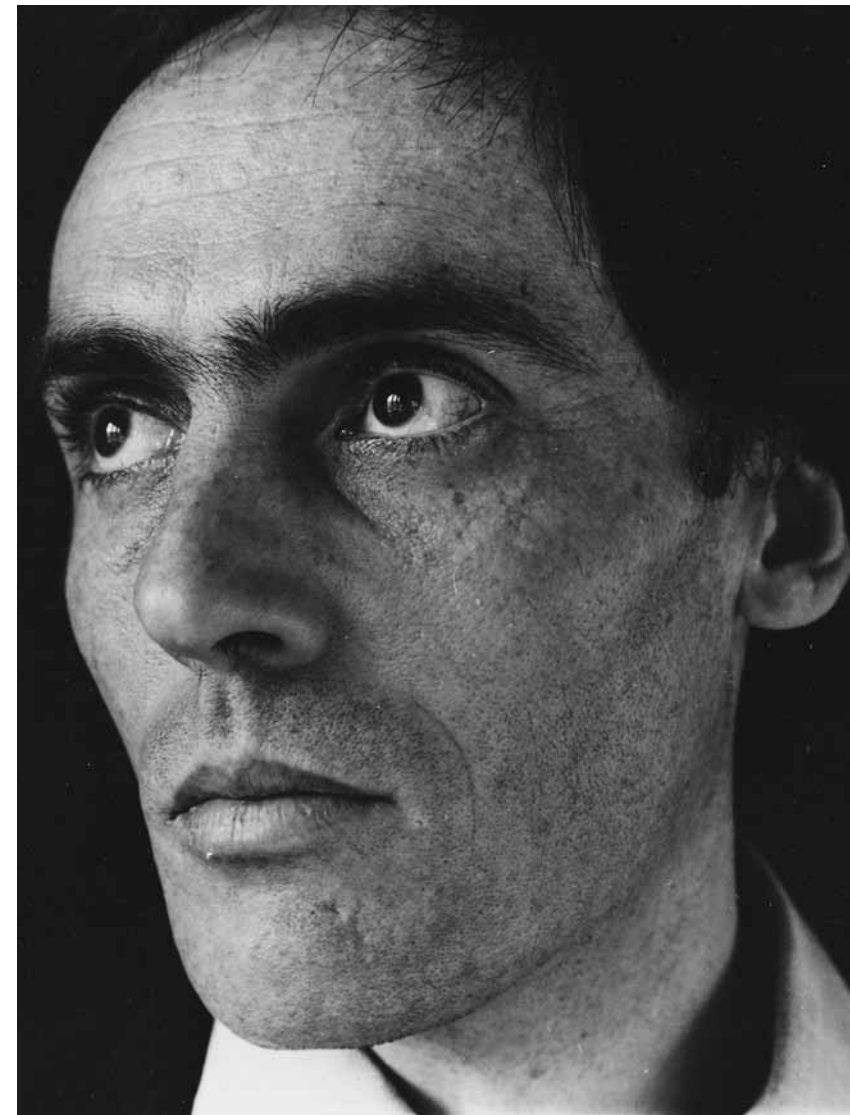
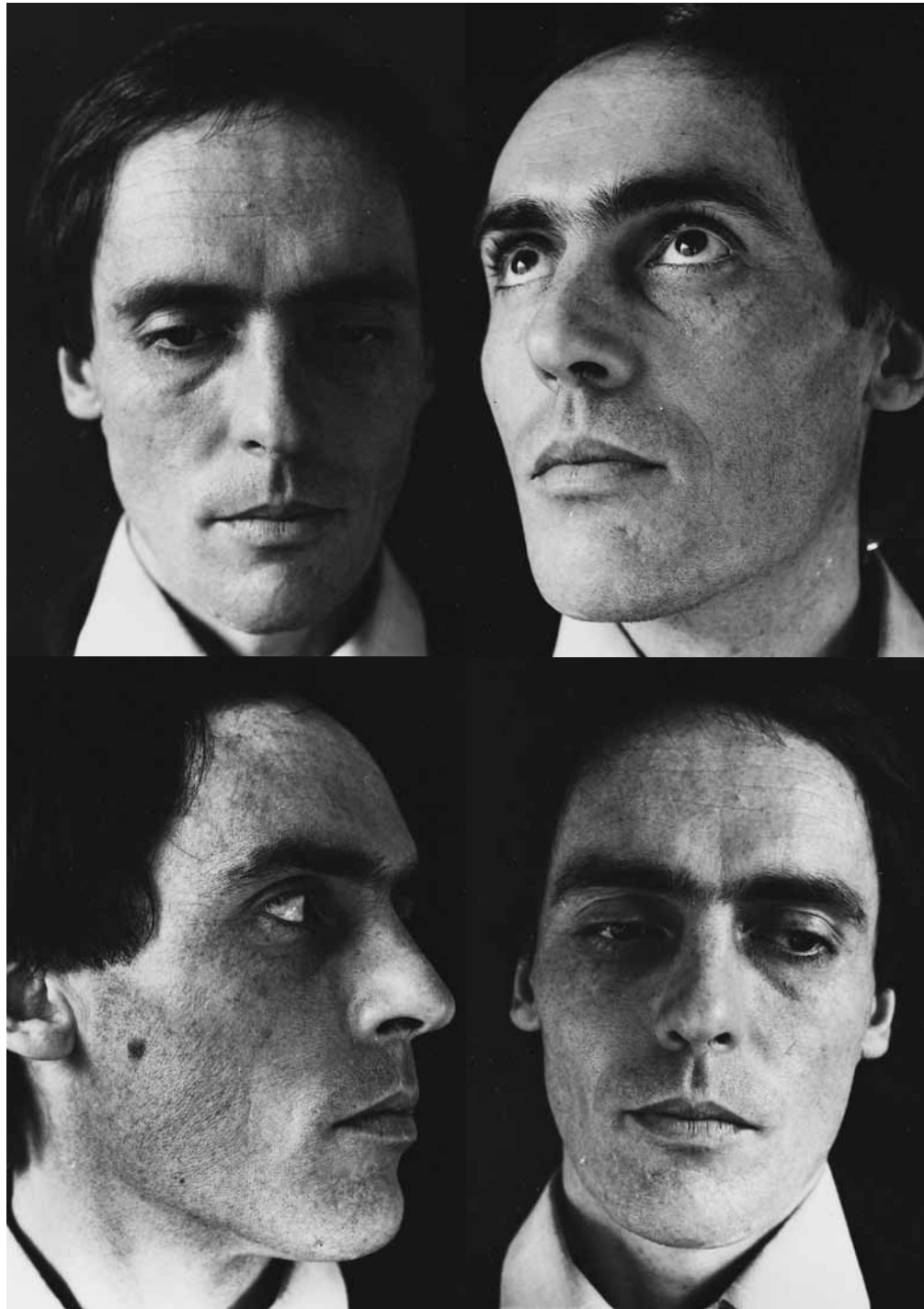
Two things. Firstly, it refers to the ideal of classical painting. Secondly, it refers to the question: “Who is this human being?” As for who he is, I don’t know that even today. More than anything else, this question is what drove the work. Just like this question is what truly drives all art of portraiture. The question, not the answer. Actually, I tried other models too, but it didn’t work. So the effect of the image series depends on F. K., his face, his stoical gaze. He watches “philosophically,” whatever that means, which fascinated me. The framing, the face excised and forced into the image field, is a textbook example of how not to take a portrait photo. And this little rule breaking was important too so that I could distinguish my work from what goes by the name of art photography. On the other hand, this composition turned out to have been a precursor of the later oval Head paintings too.



Ferenc K. – A Friendship
[series], 1977–78







Ferenc K. – A Friendship
[series], 1977–78



Besides the portrait, self-portrait appears as well – were there several series of these? “500 Self-Portraits,” “Self-Portrait Painting by Camera,” “Rembrandt, the Phantom of the Self-Portrait.” Does one follow from the other? I insisted on being a painter, if with a camera in hand. Logically enough, I was engaged with the relationship of photo and painting. The way I saw it, both were images, but there was an interesting difference between the two when it came to time. I was beginning to pay attention to moments of time; this is what all my photos of the portrait type revolved around. I took a familiar type of painting – clichéd, if you like. Representing that in a photo is not a big deal. The question is how I structure the time of presentation/representation. The image appears in time. (“Developing” always makes me think “epiphany”!) Thinking about the image in terms of time, thanks to photography, was a novelty for me. I could have fiddled with temporal concepts within the technical limits of painting too, but the camera as a time structuring device, a mechanical recorder of points of time, suited me better. The mechanical camera seemed to me a relative of the wind-up clock. The rational insensitivity of the clock has transformed time for us; it stands opposed to astronomical time, subjective time, and biological time. The camera also made us sensitive to another perception of time. The ideas of the mechanical clock and the camera seem close relatives from the family circle of a stubbornly rational enlightenment. What fascinated me in thought was the moment when its stubborn rationality crosses the limits of rationality.

500 Self-Portraits 1-2
1977-78

33. Önsözler, 1977
Önsözler, 1977
Önsözler, 1977



Rembrandt – The Phantom of the Self-Portrait
1977



Self-Portrait Painting by Camera
Pictures from Series 1-3, 1977-78



Was it a lesson of the book "500 Self-Portraits" that all self-portraits are alike? Could you have been looking for a final conclusion when you superimposed all the self-portraits attributed to Rembrandt at that time? Why did you prefer the well-known, even clichéd genres of painting in your photo works?

The portrait is "eternal," and I considered the self-portrait an icon, the tautological end point of portraiture. It is tautological insofar as the painter paints his or her own portrait and represents an iconically permanent situation, for all true self-portraits must show the same pose: the painter at work, looking us in the eye (because he is looking himself in the eye in the mirror while he is painting the eyes). These were such clichés that I saw them as obsolete, already musealized forms. Using the camera as a mirror was fairly typical in the 1970's; plenty of artists were interested in the mirror as the simplest metaphor for virtual reality. So I was making a connection to certain current artistic practices with these works. What set my works apart from the others was perhaps that their mirror concepts tended to open to the present, while mine opened to the past, or more precisely to the [seemingly?] extra-temporal, such as the "idea" of the portrait or the icon of the self-portrait. That is to say, I wanted to work with given structures that existed independently of us.

Self-Portrait Painting by Camera
Series 4, 1-6, 1977-78



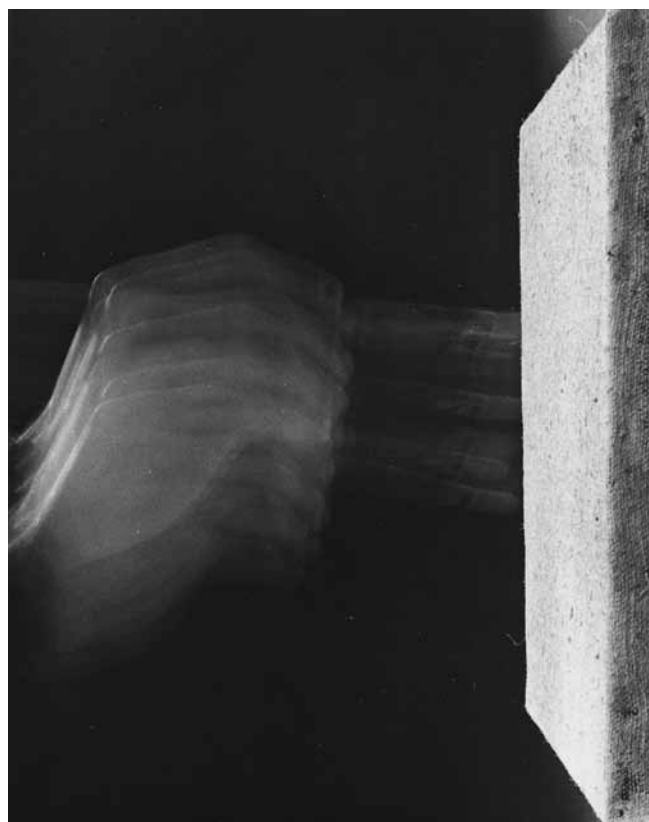


Az önarcképfestő a tükörbe pillant, majd húz a vásznon egy ecsetvonást, rögzíti a képet. Tükörbe pillantások és rögzítések hosszú sorozata rétegződik a festményen egymásra. Ma viszont a festő a kamerát használja tükörként, a pillantások és a rögzítések képsorozattá alakulnak.

The painter of a self-portrait glances in the mirror, then makes a brushstroke on the canvas, recording the image. A long series of glances in the mirror and acts of recording are layered in the painting. Today, when the painter uses the camera as a mirror, the glances and acts of recording turn into a series of images.







Aurél Bernáth Allegedly... 1-3
1977-78

Aurél Bernáth allegedly writes somewhere that it is not what is put on the canvas that counts, but what happens between the brush and the canvas.

Bernáth Aurél állítólag azt írja valahol, hogy nem az számít, ami a vászonra kerül, hanem ami az ecset és a vászon között történik.



There is a group of photos based on a conception we have not discussed so far. These works revolve around yet another element, that of the text.

This group of photo works is more loosely linked than the series of the two previously mentioned groups. First made for sporadic occasions of various exhibitions, they would claim my total attention later on, for three years starting with 1978. These are photos "with text," with the mutual reference of the photograph and text in the broadest sense. Exhibition opportunities were scant in the subcultural milieu, so it was advisable to take those that did appear. But I didn't want to show the museum or the portrait works all the time. These more ad hoc works do not compose themselves into such continuously developing, closed trains of thought as the previously discussed other two did, but this group also has a common basic pattern. If in the previous two groups photography was counterposed to painting, now it was counterposed to text. I read very intensively in those years, and much of it had a powerful impact. The works refer to this intensive reading, the effort, and the subversive effect of the texts rather than to the specific texts themselves. They refer to the constant need to rethink things. It was important that the given texts, the readings were referring to "today" as opposed to the "old" museum and "old" painting. Their effects were new and aggressive. You couldn't contemplate them in a meditative way; I fought them instead. The photo entitled "The Angel" has no separate textual component, but it is "textual" to me, because it refers to the "text," a reading, the latest book. I am reading the essay "L'Ange" in the picture, and my head is about to explode, because I am hanging upside down, which makes me look rather devilish. That's it. (Or another possible interpretation is the Hanged Man of the Tarot. I am holding the book the wrong way. The reversals indicate mirror relationships and being closed. The French words, by contrast, indicate spaciousness. The text of the book refers to the [self-]criticism of the intellectuals of the French Left.

The Books 1-2
1978

Flying Books 1
1978

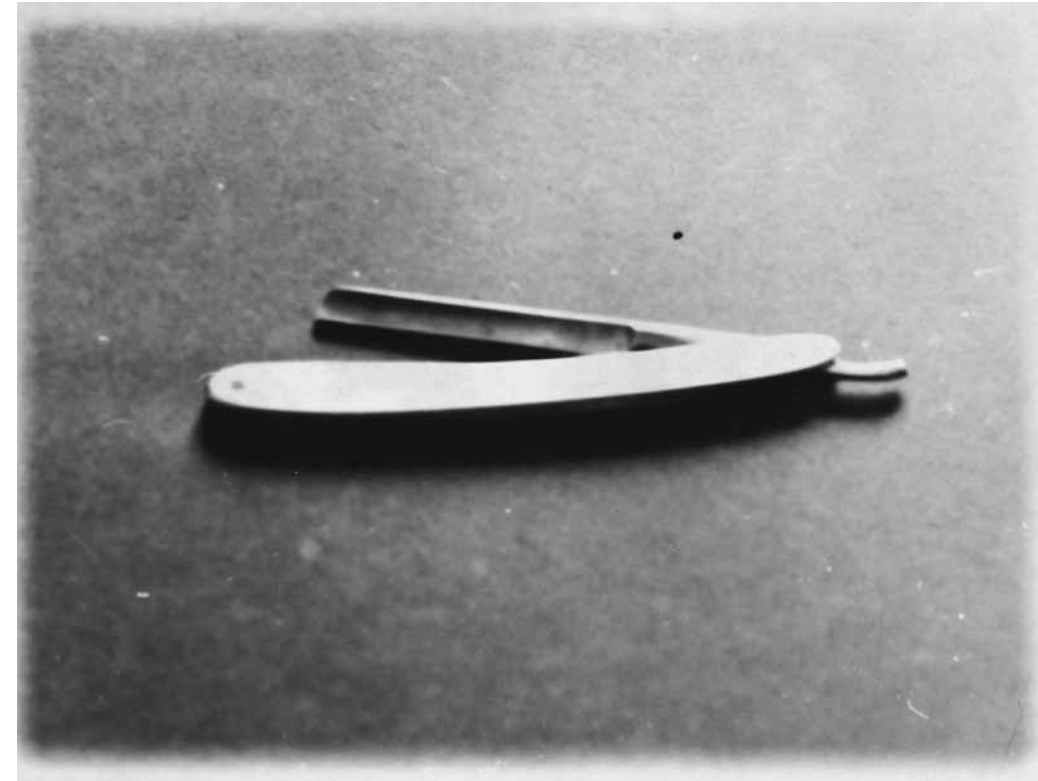
Which texts had such a great impact on you?

It was the Western political and art theoretical literature of the seventies. Actually, it was an even broader range, from Blaise Pascal through the later Kierkegaard, Lacan, and Althusser to Wilhelm Reich. I subscribed to Art Press for a few years; this was – to put it a bit simplistically – the art journal of leftist structuralism. I brought back piles of books from a trip to Paris in 1977, which I had selected with the help of Gyula Konkoly, who was living in Paris at the time. They were mostly by the authors called New Philosophers (André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henry Lévy, etc.); their critique of the traditional leftist position of the French intelligentsia took me by complete surprise. But their powerful impact was probably not just a function of the content.

I was going through phases of the kind of rebellious rethinking one typically experiences as a student. I must have been a little retarded. But that's a whole different story, I think. In any case, I read with the eagerness of a student, fervently, so to speak.



The Angel
1978



We have covered a lot of ground, except this: what was your first photo work?

The title was Occam's Razor; it was made in 1975. It showed a razor knife, slightly open, on a table. It was a blurry grey picture, the kind usually thrown away. So I really loved it, because this was my first photo of bad quality that came out really well! I had been thinking about photography for a while at that point. I also read somewhere around that time that Occam's razor is a philosophical principle "stating that among competing hypotheses, the one which makes the fewest assumptions should be selected." (I actually took this from Wikipedia just now, but that's what it was about.) I had two thoughts about this principle. Firstly, if there was a choice between painting and photography, one should choose photography, because it was simpler. Secondly, another interpretation of this principle is that one should not add to the unnecessary things in this world, and the image reproduction of photography seemed awfully prolific to me, the painter (even at the time). I liked this contradiction. And I liked the slippage between the metaphor and the image of the razor, the slightly deadpan irony of intentional misunderstanding, though I wouldn't like to overexplain it. Also, how many people could have known at that exhibition what Occam's razor stood for? So the "bad" photo was linked to an uncertainty of meaning or even a void of meaning, and it was totally unnecessary to boot – the only saving grace of this work is that it is humble, non-aggressive, even if it does demand the aura of a separate standpoint. Well, it seems to me this work had all the key elements of my future photo works.

Occam's Razor
1975

"Mi más egy beszélgetés, ha nem az az igyekezetünk, hogy levetkőzünk valaki előtt, miközben elvárjuk tőle, hogy viszonzásul magára vegye levetett ruhadarabjainkat."



Conversation 1-12
[András Lengyel and György Fazekas] 1978

What is a conversation if not your effort to get undressed in front of someone, while expecting them to reciprocate by putting on the clothes you have removed?





I Like to Read While Walking...
1978

I like to read while walking with a book in hand. When I look up from time to time, the world appears in a strange light. But in order to take a picture of it, I have to put the book down.

Szeretek könyvvel a kezemben, olvasva sétálni. Ha ilyenkor fel-felnézek, különösnek tűnik a világ. De ahhoz, hogy lefotózzam, le kell tennem a könyvet.

One of your works dating from this period seems to match the Artist at Work photo series by Mladen Stilinović, which shows him in bed. And it was made in 1978, the same as his! Yours is called "Night Work – An Anti-Textual Project." This does not seem to be a series, but rather a number of variations. You are asleep in the dark in the lamplight, either in bed or at the table.

I was also surprised by the similarity. Stilinović's work is about the same thing as mine: a defunct world. Or about Eastern Europe being different. Stilinović's power is that his photos are completely "unartistic," which makes them much stronger. My photos are partly stylized, theatrical, "artistic," but that's not something I should be commenting on. The other difference is that my work basically refers to the text, or rather a rejection of the text. This hostility to the text was the key to me, a different kind of resistance that is not built on another text but on one's departure from the world of texts. Night work is dream work, Traumarbeit. The excitement of being inspired by the text and the desire to flee an alien text – the two became an inner debate within me, which escalated until I started to paint again. But that did not happen for another 3-4 years, and that's a whole different story too, one that would deserve its own discussion. By choosing painting, this inner debate was settled in the eighties (and for a long time to come) in favor of "dream work." Night Work" was not exhibited, except for one piece at one time: it only shows a pile of hair under the lamplight. Even this happened post festum, so to speak, in 1986 at the Pécs Gallery at an exhibition of my (then) recent paintings. I put the photo up on the wall at the far end of the elongated arched gallery space as an experiment of sorts to make a connection between photos and paintings and to refer to my paintings' anti-textuality akin to dream work. (The experiment failed; the photo remained unnoticed and generated no reflection.)



Night Work – Anti-Textual Project 2-4
1978

Why do you set the limit of this body of work in 1978?

Because this body of photo works – from Occam's Razor to Night Work – was about an increasingly stable aesthetic method or form. And even though it developed in the spirit of the contemporary art photo, it always represented a meditative contemplation that I tend to connect to the ideal of classical art. Afterwards, I began to move away from this approach and my works became more and more chaotic, but that is a different chapter.



Night Work – Anti-Textual Project 5
1978

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