

Across the Eastern Bloc, many conceptual artists, and especially performance artists who documented their work in photography, would say that their photographs were for “future audiences”; a statement that implies that they expected the regimes to eventually fall, and only then could their work be seen. Did it feel like that to you as well?

– I made these pictures for myself, as a form of self-expression. I was very hopeful about the fall of the regime and the possible changes, but I was surprised when it happened. I think many felt the same. However, the years since have been a disappointment, and not only for me.

The Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde has been gathering interest with an international audience.

– I am very happy for this success. I believe these are highly valuable works and it’s very comforting to see that they have connected with an international audience. It is important for these photos to stay recognized as they document a very depressing and anxiety-filled era that we lived through.

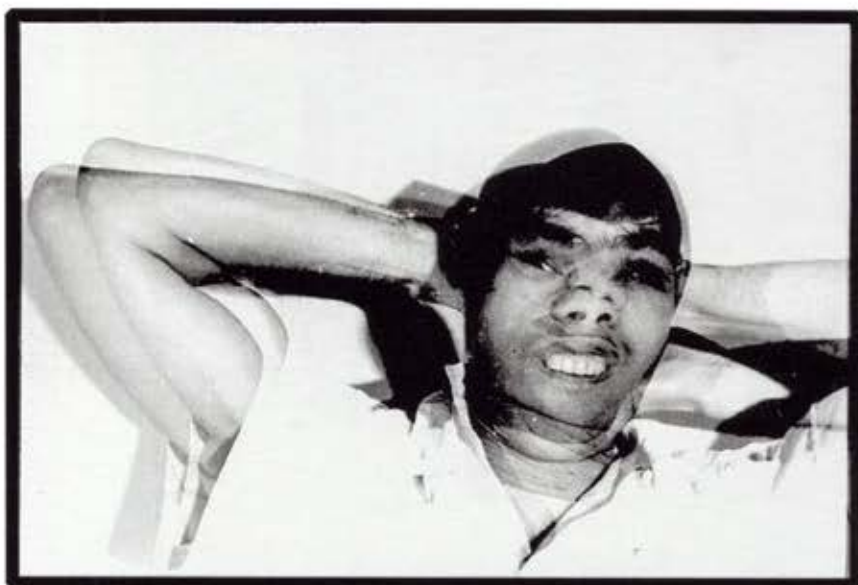
Stalter later abandoned conceptual photography to focus on photojournalism, starting with two projects about Roma, regarded in Hungary and many other countries as second-class citizens. A selection of images from the two projects, *Manufacture* (1980) and *Tólápa* (1982), can be seen on *The Classic Platform*. But as Stalter points out, “My series of photojournalism are not traditional photographs, I believe they also carry some conceptual thinking. They are subjective, reflect me, my relationship with the world surrounding me, my vulnerability, my emotions, as well as the people who collaborated with me.”

János Vető, born 1953, was another prominent figure on the scene, not only because of his own work but also through his collaborations with Tibor Hajas (1946-1980). He got his first taste of officialdom at a very early age.

– My first camera was a Russian cine camera given to me by my brother. It was for an unusual film format that I couldn’t get hold of but I used it to record sound. We lived opposite a military building. One day I took the camera out on the balcony. Shortly thereafter, a general and two soldiers knocked on the door, demanding I hand over the camera. I got it back eventually. They could see there was no film in it but the shock left a mark that stayed with me.



György Stalter.
Game, gelatin silver prints, 1976.
Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography.



Almost by coincidence, Vető became a child actor at the age of nine at the Madách Theatre in Budapest. “Then I hit puberty, got fat and they said goodbye.” In 1966, together with friends, he founded the Apropos Film and Photo Studio and in 1972, the art action group KOMMUNART. He also played music in experimental bands and would “continue to act in films, when I was asked by directors. Performing comes easy to me. I really think of myself as a body artist who uses photography rather than a photographer.”

With all these activities that you were involved in, did you have a feeling of being watched? That there was a file on you?

– It was a fact. I loved hiking and hitchhiking. In my late teens I travelled as much as I could in the Eastern bloc, East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania. I couldn’t travel to the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the west was completely forbidden. Then suddenly in 1972, they took my passport as I entered military service and I didn’t get a new passport until 1982 so no more travelling outside the country. But there was an upside to this, because it made me focus that much harder on my art. I lost something but gained something else. I wasn’t allowed to exhibit in the main spaces so I exhibited underground.

There’s a strong performative element in your work. During that period you worked with sequences and also combined negatives in the darkroom, images that required great technical skill.

– The sequences were probably influenced by my experience of performing and making films. I began to think in sequences. The combination printing started “in camera”. Initially by rolling back the film but it didn’t really work. Then I got my first Nikon camera and it had a double exposure function. I used it a lot but most of the real work was done in the darkroom. Combining two negatives, then four, six, eight. I wanted to go against the school of “photography is documenting reality”, to break reality, play with the eyes and the mind. It was really about creating magic in the darkroom. To go somewhere else, create a different reality. It was a kind of alchemy, working long hours in the dark, experimenting with paper and chemicals.

János Vető. *Asia (variation)*, reconstructed from the negatives, 1978.
Collection of the artist.



János Vető. *1x1*, gelatin silver print, 1976.
Courtesy of Vintage Galéria.

You used those techniques in your own way. Were you aware of artists and photographers in the west exploring them at that time?

– I used to go to the libraries at the British and American embassies in Budapest and I found some books and magazines there that weren't allowed in Hungary, about historical as well contemporary photography, Bauhaus and Avant-Garde movements. Those visits were probably noted in my files but I was never deeply involved in anything political and not really in my art either. Some of my friends were politically involved but though I agreed with them, I did my own thing.

In 1974, you presented an exhibition at the Bercsényi Club in Budapest.

– That was my first official exhibition. Before that, I made a few exhibitions in private flats and an illegal exhibition, when I put up images on the brick wall around the mausoleum of Dervish poet Gül Baba Türbéje who died in 1541. Bercsényi was housed in the collegium for architect students at the university and I built a room within the room. Some of the prints were partially painted with aniline colour. But it wasn't a major institution, so not that many people saw it.

But your work was exhibited abroad sometimes?

– Well, the strange thing was, even though I couldn't travel abroad myself, as I didn't have a passport, my work did. It was smuggled out of the country and exhibited in England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Germany and even Australia. I was absolutely amazed the first time I sold a piece of work. For me, art was my existence, not objects to be sold. I was naive I guess.

In 1975, you began collaborating with poet, artist and performance artist Tibor Hajas.

– I knew of him of course and had seen some of his exhibitions, including the series *Letter To My Friend in Paris*. I didn't like it that much. The photographs were documents of an action. Not what I was into, which was, as I said, to create magic with photography. Our friendship began when he and I and a few others went to the airport to say goodbye to the great artist Tamás Szentjóbgy who was being



János Vető. *Ball of Light*, made in collaboration with Peter Janesch, reconstructed from the negatives, 1982.
Collection of the artist.



Tibor Hajas. *Make-up Studies I*, photograph by János Vető, gelatin silver print, 1979. Courtesy of Vintage Galéria.

kicked out of the country. Tibor and I immediately realised we had a lot in common. At first he just did performances at my exhibition openings and gave my works wonderful titles. Then we started doing photo actions.

His work prior to the photo actions was influenced by the Fluxus movement. The photo actions have often been compared to the Vienna Actionists. I would suggest the two of you took it further, sometimes through your “darkroom alchemy”?

– In one series, I used acid on the negatives, slowly moving the emulsion, creating “flames”. In other images in the same series, I used red deck paint and sometimes both.

There’s another difference, I think. Hajas wrote extensively about photography, not academic texts but making statements such as “the lack of photograph is like a lack of water... Communication with the outside world ceases. The story without proof becomes not only private, but a secret story, a hallucination with which one must cope alone.” and “The less you are able to

live out reality, even though you are forced to go through it, the more you can experience it in the form of genres or symbols, that is to say, in art.” Reading these and other statements I get the impression that he almost wanted to merge with photography and through it transform himself and the world around him. That’s quite different from the Vienna Actionists who regarded their performances as rites of transgression, documented in photography.

– We regarded the photo actions as a kind of opera, grandiose drama. We talked endlessly about photography, spent and hours making sets and paintings for the actions. I had picked up some extra skills years earlier when I had photographed heavy industry, lighting vast spaces with magnesium. It was like we were exploding each other’s brains with ideas, “we need some coal!”, “we need magnesium! and wire!” We laughed a lot but it was also very dark, very heavy and deep. Even we were surprised how intense it got.

And then he died in 1980.

– He died in a car accident. I was in the backseat. It was absolutely terrible. An incredible blow.



Tibor Hajas. *Surface Torture*, vintage gelatin silver print, 1979. Photographed by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography.

During the immediate years following, you did a series of light drawings, using a flashlight. And then you switched to painting?

– Funny that, because I couldn't stand paintings during the '70s and I then began painting myself. In 1980, I began working with Lóránt Méhes, alias Zuzu the great hyperrealist painter, and together we created a third artist, Zuzu-Vető. The works we created were not like anything either of us had done before. I also started a band with some friends, Trabant, and made installations. Since then I have moved between all these mediums, sometimes collaborating with my wife, Maria Lavman Vető.

Over the last 15-20 years, the works of Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde have become increasingly sought-after by institutions as well as private collectors. Attila Pócze's Vintage Galéria presented its first exhibitions of conceptual photography in the early 2000s.

– I was fascinated by the different approaches artists had to photographers when working with the medium. This difference was still very visible until the '90s. I was also interested in the political aspect

of the Neo-Avant-Garde and its focus on the basic questions of the medium itself.

Is the work well represented in the Hungarian institutions?

– Hungarian museums started to collect this period much, much earlier than private collectors, so there are important pieces in public collections. On the other hand, most Hungarian institutions have very limited funds for collecting and as prices have gone up a lot in the last few years, it is now difficult for them to fill in the gaps. Having said that, important works are rare and hard to find, especially as there's now much more focus on works from the '60s and '70s.

Who are the buyers?

–We represent artists or estates of artists and we carefully place works with museums and major collections. Within Hungary, there is a small but very devoted group of collectors. Internationally, interest just keeps on growing. In the last ten years we have placed works with major museums like Art Institute of Chicago, MoMa, Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou, as well as private collectors.



Tibor Hajas. *Tumo I*, vintage Agfa chrome print, 1979. Photographed by János Vető. Courtesy of Einspach Fine Art & Photography.

Gábor Einspach will be familiar to some through the gallery Art + Text in Budapest. It transformed last year, into Einspach Fine Art & Photography and has recently moved into a substantially bigger space. Einspach was instrumental in bringing out the English-language version of Sándor Szilágyi's book.

– This period in Hungarian fine art has received a lot of attention over the years and important works of Ilona Keserü, Dóra Maurer, Isván Nádler and Imre Bak are now in the collections of the most significant museums. I believe that the photography of this period is just as important. Together they not only reflect the anxieties and uncertainties of the socialist era, in which I grew up, but these works also have a very strong sense of freedom. They are instinctive, sometimes wild, often playful, and that's very liberating today.

When we met in 2018, we talked about the scarcity of the material.

– There's not a lot. Only a few collections exist that are specific to this period. The main sources are basically the artists' studios. Works rarely appear on the market, although sometimes there might be a forgotten suitcase with a bunch of prints from the seventies, which somebody gave to a friend before their defection or they left it at a lover's house after a sudden breakup. Or it was simply forgotten because there was no interest in it for a very long time. In many cases, artists at that time did not have money to develop their own photographs. With the lack of exhibition space and no real market, it made little sense to make more than one or a few prints. However, we have found a variety of significant works buried deep in drawers, in artists' studios and attics. Sadly there are not many vintage prints and we don't work with later prints. So quite frankly, for me, this is more of a mission than a business.