

Endre Tót

solo exhibition | february 20 – july 18, 2020

"I write you because you are there and I am here" (1971). This simple sentence might summarise what was at stake in the work of Hungarian artist Endre Tót at the time when he decided to make the viewers of his paintings into readers of his letters. In 1963 he adopted a so-called "informal" approach to painting, but quickly found himself at a dead end: who might it address? Although not an openly militant artist, he refused to be part of the institutional art world: his works could thus only be aimed at the few. Under the regime of János Kádár, general secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party – the only party –, opportunities for alternative artists to make the experiments public in their own country were non-existent. Without exhibitions, without opportunities for sharing, and without reception, what is the point of creating anything? Having explored the canvas as a writing space where he could proclaim his discontent (*I'm fed up with painting, Four Zeros for you*, 1972) Tót gave up the canvas and devoted himself to radically conceptual forms. To avoid censorship, he went in secret to Belgrade, the capital of what was then Yugoslavia, and sent his works to the West. By embracing all the possibilities offered by Mail Art, his new works could at last circulate and be communicated, photocopied and sent on; they had an *address*. In 1971, the young art historian Jean-Marc Poinot invited Tót to send contributions for his book *Mail art, communication à distance, concept* and to be shown in Poinot's exhibition "Envois" at the seventh Paris Biennale. Tót acquired international recognition and spontaneously started to write to the artists on show. The *Rain* series – postcards on which oblique lines symbolise artificial rain – nonetheless clearly signal a sense of separation (*My Rain, your Rain*, 1971-79), isolation (*Isolated Rain*, 1971-79) or the interiority of the artist as recluse (*Inside Rain*, 1971-79). He wrote to you because you were there and he was here.

By sending his works outside the country, the artist appropriated their modes of circulation; his work crossed the iron curtain. In this way he powerfully asserted his individuality at a time when the totalitarian state was deliberately preventing it from expressing itself. Under the communist regime, it was not only private property that was threatened with elimination, but also "privacy and individuality as an emotional and psychological refuge"¹. The power exercised by the state reaches into the furthest confines of the mind. By working despite all this, in secret, the artist asserts his own existence. The *I am glad* series (1971-1976/2015), photographs of the artist staged in ordinary, even derisory situations, demonstrate the lack of available freedom: the artist is glad if he can stare at a wall, look at himself in the mirror, or write with his left hand. Art enters the private sphere because it cannot declare itself publicly. Some of his actions nevertheless took place in the streets of Budapest: he addressed Hungarian passers-by – though in English. The photographs recording these actions present the artist alone with a smile on his face: he is glad to be able to hang a notice in the street; he is glad to demonstrate alone on a bridge. His furtive gestures were made in full sight, but his forewarned audience was the photographer alone; they were thus secretly artistic. If discovered, the images he produced could not be interpreted negatively by the regime, since the gestures were perfectly harmless and the words expressed joy. Predicated on both concealment and revelation, these works used the fact that they would be revealed later – outside the country, in an artistic framework – to create a sense of tension that made the system effective. They opened up a world whose importance seemed inversely proportional to the gesture itself, a world where

¹ "The ownership of private property was systematically eliminated, along with privacy and individuality as an emotional and psychological refuge." Claire Bishop, *ARTIFICIAL HELLS, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, Londres, New York, 2012, p. 131.

absurd acts stripped of their utilitarian function were made in secret, without an audience and without consent from whatever regime. A world where drawing a chalk line on a wall has a completely different value from the one first assigned to it. Close to artists affiliated to Fluxus such as Robert Filliou and Ben Vautier – with whom he corresponded –, Tót is driven by the potential to merge art and life. But according to art historian Claire Bishop, discreet intervention in public space under the communist regime was also “a reaction to the state’s own military displays and socialist festivals (mass spectacle) as visual points of reference”². The occupation of the public sphere should be seen, she says, as a reaction to the monopoly of propagandist parades. Happily, “nobody saw me write this”, as Tót wrote on the concrete pavement. By this he implies, with humour tinged with derision and a sense of absurd pathos, that these claims must remain secretive. The smile of the “happy” artist is a sarcastic smirk addressed to the powers that be.

By “addressing” his works in the street and outside the country, Tót shows the extent to which the individual and his work only exist through their relational activities – those that were confiscated by the regime. If the recipients of his letters are required to engage in a deciphering process that is part and parcel of the act of reading, what is at issue here is nonetheless the impossibility of communication. Language seems to be reduced to signs that have lost all their value: rows of consecutive oblique lines and zeros contaminate the sent message like protest banners (*Zér0s* series). Here, that which is repeated appeals for meaning in a world where rationality seems to have abdicated in the face of the madness of a totalitarian regime. Like symptoms, the zeros insistently appeal for meaning from readers who actively participate in their signification. All that remains is a relationship. If he is here, Tót writes to you because you are there, urging you to help him conquer a new semiotic field.

Sophie Lapalu – january 2020

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² “The fact that many of these actions do not look like art is less an indication of the artists’ commitment to blurring “art and life” than a deliberate strategy of self-protection, as well as a reaction to the state’s own military displays and socialist festivals (mass spectacle) as visual points of reference”. *Ibid.*, p.130-131.