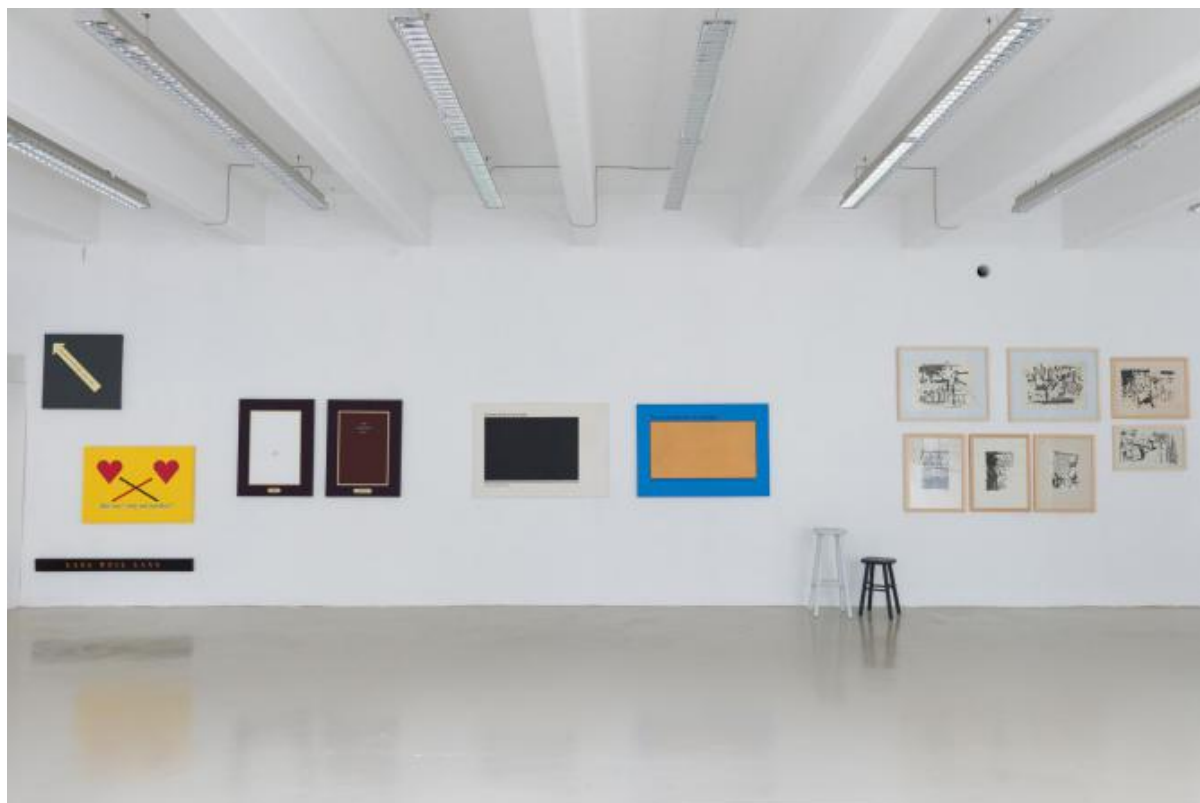


ENDRE TÓT | BREAK THE GRIP OF SHAME

03.10.17

Translated to English



Endre Tót is regarded as the leading internationally recognised artist of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, as well as one of the defining figures of international conceptual art. He was part of the Fluxus movement and is best known for his mail art projects. A retrospective of the exceptional artist is currently on view at **Kunstraum Baumgasse 42/7** in Vienna, curated by **Amir Shariat**.

“I cannot emphasise enough how mail art was the only way to break out of the isolation ... [...] Despite living under a dictatorship, the postal service was surprisingly flawless,” says Endre Tót (b. 1937 in Sümeg, Hungary), who was able to overcome the restrictions of censorship in Hungary before emigrating to West Germany in 1978 with the help of mail art. As a social and political medium, mail art was a means of resistance in the dictatorships of Latin America and Eastern Europe and refers to letters, maps, documentations of actions, as well as other art projects sent via mail. Mail art artists produced, collected and archived the works. As conceptual art, it circumvented galleries, art dealers or museums and was therefore difficult to control.

At the beginning of his artistic career, from 1964-1970, Tót painted pictures in the style of *Art Informel* – an absolute novelty in Hungary at that time – as well as works in the spirit of Pop and Minimal Art. Several hundred pictures were made during this time, which Tót “rehabilitated”, as he calls it, after the political transition in Hungary. For example, in 1989,

after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a retrospective of his early works was held at the Kiscelli Museum in Budapest, and many of his key works from that period entered the collections of important Hungarian museums. For the Hungarian art historian and artist **Géza Perneczky**, Tót had "the greatest artistic talent of all the artists who lived east of Amsterdam" (*Új Művészet*, October 2003). Nevertheless, Tót decided in 1970 to take the radical step of abandoning painting. Given limited opportunities – on one hand, his personal economic situation, on the other hand, the restrictions imposed by the cultural policy of the socialist regime and the Iron Curtain – he saw no future in painting. In the late 1960s, theories and practices emanating from *Fluxus* and the conceptual art movement out of Western Europe and the US, had already reached the Hungarian shores. Artists proficient in traditional media started to work with non-material forms. Endre Tót's decision to dedicate himself to conceptual art was the only way forward as he yearned to create internationally relevant art as an artist who lived and worked in Hungary at the time.

In 1971, all three fundamental ideas which would define his conceptual period as well as his later artistic career, had already crystallised. Aptly named *Zero*, *Joy* and *Rain* (works from all three workgroups are shown in the exhibition), Tót realised these ideas originally in text. Printed on paper, machine-written, or stamped, his small-format text works were particularly suitable for mail art, with Tót one of its first representatives in the region. In 1971 he was invited by Jean-Marc Poinot to exhibit at the pioneering "*Section of the Envois*" during the 7th Biennial of Paris. Thanks to his participation, Tót was able to make important contacts and soon became part of the then most prevalent mail art circle, with dozens of letters being sent and received on a daily basis. His correspondents included **Ben Vautier**, **John Armleder**, **George Brecht**, **Daniel Spoerri**, **Cosey Fanni Tutti**, **Marina Abramovic** and **Dieter Roth**.

As a result of the artistic isolation and separation from Western art, the notion of absence, emptiness and "nothingness" – such as the word *Zero* in the series of works of the same name or the Number 0 – is a central and recurring theme in Tót's works. His works from the *Rain* series are in tautological relation to the repetition and positioning of the "/" character. Endre Tót's *Joy* works, or JOYS, were followed by a prototype entitled "I am glad that I could have this sentence printed". This sentence was written on cardboard the size of a postcard and was ground-breaking for the entire group of works created in different media, as each work begins with the statement "I am glad if / when ...". "My JOYS reflected the totalitarian regime of Hungary in the 1970s. I countered the censorship, isolation and oppression felt in every area of life with the absurd euphoria of different pleasures. Nevertheless, I would not call myself a political artist. I reacted rather indirectly to the time in which I had to live. With humour and ease and also some philosophy. I consistently avoided dark colours and other dramas in my works," the artist says. In the early 1980s, a DAAD scholarship enabled him to move to West Berlin and to create his public performances. Endre Tót has been living in Cologne for 35 years, has participated in numerous exhibitions and his works are in renowned international museums (Museum Ludwig Cologne, Centre Pompidou Paris and MoMA New York amongst many others).

Endre Tót
Break the Grip of Shame

To 20 October 2017
Baumgasse 42/7, 1030 Vienna, Austria

Author: Angelika Seebacher

<http://www.parnass.at/aktuelles/endre-tot-breaking-the-grip-of-shame>