ILONA KESERÜ
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Agata Jakubowska
Mónika Zsikla

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Ilona Keserü (b. 1933), an artist whose career spans more than half a century of innovative contributions to painting and spatial installations, is a leading figure in the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Her journey as an artist reflects the complexities of being a woman artist in a state-socialist society, in which the interplay of personal expression and political constraints shaped her innovative approach to abstraction. As she stated, "Art for me is a way of living," emphasizing her belief that creativity is not just a profession but an integral part of existence. This perspective is evident in her groundbreaking works, which blend elements of folk art with avant-garde abstraction, creating a dialogue between the past and present.

Ilona Keserü began her artistic career during the turbulent 1950s, a time shaped by Stalinization and the period of liberalization following his death. A graduate of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts and subsequently influenced by her time in Rome, Keserü brought a unique sensibility to the Eastern European art scene of the 1960s and beyond. Her works often delve into themes of femininity and bodily identity. Pieces from 1960s, such as *Black Line (Fekete vonal)* (1968–69), directly reference intimate aspects of the female body, challenging societal taboos at a time when such expressions were largely repressed. Another focus of her work is color. Her signature use of bright, vibrant tones has always stemmed from both scientific and artistic exploration. As she once remarked, "I wanted to find the most concentrated form of color and shape that could reach people directly and speak to them." This approach, grounded in both intellectual rigor and personal emotion, has made her work resonate across generations and borders. Despite her significant contributions to modernism, which continue to inspire and challenge contemporary artistic practices internationally, her legacy remains underrecognized.

In line with our ongoing practice, Muzeum Susch is pleased to present the first large-scale retrospective dedicated to Ilona Keserü outside of Hungary. This monograph seeks to illuminate her unique contributions to the art world and continues Muzeum Susch's founding mission to promote the work of international avant-garde women artists and to reshape the dominant narratives within the art world.

My sincere thanks go to Mónika Zsikla, the exhibition curator and co-editor of this monograph, as well as to Agata Jakubowska, who has supported the project as the exhibition research consultant and co-editor of the book. Their dedication to shaping the exhibition's concept, conducting extensive research, and maintaining the high quality standards of presentations at Muzeum Susch has been invaluable.

My gratitude is also extended to Emma Vidovszky, the daughter of Ilona Keserü, for her inestimable support for the project and her efforts in facilitating the conditions necessary for the curators and researchers to study the artist's work.

Special thanks are expressed to all the private and institutional lenders: Kisterem Gallery, Stephen Friedman Gallery, Einspach & Czapolai Fine Art, History Museum—Kiscelli Museum, Municipal Gallery in Budapest, Balázs—Dénes Collection, Feoli Fine Art Collection, Somlói—Spengler Collection, Kolozsváry Collection, Collection of Queenie Rosita Law, Collection of Melinda Quintin and Molnár—Száraz Collection.

I am grateful to the esteemed researchers and authors of this monograph for their invaluable contributions and expert insights, which deepen our understanding of Keserü's work and promote greater recognition of her legacy. Heartfelt thanks are therefore extended to Katalin Aknai, Susanne Altmann, David Crowley, Éva Forgács, Dávid Fehér, Flavia Frigeri, Klara Kemp-Welsch, and Judit Radák.

Finally, I would like to warmly thank the team at Muzeum Susch for their devoted efforts and enthusiasm throughout the lengthy planning stages, thus contributing to the truly successful realization of this complex project.

Grażyna Kulczyk
Founder of Muzeum Susch and Chairwoman of the Board of Art Stations Foundation CH

Emma Vidovszky

ILONA KESERÜ: LIFE IN IMAGES

● Ilona Keserü was born on November 29, 1933, in the town of Pécs, Hungary, as the second child of Ilona Jászai, a teacher, and János Keserü, a sub-prefect. During the Second World War, the family was relocated to Máramarossziget (today Sighetu Marmației, Romania) for a couple of years, a territory that was temporarily reannexed to Hungary in 1938. Once they returned to Pécs, Keserü started her secondary school studies at a local girls' lyceum. In 1946, she met her first master, the painter Ferenc Martyn, who took her on as a student, and joined the Free School of Fine Art, an afternoon art school led by Martyn, among others. The students practiced the use of graphite, pencils, and watercolor paint on paper.

Ilona Keserü age four (location unknown), 1937,
© Ilona Keserü, photo: Ilona Jászai

Ilona Keserü playing the piano in Máramarossziget, 1942,
© Ilona Keserü, photo: Ilona Jászai

● In 1950, Keserü transferred to the Secondary School of Fine and Applied Arts in Budapest, where she made friends with other young artists such as Béla Gönczy, János Neufeld (later Major), György Kovásznai, and József Bartl. These friendships lasted for decades and were important in Keserü's life.

Secondary school classmates: György Kovásznai, Ilona Keserü, János Neufeld (later Major) in Budapest, May 1, 1952, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Irén Kresz

● In 1953, Keserü applied to the University of Fine Arts (formerly College of Fine Arts) in Budapest, where she completed first a course in painting with master László Bencze (three years) and then a fresco (mural) course with master István Szőnyi (three years). The training at the university was very traditional, focusing on drawing and painting models and still lifes. They mostly worked with charcoal on paper and did not experiment with bright colors.

Keserü was one of the many young people who took part in the demonstration that started the Revolution of 1956 in Budapest, and was deeply affected by the tragic events that followed.

She graduated from the fresco department in 1958, with her diploma work, *Refugees (Menekülők),* a 2.5-by-nine-meter-large *al secco* painting.

István Szőnyi and Ilona Keserü at the University of Fine Arts (formerly College of Fine Arts), 1957, courtesy Fortepan, photographer unknown

Ilona Keserü standing in front of the cardboard draft of her diploma work, *Refugees (Menekülők),* at the Epreskert buildings of the University of Fine Arts (formerly College of Fine Arts) in Budapest, 1958, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

● While she was studying, Keserü lived in student residences. Once she graduated, she continued living and working in Budapest, first in a small, rented basement studio/apartment on Rómer Flóris Street (1959–60), followed by a much brighter but equally small flat by the Danube, at 3–4 Belgrád rakpart (1960–66), which she then managed to exchange for a much larger studio/apartment at 17 Belgrád rakpart, where she still resides.

Sublet and studio on Rómer Flóris Street, 1959–60. In the background: *Figures on the Seashore (Alakok a tengerparton),* 1959–62, oil on canvas, 80 × 70 cm, and *Sea Grasses (Tengeri füvek),* 1959–62, oil on canvas, 35 × 50 cm (early version), © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsuzsa Fábri

Ilona Keserü in her small studio/apartment at 3–4 Belgrád rakpart, Budapest, 1964, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

Studio/apartment interior, 17 Belgrád rakpart, Budapest, 1974. On the walls: *Tombstones 4 (Sírkövek 4.)* and *Monochrome Wall-Hanging (Monokróm falikárpit),* both 1970, jute, linen, hemp and graphite, 160 × 104 cm; on the floor: parts of the series titled *Tombstones (Sírkövek),* 1969, linocolor paint and paper print, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsolt Szabóky

● Between 1959 and 1969, illustrating books and newspapers provided Keserü with a source of income. It was also during these years that she made the long-lasting acquaintance of important figures in the contemporary Hungarian cultural scene. In addition to colleagues in the visual arts (for instance, Dezső Korniss and Árpád Mezei), Keserü struck up close friendships with the authors Géza Ottlik and Dezső Tandori.

● Traveling was always a very important part of Keserü's life, starting in 1959 with her first trip abroad to Poland, at a time when Hungarians were only issued what was called a "socialist passport," which permitted travel only to countries in the Eastern Bloc. While there, she saw abstract paintings on display in museums for the first time. She started painting abstract paintings upon her return. This trip was then followed by ones to Czechoslovakia (Prague), Bulgaria, and a return to Poland.

● In 1962, Keserü was issued a passport for the first time, which allowed her to travel to Western Europe for one year. She planned to stay in Rome and then Paris, but ended up spending the entire time in Rome (November 1962–November 1963), where she had her first solo exhibition at the Galleria Bars, and also applied for a noncredit course at the Accademia di Belle Arti, and consequently received a three-month Italian state scholarship. She had the opportunity to meet and befriend contemporary Italian artists, hitchhiked to southern Italy with friends, and won a prize in a painting contest in the town of Gubbio.

Book cover by Ilona Keserü, 1970, for János Körössényi, *Éhes falka,* published by Kozmosz Könyvek, 1970

Late Season (Utószezon), 1961 (Nesebar, BG), pen and India ink on paper, 410 × 293 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

Ilona Keserü at the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, Italy, 1963, © Ilona Keserü, photo: László Vinkler

First solo exhibition, Galleria Bars, Rome, Italy, 1963, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

● Keserü's first visit to Rome had a catalytic effect on her work. The months that followed her return to Hungary, devoted to processing her experiences, were filled with frenzied work. In 1964, she produced her first large-scale painting, *Silvery Picture (Ezüstös kép),* which marked the end of her period of exploration and the discovery of her "own voice." The vertical groups of recurrently interlacing curved lines arranged in gray, white, and black columns that form the basis of the composition evoke an imaginary cityscape. Keserü subsequently became aware of the intuitive materialization of shape, in 1967, in the form of the heart-shaped Baroque tombstones in the village of Balatonudvari.

● After her return from Italy, Keserü had a small solo exhibition at the Jókai Klub in Budapest (1964), where pebble paintings and drawings that she had made in Rome were on display. In 1965, she joined the Studio of Young Artists, where she made new friends in the fine art scene, such as István Bencsik, Lajos Sváby, Miklós Melocco, and Tamás Fekete. She remained a member until 1967, when the annual exhibition of the Studio was reported to the authorities, who in return banned the display of non-figurative works. In 1969, she, along with István Bencsik and János Major, organized a self-financed exhibition in which she presented her new works incorporating stitching. In 1968 and 1969, she participated in the Iparterv exhibitions, two other landmark events for this generation of artists.

Ilona Keserü in her studio/apartment in Budapest (3–4 Belgrád rakpart) standing in front of *Silvery Picture (Town) (Ezüstös kép [város]),* 1964, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Elemér Vattay

Solo exhibition at the student residence club of the University of Engineering, Budapest, 1967.
Ilona Keserü in front of *Red Picture (Painting Number Nine) (Piros kép [kilences számú festmény]),* 1966, oil, enamel and oil pastel on canvas, 120 × 165 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: István Karff

Group exhibition with János Major and István Bencsik at Adolf Fényes Hall, Budapest, 1969 (János Major, Ilona Keserü, István Bencsik, Ilona Jászai), © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

● 1966 marked the start of Keserü's career in theater design, after a friend, Éva Sasvári, introduced her to the theater director and actor Tamás Major. From this year onward she designed sets and costumes for various productions all over the country until 1976, collaborating with the directors Tamás Major and István Szőke, among others. This became her major source of income, and since the authorities had banned abstract art from being exhibited, it was also an important way to share her art with a broader audience.

The performance space of *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogey*, directed by Tamás Major, Katona József Chamber Theatre of the National Theatre, Budapest, 1970, courtesy MTI (Hungarian National Archive), photo: Éva Keleti

● In 1967, Keserü started using the motif of the heart-shaped tombstones she had previously discovered in the cemetery of Balatonudvari, a motif that went on to play a major role in her oeuvre. In 1969, she revisited the cemetery with photographer Yvonne Kranz and took the paintings *(Tombstones 3, Tombstones 4 [Sírkövek 3., Sírkövek 4.])* and the large work titled *Hanging with Tombstone Motifs (Falikárpit sírkőformákkal)* to be photographed alongside and among the old tombstones, her sources of inspiration.

Balatonudvari cemetery, installation with the painting *Tombstones 4 (Sírkövek 4.),* 1969, oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm, 1969, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Yvonne Kranz

● Keserü was granted a passport to travel through Western Europe for two months in 1971. The following year she spent time working at the artists' colony in Moravany, Slovakia, whose participants included artists from Central-Eastern Europe, and completed a number of large paintings, using her unique technique of embossed canvas in several of them.

Moravany, Slovakia, 1972, with the work *Space Taking Shape (Alakuló tér),* 1972, oil on canvas-backed linoleum on a shaped wooden frame, 180 × 110 × 12 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

● Keserü and the composer László Vidovszky first met in 1974 during the production of a theater performance at the Ódry Stage in Budapest. They began their life together in 1976 and in December of that year their daughter, Emma, was born.

Ilona Keserü with Emma Vidovszky and László Vidovszky visiting the Sculpture Park of Nagyharsány in Villány, Hungary, 1977, with the work Ilona Keserü, *Pasted Forms (Tapasztott formák),* 1973, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Kata Nádor

● 1978 saw an important solo exhibition open at the Csók István Gallery in Székesfehérvár, Hungary, and the following years presented Keserü with several opportunities to exhibit both in Hungary and abroad.

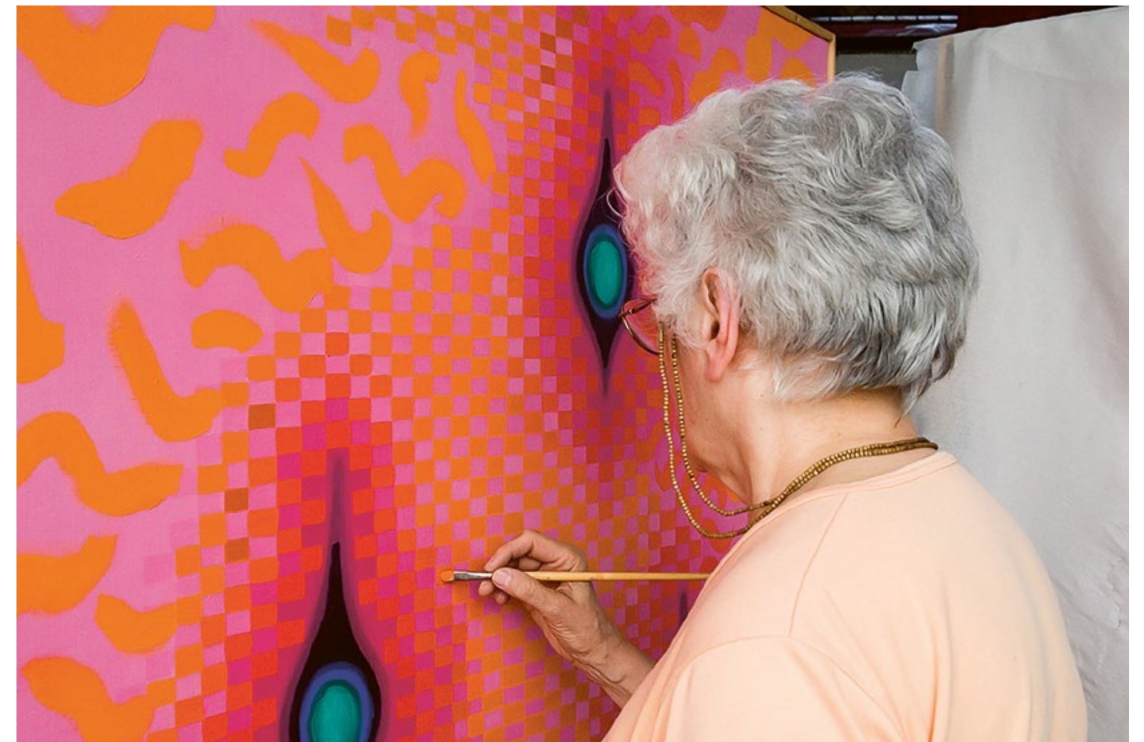
Ilona Keserü with Emma Vidovszky at Keserü's solo exhibition, Csók István Gallery, Székesfehérvár, 1978. In the background: *Plate 1 (Tányéros 1.),* 1967–68, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsuzsa Fábri

● In 1979, Keserü was offered a studio space at the artists' colony in Szentendre, north of Budapest, where she spent the following summers working. It was there that she made the colorful pipes for *Sound-Colour-Space (Hang-Szín-Tér),* a collaborative work with László Vidovszky, as well as other large paintings, which the studio in Budapest could not accommodate. It was also in the town of Szentendre where Keserü found a valuable collaborator, Mihály Lipták, the workshop manager at the Szentendre Print Workshop, with whom she worked on several silkscreen print series over the years that followed. Previously, between 1975 and 1979, Keserü had been a member of the Budapest Workshop, where she first encountered the technique of silkscreen printing and made several series of prints there.

● It was during the 1970s that Keserü started her color research, which has since then spanned many decades and examined several topics. The most significant of these color research works include the painting series called *All (Mind),* which explored Keserü's great revelation that: "Each and every shade of color of the rainbow is in harmony with each and every shade of skin color of people living on Earth"[1]; experimentation with the afterimage phenomena, a vision that manifests behind one's closed eyelids, to which topic she dedicated numerous paintings with brilliantly vibrant, pulsating surfaces; the color Möbius strip, which she discovered and started developing in 1987 and went on to create both paintings and spatial objects relating to this theme; and the *cangiante* technique, which she encountered while doing international research in the late 1990s and started to apply in her paintings around 2000.

1. Ilona Keserü, *Infinite Colour Sequence (Végtelen színsor),* in *Tavaszi Műhely,* Conference on Science and Arts (Pécs, 1997), trans. John King and Krisztina Sarkady-Hart.

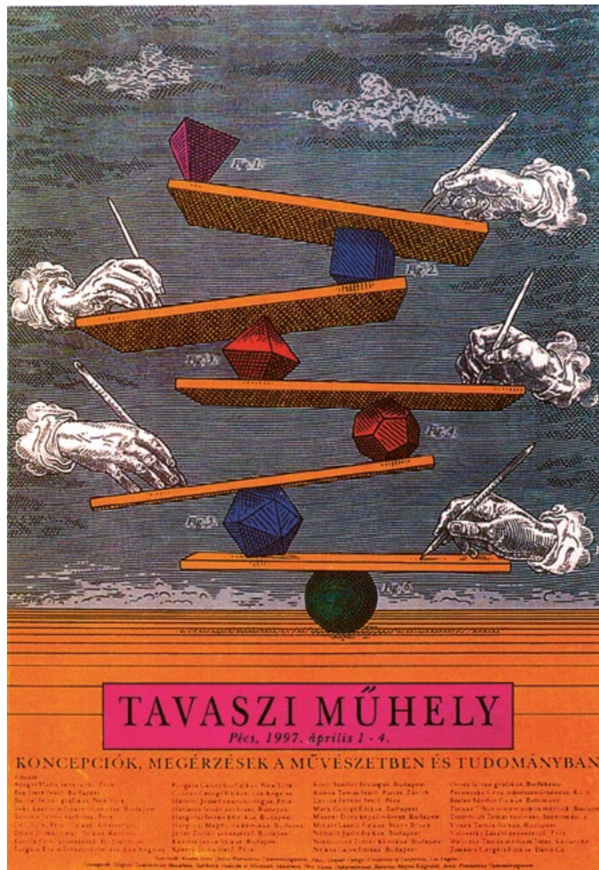
Sound-Colour-Space (Hang-szín-tér), 1980, on display at the M21 Gallery, Pécs, 2016, as part of Ilona Keserü's solo exhibition, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth



Keserü making corrections on the painting *Sun After-Images (Nap-utóképek),* 1990, oil on canvas, 140 × 140 cm, in her Pécs studio, 2007, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

Installation view of Keserü's exhibition at the Kieselbach Gallery in Budapest, 2012, titled *Cangiante – Colour Shifting – Exhibition of Ilona Keserü Ilona (Cangiante Színváltás – Ilona Keserü Ilona kiállítása),* © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

● Related to Keserü's color research was an important event that took place in Pécs in 1997, a conference organized by Keserü and the physicist George Grüner, with numerous artists, scientists, and theoreticians taking part: the Spring Workshop—Conference on Science and Arts, which examined concepts and intuitions in art and science. Several of Keserü's color research topics were discussed, and it was here that the concept of the color Möbius was first introduced to the public.



Cover of the booklet published by Pécsi Kultúrális Központ (Pécs Cultural Centre) in 2000. The Spring Workshop conference was held in 1997.

● A landmark exhibition opened in 1983 at the Budapest Kunsthalle, Ilona Keserü's first major solo exhibition in a state-run exhibition venue in Hungary, marking the artist's fiftieth birthday. It was a retrospective show of her oeuvre to date.

First large-scale retrospective solo exhibition in Hungary at the Budapest Kunsthalle (Műcsarnok), Budapest, 1983.
In the photo: painter Jenő Barcsay and poets Sándor Weöres and Amy Károlyi,
© Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsolt Szabóky

● In 1984, after accepting a teaching position in the Visual Arts Department of the University of Pécs (formerly Janus Pannonius University), Keserü and her family moved to her birth town, but both she and László Vidovszky, who was invited to teach at the music department, continued to commute back and forth between Pécs and Budapest. They moved into a newly built house with studio spaces for both Keserü and Vidovszky in 1985, which became their working base for several decades.

Keserü with her students, teaching color studies at the University of Pécs, ca. 1984–85, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

Studio interior in Pécs, Hungary, 1987, with: *Soft Movement (Lágy mozdulat),* 1987, oil, oil pastel, graphite, embossed canvas, and stitching on canvas, 180 × 120 × 4 cm, *Sign (Reminiscent of a Skull) (Jel [Koponyára emlékeztető]),* 1984, oil, embossed canvas, and stitching on canvas, 180 × 110 × 5 cm; upstairs: *From the World 2 (A világból 2),* 1974–75, oil on embossed canvas, 60 × 340 × 4 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Ilona Keserü

● In 1990, in cooperation with her colleagues István Bencsik, Imre Schrammel, and Sándor Rétfalvi, Keserü started the process of establishing a postgraduate Master School of Art in Pécs, a pioneering initiative in Hungary. Teaching partially began in 1991, and in 1992 the school was officially accredited by the ministry. It was the beginning of a process that later led to the founding of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Pécs and the launch of the first Fine Arts DLA training in Hungary (1995), where Keserü continued to teach as professor emerita (2003–8).

Interior at István akna (former coalmining buildings in the Mecsek hills), residence of the painting department of the Pécs Master School of Fine Arts, with works by students on display, 1993, © Ilona Keserü, photo: László Körtvélyesi

● Supporting new generations of painters has always been a core issue for Keserü. In 2007, she started an annual program in Pécs called *Színerő – Léptékváltás (Colour Force – A Shift in Scale),* a two-week workshop that offered candidates the opportunity to work with large-scale surfaces of a minimum of two-by-two meters in the enormous, disused industrial spaces of the Zsolnay Factory in Pécs. Each of these workshops—the last of them organized in 2023—culminated in an exhibition of the works created by the participants.

Colour Force workshop at the Zsolnay Factory in Pécs, 2008. Ilona Keserü installing the *Large Colour-Shifting Titanium Tangle (Nagy színváltó titángubanc),* 2007; in the background, large-scale works by participating artists, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

● Another unprecedented initiative was the establishment and organization of an international art exhibition and fair in Budapest, the Budapest Art Expo, the first of its kind in Hungary. Keserü was one of the founding members of the Budapest Art Expo Foundation, along with the art historian László Beke and the art sociologist Johan van Dam. The fair continued to be held annually from 1991 to 1998.

Cover of the 1991 Budapest Art Expo catalogue, published by the Budapest Art Expo Foundation. The fair featured works by ninety-nine artists from Hungary, Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

● Keserü was commissioned to design and create several large-scale works for public spaces. Starting with *Colour-Rotation (Wall Painting in Space with Six Columns) (Színforgó [Térbeli falfestmény hat oszloppal])* in 1983 at a school in Dombóvár, followed by a 200-square-meter *al secco* ceiling painting at the College of Energetics in Paks in 1989 and a wall painting in the mortuary of the Tata cemetery, which was completed in 1994. The inauguration of this work was also part of Keserü's admission to the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts. Keserü worked alone for two weeks each summer, 1993 and 1994, with the sole assistance of two of her students from the Master School of Art in Pécs.

Work at the mortuary of the cemetery in Tata, Hungary, on the *al secco* wall painting *The ground below, the water above, the unmeasurable (Lent a föld, és fönn a víz, a megmérhetetlen)*, 1993–94, 200 m², © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

● In 2001, Keserü obtained a two-month Hungarian state scholarship for a residency at the Hungarian Academy in Rome. Due to the size of her room there and the difficulties of transport, she made small paintings, which she subsequently elaborated in her studio in Pécs. Keserü was invited back to Rome in the autumn of 2001 to exhibit these paintings at the Palazzo Falconieri.

Exhibition at the Palazzo Falconieri, Rome, autumn 2001, © Ilona Keserü, photo: László Vidovszky

● On the occasion of Keserü's seventieth birthday, she was honored with two major solo exhibitions in Budapest in 2004, one at the MEO Gallery *(Old and New Paintings)* and the other at the Ludwig Museum *(Approach, Tangle, Stream)*. The MODEM Museum in Debrecen organized a solo show for Keserü in 2008, with the title *Picture Forest (Képerdő)*.

Solo exhibition at the MODEM Museum in Debrecen, 2008, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

● 2012 saw the start of a collaboration with the Kisterem Gallery, which led to participation in the FIAC Art Fair in Paris in 2016 and the Frieze Masters London in 2017, as well as solo exhibitions at the gallery and presentations at other art fairs since then. During the 2010s, the gallery also played a major role in some of Keserü's works becoming part of major international collections: *Wall-Hanging with Tombstone Forms (Falikárpit sírkőformákkal)* is now part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and *Reconstruction (Rekonstrukció)* was purchased by the Centre Pompidou, Paris. The Stephen Friedman Gallery in London also took Ilona Keserü on board as one of their artists in 2017, organized a solo exhibition for her in 2018, and presented her works at the 2023 Frieze Masters London.

● To mark the artist's ninetieth birthday, several events took place in Hungary in 2023: a small-scale retrospective exhibition opened at Q Contemporary in Budapest; a two-week pop-up exhibition celebrated Keserü's art in Balatonudvari next to the cemetery with the heart-shaped tombstones; a conference was held in Pécs; the National Gallery in Budapest presented an exhibition of Keserü's works on paper (drawings and prints); and the Kisterem Gallery also honored the artist's seventy-year-long career with an exhibition of archival photos.

Keserü continues to work actively, in recent years mostly in her Budapest studio on Ferenciek tere, which she has been using since 2012. She completed her latest works in 2022 and 2023, including large oil paintings, such as the *Detail of a Message (Üzenet részlete)* series, and a series of silkscreen prints titled *Creature – Colour Leaps (Lény – Színugrások)*.

Keserü with Stephen Friedman at the opening of her solo exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, 2018, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

pp. 40–41: Keserü at work in her studio on Ferenciek tere, Budapest, 2022, with: *Burning Sea (Detail of Message 1) (Égő tenger [Üzenet részlete 1.])*, 2022, oil on canvas, 170 × 120 cm; *Detail of a Message 4 (Üzenet részlete 4.)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 170 × 120 cm; and *Sign in a Red Space (Detail of a Message 3) (Jel piros térben [Üzenet részlete 3.])*, 2022, oil on canvas, 170 × 120 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Emma Vidovszky

Mónika Zsikla

FLOWING SHAPES IN THE ART OF ILONA KESERÜ

Ilona Keserü was born in 1933 in the city of Pécs, the cultural center of southern Hungary. She started her secondary school studies at a local girls' lyceum, and in 1946 met her first master, the painter Ferenc Martyn,[1] who took her on as a student. She also joined the Free School of Fine Art, an afternoon art school led by Martyn, among others. Martyn lived in Paris from 1926 to 1940, where he was initially associated with the Surrealists before joining the Abstraction-Création group in 1933. Following his return to Hungary, he first lived in Budapest, then moved to Pécs in 1945. Martyn's personality and the paintings, spatial constructions, and reliefs that the young Keserü saw in his studio in the mid-1940s, as well as the years she spent as his student, all had a powerful impact on her as a young person and defined her creative path for many years to come.

In 1950, Keserü left Pécs to become a student at the Budapest Secondary School of Fine and Applied Arts. She often recalls this period as one in which, without publications, reproductions, descriptions, or news, Hungary was isolated from the sorts of things that were shaping and defining the democratically based, modern artistic trends connected very strongly with the Western half of Europe. While exhibitions of contemporary art conveying the latest global trends had taken place in Budapest in 1946–47, before the Stalinist repression of the 1950s and the beginnings of the Cold War, as of 1950, by the time Ilona Keserü became a student in the capital, there were no traces to be seen of what was happening in (Western) contemporary art. Attempts were made to fill the gap with exhibitions from the Old Masters Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. These exhibitions, though devoid of contemporary references, nevertheless provided an opportunity for meticulously examining paintings such as Paul Cézanne's 1877 work *The Dresser*, which Ilona Keserü and her fellow painters studied for years.

After graduating from the Budapest Secondary School of Fine and Applied Arts, Keserü was admitted directly to the University of Fine Arts (formerly the College of Fine Arts). She originally applied to the Department of Painting, but eventually switched to studying fresco painting under István Szőnyi, graduating in 1958. She later recalled how her decision to leave the Department of Painting was perhaps prompted by the fact that she was tired of painting in monotonous "browns" and "dirty" tones, having been fascinated by colors from a young age.[2] The only place where she could paint in color was the Department of Frescoes, where, a few years later, she produced her graduation piece, *Refugees (Menekülők),* a large-scale, figurative composition, measuring nine meters long and approximately two and a half meters high, produced using the *al secco* (dry) technique. The dimensions of this piece clearly demonstrate the sort of skills Keserü had acquired in the Department of Frescoes. Besides the handling of color, the professional ability to compose on a vast scale would fundamentally define her later painting. During her time as a student of painting, both her teachers, István Szőnyi and Ferenc Martyn, with their entirely different approaches, observed that her personality and ambitions destined her to do "monumental things." But this awareness was implemented only around 1971–72, when she and her friend, the photographer Zsolt Szabóky, projected enormous reproductions of her paintings (the 1969 work *Slit [Hasítás],* for example) onto the wall of a neighboring building one summer evening. The compositions could be enlarged infinitely, which led Keserü to some startling conclusions. Seeing the enlargements convinced her that her work really was connected with monumental forms, and several motifs, including the enigmatic characters in the *Message (Üzenet)* series or the tombstone compositions, would subsequently evolve in her oeuvre in line with this recognition.

After graduating, Keserü made a living in the field of applied graphics, producing newspaper and book illustrations. In April 1959, she began living by herself for the first time, in a rented basement flat on Rómer Flóris Street in Budapest, which soon became a popular meeting place for a progressive, contemporary underground community of writers, poets, and artists working in intellectual isolation. In the summer of that year, she traveled outside Hungary for the first time, making a life-changing visit to Poland. In the public exhibition spaces of the museums and institutes

[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *Sea Grasses (Tengeri füvek),* 1959–62, oil on canvas, 35 × 50 cm,
© Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

in Warsaw, Keserü encountered contemporary abstract painting for the first time since at the Pécs studio of her teacher Ferenc Martyn. The work of Tadeusz Kantor and Maria Jarema made an extraordinarily profound impression on her. Upon returning home, the young artist produced the exploratory paintings *Sea Grasses (Tengeri füvek)* (1959–62) ❶ and *Figures on the Shore (Alakok a tengerparton)* (1959–62), both of which are a summary of her impressions from her trip to Poland. Besides the curved, rounded figures in the latter, this marks the first appearance of the tangle (later labyrinth) motif, a metaphor that pervades Keserü's cosmos as a whole; here, it takes the form of golden strands of interlaced ribbons that gleam in the darkness of the depths of the sea.

In search of intellectual independence and her own artistic voice, starting in November 1962, Keserü spent a year in Rome, where she was exposed to countless cultural influences. She enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti, where admission into a free course also meant that she was awarded a three-month Italian state scholarship. She met, among others, Amerigo Tot, who was then producing "semi-abstract" sculptures between two periods of abstract work. She also made the acquaintance of Achille Perilli, who was regarded as a pioneer in abstract art. It was also in Rome that she first came across the "spatial concepts" (*Concetto Spaziale*) of Lucio Fontana, as well as the work of Alberto Burri, whose burlap assemblages in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome not only made a profound impression on her, but also served as the inspiration for the embossed canvases that she produced six years later.

In the months following her return to Hungary, she worked feverishly on processing her experiences. In the compositions *Industrial Landscape (Factory) (Ipari táj [gyár])* (1964) and *Spiral Staircase (Csigalépcső)* (1964), we can clearly see the point at which Keserü left behind representational depiction and crossed the threshold into abstraction. In November of that year, she produced her first large-scale painting, *Silvery Picture (Town) (Ezüstös kép [város])* (1964) ❷, a work that finally seems to "speak in her own voice," bringing to a close her period of searching. The work was directly inspired by the Baroque architecture of Sicily, as well as Giulio Turcato's 1950 painting *Comizio*. Keserü's composition, which was painted over two earlier images, condenses all the architectural impressions she experienced during her study trip to Italy.

[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Silvery Picture (Town) (Ezüstös kép [város])*, 1964, oil and silver leaf on fiberboard, 125 × 170 cm, Nudelman Collection, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Red Picture (Painting Number Nine) (Piros kép [kilences számú festmény])*, 1966, oil, enamel, and oil pastel on canvas, 120 × 165 cm, Collection László Vidovszky, this work is a deposit of the Ludwig Museum, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü

The Baroque curves of the undulating lines that form the basis of the composition, arranged into overlapping groups of vertical gray, black, and white columns, evoke the panorama of an imaginary cityscape.

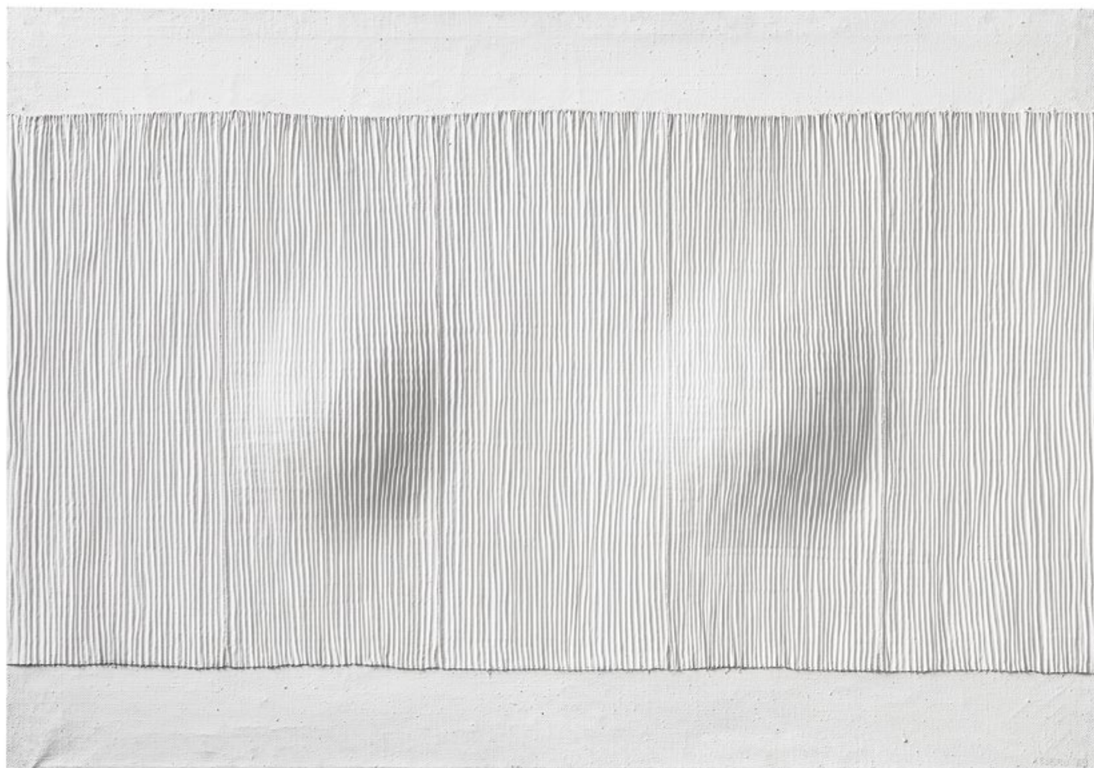
Silvery Picture opened up another perspective in Keserü's oeuvre, when her friend Éva Sasvári invited one of the period's most influential theater directors, Tamás Major, to visit Keserü's studio. On seeing the "monumental" quality of the painting and the composition's spatial structure, Major immediately declared that he could imagine *Silvery Picture* in a theater setting, and shortly after his visit, he asked the young artist to start working with him as a set and costume designer. Keserü's first stage design, produced for Peter Weiss's play *The Investigation*, directed by Tamás Major, at the request of the National Theatre, appeared on January 27, 1967. She received regular commissions to produce scenery and set designs from 1967 to 1976. Throughout this period, the two distinctly separate genres of fine and applied art developed and evolved in parallel in her oeuvre.

Following *Silvery Picture*, Keserü began painting a new series in the spring of 1965. The first piece in this series, *Painting Number One* (*Egyes számú festmény*) (1965), was followed by further numbered paintings—*Red Picture (Painting Number Nine) (Piros kép [kilences számú festmény])* (1966) ❸, and *Celebration* (formerly *Painting Number Five) (Ünnep [volt Ötös számú festmény])* (1965–66), which were shown in the legendary *Studio '66* exhibition organized by the Studio of Young Artists. Among the visitors to the exhibition was Lajos Kassák, a pioneering figure in the Hungarian avant-garde, who spoke highly of Keserü's paintings, in which her fascination with color was already apparent. In connection with *Red Picture (Painting Number Nine),* Kassák commended Keserü's pure and powerful use of color. A former student of Keserü, the painter István Losonczy, perceptively drew attention to the fact[3] that: "Hungary in the 1960s was relentlessly gray, not only because of the political regime but also because there were no colors: it wasn't just the clothes that were brownish gray; even painters were unable to get hold of the modern pigments that were widely available in the West. In 1965, once it became possible to travel, Keserü received as a gift 'from a friend in Paris' four different kinds of red paints that were not available in Hungary. She immediately tried them out, 'just as they came out of the tube,' on a large white canvas (*Red Picture [Painting Number Nine]* [1965])."[4]

[Fig. 4] Ilona Keserü, *Tombstones 1 (Sírkövek 1.),* 1967, oil and graphite on fiberboard, 125 × 170 cm, Collection Zsolt Pogány, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü

[Fig. 5] Ilona Keserü, *Painted Linen Chest Study 1 (Szuszék tanulmány 1.),* 1969, oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm, Budapest History Museum, Kiscelli Museum—Municipal Gallery, Budapest, photo: Ágnes Bakos, Bence Tihanyi

In her biographical-analytical recollections, perhaps one of the most important entries for the year 1967 reads: "Excursion with Manuel Pauli and András Rácz around the Balaton; I begin a series of paintings based on the heart-shaped gravestones encountered in the cemetery in Balatonudvari."[5] The *Tombstones (Sírkövek)* series ❹, produced in 1967, marked the beginning of a



[Fig. 6] Ilona Keserü, *Two Hills (Két domb)*, 1969, oil, embossed canvas, and stitching on canvas, 105 × 150 × 5 cm, courtesy Kolozsváry Collection, Győr, photo: György Darabos

new period in her oeuvre. According to the artist's monographer, Katalin Aknai, when Keserü saw the shapes of the late-Baroque tombstones, she recognized "the image of her most spontaneous gesture," the essential, intuitive motif of her art: the undulating line with a peak at its center.[6]

Folkloric forms were a source of inspiration for Ilona Keserü—as they had been for her predecessors Lajos Vajda, Dezső Korniss, and Victor Vasarely as well. In her case, besides the late-Baroque folk tombstones in Balatonudvari, these folkloric forms and designs included the painted motifs on wooden linen chests from Baranya or Zala County, known as *szuszék*, which can be seen as the inspiration for *Painted Linen Chest Study 1 (Szuszék tanulmány 1.)* (1969) ❺, among other works. Besides references to folk-art object culture and the world of folkloristic forms, folk textiles provided another source of inspiration for Keserü: the rough, unevenly woven surface of the underskirt (*bikla*) worn as part of folk costume can be seen, in the form of an image, in the plastic composition *Two Hills (Két domb)* (1969) ❻, for example. Keserü was not only familiar with the fabric of these underskirts: she was also a passionate collector of such items, which she found at the flea markets in Pécs, even using them as the base

[Fig. 7] Ilona Keserü, *First Stitched (Első varrott)*, 1969, stitching and applique on canvas, 80 × 100 × 4 cm, © Ilona Keserü

material for her works. These folk art-inspired compositions are the most geometric in Keserü's oeuvre.

The concept of folk-art object culture as a source of inspiration originates from one of the most important representatives of modern Hungarian painting in the mid-twentieth century, Dezső Korniss, whom Ilona Keserü, along with several other painters who began their careers in the 1960s, as well as the progressive artists of the Iparterv generation, regarded as an archetype and master. In fact, the fine art program that Dezső Korniss devised was derived "from lessons learned from the music of Béla Bartók: One must have East Central European feelings—there's no other way to put it!—that contain the latest Western European aspirations. For Korniss, this was the most important lesson from his study trip to Paris: Bartók's piano concerts there ..., and his encounter with modern Western art."[7]

In the second half of the 1960s, Ilona Keserü began to experiment and work more intensively with different materials and techniques. It was then that motifs alluding to her female identity were given increasing emphasis in her art—independent of the feminist aspirations of the time. She was almost the first of her generation to use the technique of stitching, which became important in her work, not in the form of embroidery or as an applied decorative technique, but as one possible means of artistic creation. *First Stitched (Első varrott)* (1969) ❼, composed from discarded pieces of textiles, echoed this desire for a free, relaxed creation of objects. Keserü's use of hessian fabric was greatly

inspired by the stitched hessian-textile reliefs of Alberto Burri, which she had seen during her first visit to Rome. Although the concept and her choice of material already appeared in 1966, her first embossed canvases can be dated to 1968. These works already feature the distinctive embossing technique, which, as a trademark of Ilona Keserü, is regarded to this day as an exceptional technical innovation in the history of art.

ILONA KESERÜ'S COLOR RESEARCH

A new period in her oeuvre began in the late 1960s based on colors and the choice of color, which she subsequently referred to as "color research." This was, however, an ongoing evolution rather than an abrupt change. Colors had been present from the very beginning and have played an important role throughout her work. Colors and the choice of color were initially connected with shapes (from 1967 to the tombstone motifs), and first appear as an independent—and subsequently scientifically based—thematic focus in her oeuvre as of the 1970s. *Light Picture (Painted Linen Chest Study 4) (Világos kép [Szuszék tanulmány 4.]),* produced in 1969, can be regarded as one of her first compositions on this theme, and in the series of colored drawings *Forming Space (Képződő tér),* produced starting in 1971, the gravestone shapes are still visible. These compositions, part of the early stage of her color research, were inspired by a photograph of a candle flame given to her by the writer Géza Ottlik, in which the colors of the natural flame are broken down into bands of pure color.

With her gradual withdrawal from forms, colors became independent in Keserü's compositions, which, starting in 1972, move in the direction of spatiality. The shifting of colors into spatiality came about during a trip to Slovakia, when Keserü participated in the work of the Morovany art colony. The first work she produced there was the large-scale painted and embossed canvas *Waves (Hullámzás)* (1972), in which every shade of color that she used, and that could be mixed from the pigments then available to her, was positioned on an intense blue background.

This composition was followed by *Space Taking Shape (Alakuló tér)* (1971) [8], in which Keserü no longer painted on a manually embossed canvas but on a turned wooden surface on which the waves follow a mathematical regularity. The vertical sinus profile of the turned wooden surface is an even sinus wave, while on the transverse relief, Keserü painted hexagons in adjacent colors of the spectrum. From several directions at once, she applied to the surface shades that approach one another, patch by patch, with minute differences, resulting in clashes between the converging

[Fig. 8] Ilona Keserü, *Space Taking Shape (Alakuló tér),* 1972 (Moravany, SK), oil on canvas-backed linoleum on shaped wooden frame, 180 × 110 × 2 cm, courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, private collection, London

fields of color. There were several potential ways to resolve this and to "neutralize" transitions between colors that were "undesirable" together: one solution was to use an "industrial" gray that could be mixed from black and white; another—more painterly—approach involved the use of desaturated colors, which could be created by combining clashing colors. However, in the course of her research, Keserü heuristically hit on a third solution: the use of skin colors[8] between clashing color fields.

Keserü first explained her observations with respect to the colors of the rainbow and skin colors as follows: "every color of the rainbow is in harmony with each and every shade of skin amongst the people living on Earth."[9] She shared the earliest findings of her color research with Dezső Korniss.

When painting the colors of the spectrum as an independent subject, she first used everyday objects that could be found in her studio, such as an ornately carved clothes stand with a wave-like profile (*Colour Column [Színoszlop]* [1974]), or a simple paper cylinder (*Colour Cylinder [Színhenger]* [1974]), in which the colors of the spectrum, broken down into bands of different shades, climb and wind over the three-dimensional surfaces as if swallowing and engulfing the object's original shape.

Drawing on what she had learned during her color research, in 1974–75 Keserü once again returned to the easel painting format, producing the almost five-meter-long composition *From the World 1 (A világból 1.)* ❾. In this painting, her intention to position the human skin colors in relation to the transitions between the colors of the spectrum immediately becomes apparent. By means of the unusual format of the composition, Keserü set the classic framework of easel painting on new foundations, breaking up the pictorial field into independent sequences and painting the successive spectrum and flesh-colored compositions separately on canvases almost identical in size. But once the pictorial space is broken up into sequences, two significant insights are obtained. On one hand, we are confronted with the open form and the infinity of the composition, which carries within it the potential for infinite continuation; while, on the other, there is an apparent looseness, holding out the promise that the independent sequences in the pictorial space—that is, the individual pictorial modules—are (potentially) interchangeable. Despite appearances, this possibility is, however, excluded, since Keserü aligns the color spectrum sequences to the arc of a curved line, which is apparent only when the individual modules are assembled in the appropriate order.

The potential for compositions expandable to a vast size and in infinite directions through the juxtaposition of "independent" image sequences had already revealed itself to Keserü on that summer night mentioned above, around 1971 or 1972, when she and her friend the photographer Zsolt Szabóky projected reproductions of her paintings onto the wall of a neighboring building. Keserü gave clear expression to the insight obtained during the projection, achieving one of the first spatial manifestations of a composition enlarged to a vast scale and the potential for an "infinite" format achievable through the juxtaposition of independent modules, first through her pasted shapes (*Pasted Forms [Tapasztott formák]* [1971–73]) in the Sculpture Park of Nagyharsány in Villány, and later, after returning to the painted pictorial field from the infinite dimensions of space, in the painting *From the World 1*.

Keserü subsequently continued exploring the possibilities inherent in the principles of composition creation by enlarging and/or combining independent modules. Her further insights provided significant inputs to several panel-based frescoes and painting series. Before this, the painted pictorial space of *From the World 1,* broken down into sequences and assembled from modules, was designed as a genuinely spatial composition in the form of the enormous textile work *Colour-Space (Happening at New Year's Eve) (Szín-Tér [szilveszteri akció])* of 1977, shown in the *Colour-Space* exhibition at the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts. In the exhibition guide, Keserü summarized the results of the ongoing color research that she had begun with the work *Space Taking Shape*, produced at the Morovany art colony: "In 1972, in one of my images, I experimented with using every color I could mix in oil paints from the three primary colors. Green, blue, purple, magenta, orange, and yellow were gradually built into one another. One color advanced towards the next through certain shades and variants. This generated some undesirable clashes. What neutral area could be placed between any two colors? Black, white, or gray ... What I found was that there is another color, which, when placed between two fields that do not go together, creates a balance. A pale, ocher shade: the color of skin that our eyes are so used to already that we are scarcely aware of it. ... It was a huge discovery. I discovered the 'human color,' which, because of its being ingrained in the consciousness, its familiarity, the way it disappears, is capable of conveying both incredible simplicity and disconcerting mystery. I began to use it; I painted picture after picture to explore the possibilities."[10]

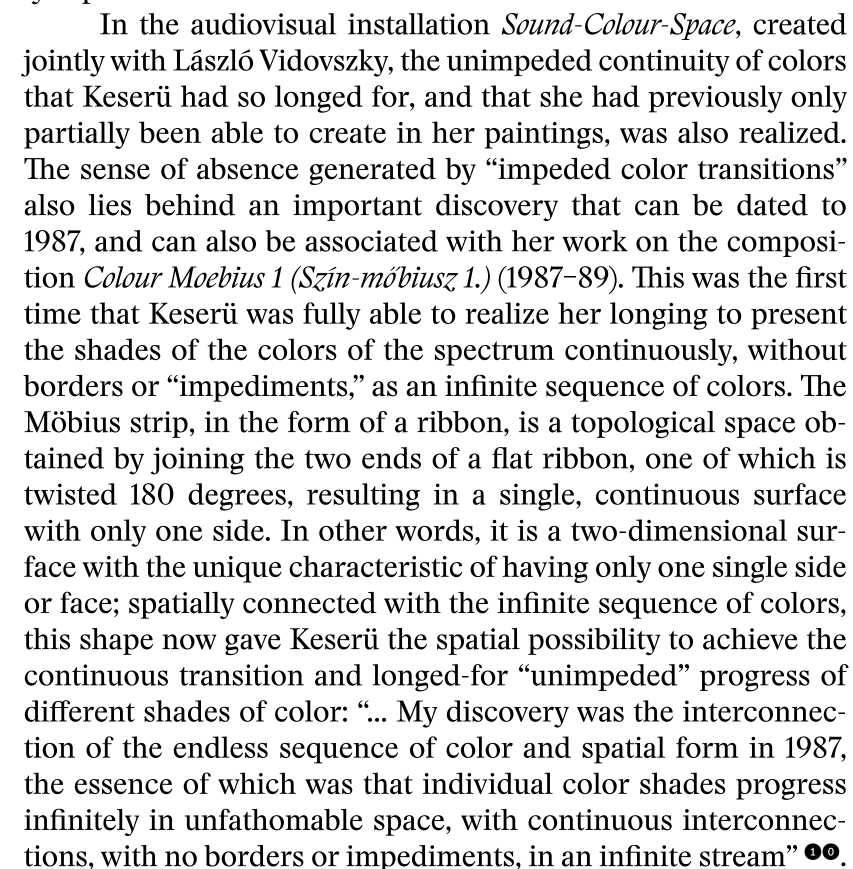
Keserü further developed the enormous *Colour-Space* textile composition shown at the 1977 performance, which united the colors of the spectrum and skin colors, with the production of her textile work *Cylinder Robe (Hengerpalást)* in 1978. This smaller work was likewise produced from dyed textiles, although

[Fig. 9] Ilona Keserü, *From the World 1 (A világból 1.)*, 1974–75, oil on canvas, 90 × 485 cm, Hungarian National Bank Collection, Budapest

this time she omitted the "human color" between the bands of the colors of the spectrum and the winding textile strips, relying on the skin color of a living person rather than on pigments and dyes. The size of the textile garment made it suitable for a one-person performance—like the one that took place in 1982 at an exhibition of Keserü's work at Uitz Hall in Dunaújváros. Documentation of the *Cylinder Robe* performance exists in the form of archival photographs and a faded film, shot by László Vidovszky. The 1977 work *Colour-Space,* and *Cylinder Robe,* produced in 1978, as well as performances connected with these textile works, can be associated in many respects with the commissions that Keserü had regularly received for stage and set designs prior to this period—between 1967 and 1976.

The theme of spectrum and skin colors was further elaborated in 1988, when Keserü was invited to produce a 200-square-meter ceiling painting for the ceremonial hall of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant's College of Nuclear Energetics. In this first large-scale work following her research on skin colors and the colors of the spectrum, Keserü returned to the dimensions of the fresco (mural), and to a world, associated with architectural space, in which she was entirely at home. She produced several compositional designs for the ceiling painting in 1988, one of which, *Ceiling Sketch (Mennyezetvázlat),* was originally intended as a painting, while the four large-scale easel paintings *Panneaux 1–4: Body in Refraction (Pannó 1–4. Test sugártörésben [vázlatok festményekhez])* were likewise produced as sketches for frescoes. From among these designs, it was the second *Body in Refraction* proposal that was realized on the ceiling of the ceremonial hall in 1989, painted *al secco*, and broken down into architecturally independent concave elements that nevertheless formed a coherent, 200-square-meter work when combined. In these compositions, which thematize the colors of the spectrum and the colors of skin, Keserü positioned the colors of the rainbow, arranged in regular geometric patterns, alongside human flesh hues in swirling, whirling, curved organic shapes. As her compositional principle, she returned to enlargement and the juxtaposition of modules, processes that can be augmented to infinite dimensions.

Keserü's other important discoveries with respect to the colors of the spectrum, the colors of human flesh, and her color research are associated with the 1980s. These discoveries were preceded by important events in her life: in 1976, Ilona Keserü gave birth to her daughter, and from 1979 to 1983, she worked in the studio next door to Dezső Korniss in the Old Art Colony in Szentendre. "It was there that László Vidovszky and I produced a joint work: the painted pipe-forest *Sound-Colour-Space (Hang-szín-tér)*(1981). It comprised 123 individually painted three-meter-long PVC tubes, which were individually tuned."[11] The jointly created audiovisual installation *Sound-Colour-Space* brought together activities and research that the couple had previously pursued independently. The two artists thus aimed to create an object "whose colors and sounds change according to an identical system, while the person moving within them constantly experiences different sounds and colors."[12]



In the audiovisual installation *Sound-Colour-Space*, created jointly with László Vidovszky, the unimpeded continuity of colors that Keserü had so longed for, and that she had previously only partially been able to create in her paintings, was also realized. The sense of absence generated by "impeded color transitions" also lies behind an important discovery that can be dated to 1987, and can also be associated with her work on the composition *Colour Moebius 1 (Szín-mőbiusz 1.)* (1987–89). This was the first time that Keserü was fully able to realize her longing to present the shades of the colors of the spectrum continuously, without borders or "impediments," as an infinite sequence of colors. The Möbius strip, in the form of a ribbon, is a topological space obtained by joining the two ends of a flat ribbon, one of which is twisted 180 degrees, resulting in a single, continuous surface with only one side. In other words, it is a two-dimensional surface with the unique characteristic of having only one single side or face; spatially connected with the infinite sequence of colors, this shape now gave Keserü the spatial possibility to achieve the continuous transition and longed-for "unimpeded" progress of different shades of color: "... My discovery was the interconnection of the endless sequence of color and spatial form in 1987, the essence of which was that individual color shades progress infinitely in unfathomable space, with continuous interconnections, with no borders or impediments, in an infinite stream" (10).

It was the architect János Keserü who first drew Ilona Keserü's attention to the Möbius strip as a "miraculous spatial experience," although the 1986 exhibition of work by the Swiss artist Max Bill at the Budapest Kunsthalle (Műcsarnok) was also an important source of inspiration. Bill's creative path as architect, painter, sculptor, writer on art, and industrial designer was defined when he joined the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1927, where he was taught by Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy and also made the acquaintance of the founder of the school, Walter Gropius. In the 1930s, he was one of the first to start using the Möbius strip. He created the *Endless Ribbon* sculpture series out of Möbius strips made from granite or metal. Bill even made two trips to Brazil, where the use of the Möbius strip became common

[Fig. 10] Ilona Keserü, *Two Colour-Moebiuses (Két szín-móbiusz)*, 1987–89, oil, canvas relief, and stitching on canvas, 70 × 70 × 20 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

among Brazilian artists as a result of his lectures. Many other artists worked with the shape, including Lygia Clark and the Japanese sculptor Keizo Ushio, though Keserü was presumably not familiar with their work.

With the discovery of the Möbius strip as a subject, Keserü's research in relation to the colors of the spectrum continued, as of 1987, with the color Möbius theme, and for decades this enigmatic shape appeared in countless sizes and variants in her oeuvre. In Keserü's universe, the Möbius strip can be seen as an independent, three-dimensional object, as a model of space, and as a motif in her paintings and embossed canvases.

Following the discovery of the shape of the Möbius strip, the next critical point in Keserü's color research came in 2001, when, on her second trip to Rome, she visited the Sistine Chapel to see the freshly cleaned Michelangelo Buonarroti frescoes. Her visit prompted extensive research, as a result of which it became clear to her that Michelangelo had painted the enormous Old Testament frescoes in the Vatican palace using the *cangiante* color-mixing technique: "Michelangelo's newly discovered elementary color combinations were intoxicating. But it still required extensive research before it really became clear to me that this genius had used the same *cangiante* color system on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—especially for the drapery and clothing—which he had read about earlier in Cennino Cennini's *Il libro dell'arte* in the late 1400s, and which more or less all Italian painters were probably using at the time. ... [B]rilliant color tones are juxtaposed in such a way that one or two shades or transitions are omitted from the continuous color sequence. ... According to some, the *cangiante* color system transcends the power of color and light subsequently discovered by the Impressionists. This color system has since been the object of my painting practice and my color theory research."[13]

For many decades, Ilona Keserü also shared the findings of her research on painting theory and technique as a teacher in the Faculty of Art at Pécs University. Over the decades, she has retained her enthusiasm for painting, and she carries on working with undiminished energy. She continues to be actively engaged in exploring the potential inherent in vast compositions created by combining modules. Looking at the most recent paintings in the studio of Ilona Keserü, who will soon be ninety-one years of age, one sees not only the colors of Keserü's universe reflected in individual fields of color, but also the independent shapes familiar from the 1970 work *Message*, now vastly enlarged. The figures look like cryptic characters in a secret code, a *message* that the artist has been writing for decades. In connection with forms, Keserü wrote in 1988: "That was my intention with *Message*—I planned to paint these enormous signs one after the other, one huge sign to a canvas, and then assemble them into an enormous image, series, or pictorial processes. That's another thing that I never realized."[14] Today, in the artist's studio, we are eyewitnesses to the realization of this plan—to the shaping of enigmatic visual characters into a message ❶❶.

[Fig. 11] Ilona Keserü, *Details of a Message 4 (Üzenet részlete 4.),* 2022, oil on canvas, 170 × 120 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

1. Ferenc Martyn (1899–1986), painter, sculptor, illustrator, and member of the Abstraction-Création group in Paris, France (1934–40). Following his return to Hungary in 1940, Martyn became a defining figure in Pécs's artistic life.
2. András Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," in *Hatvanas évek*, ed. Ildikó Nagy, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, March 14–June 30, 1991, Képzőművészeti Kiadó – Magyar Nemzeti Galéria Ludwig Múzeum, Budapest (Budapest, 1991), p. 140.
3. In a presentation delivered at the conference in Pécs held to mark Ilona Keserü's ninetieth birthday.
4. István Losonczy, "A ragyogás szerkezete, Keserü Ilona két festménye a Csontváry Múzeumban," in *Közelítések egy ünnephez konferencia Keserü Ilona tiszteletére*, Faculty of Arts, Pécs University, 2023, pp. 23–24.
5. *Közelítés Gubanc Áramlás – Oknyomozás Ilona Keserü Ilona munkásságában*, Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (Budapest, 2004), p. 80.
6. Katalin Aknai, "*Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba, Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából,"* Ph.D. diss. (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2014), p. 35.
7. Katalin Keserü, "Korniss Dezső és a népművészet metamorfózisa," in *Csak tiszta forrásból – Hagyomány és absztrakció Korniss Dezső művészetében*, exh. cat., Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest (Budapest, 2018), p. 25. In Keserü's text, footnote 13: Móser 1981, p. 90. Joan Miró, the subject of another interview following the Móser interview in the journal *Valóság* (T. Endre Rózsa, "Egy hamisított kép nem tud lélegezni"), made a similar statement in relation to Spanish art.
8. "Several possibilities presented themselves: either to use an 'industrial' gray, mixed from black and white, or simply to mix opposite, clashing colors into a desaturated color, or ... I was searching around when my gaze fell on the back of my hand as it held the brush and moved in front of the patches of color that flowed over the image surface, and I saw the color of my skin, which otherwise people don't really pay attention to while they work. I started moving my hand to and fro next to the different ranges of color. There was the solution: the color that brings together, leads through, neutralizes. It was a huge discovery for me. I began using human skin color purposefully and researching its different shades. ... For years, I painted a significant number of my paintings in light of this realization. The experiments begun on my own skin led to further questions. Working with oil pigments, a group of colors emerged before me: from dark, blackish-brown tending towards purple, to light, pinkish-white ocher, and between them greenish and reddish shades, and all sorts of yellowish-brown hues." Ilona Keserü, "Végtelen színsor," in *Keserü Ilona Keserü*, Vaszary Galéria, Balatonfüred (Balatonfüred, 2014), p. 38.
9. Ibid., p. 39.
10. Keserü Ilona, "Szín-Tere, 1977. december 16 – 1978. január 8," in *Tér-alkotás Tárgy-formálás,* exhibition series in the Ceremonial Hall of the Museum of Applied Arts, exhibition guide.
11. Ilona Keserü, "Kornissra emlékezve," in *Csak tiszta forrásból* (2018), pp. 106–8.
12. The quotation is taken from the text of the exhibition guide for *Sound-Colour-Space, Exhibition by Ilona Keserü and László Vidovszky*, Budapest Kunsthalle, June 2–27, 1982.
13. The text was originally written in 2011 for the temporary Ilona Keserü exhibition: *Colour-Changing Bodies of Sound at the Modern Art Gallery—László Vass Collection*.
14. Zwick, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," p. 147.

Klara Kemp-Welch

ILONA KESERÜ AND THE COMMUNITY OF THE ABSTRACT

[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *In Memory of an Actress (Színésznő emlékére)*, 1965, oil, lace, graphite, enamel, and chalk on canvas, 70 × 50 × 0.5 cm, private collection, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü

"I have been free all my life," Ilona Keserü says, explaining that: "For those who dedicate themselves to art, freedom is the starting point. Without it, [art] is just impossible."[1] This may seem surprising, given that the painter was born in the authoritarian Hungary of 1933 and embarked on her adult life under the rule of the Stalinist Mátyás Rákosi.[2] The personal freedom she reflects on having experienced must in part be attributed to her progressive family. As the artist recalls, "there is a bloodline in our family that goes back to the famous Hungarian actress Mari Jászai ... ❶ Thanks to her memory, which was kept very much alive, my parents accepted my wish to become a painter as if it were a natural thing. ... I am sure that this is due to the fact that there had been, not so far back in time, a woman who became such a great, uncompromising female figure in the world of arts."[3] Keserü also stresses the importance of her gender in the course of her professional life: "I was incredibly lucky to be born a woman. At that time in the Hungarian art world, no one paid attention to women and their work. They just ignored them. I could do anything, and that's what I did!"[4] Her work explores many avenues, but abstraction remains its lynchpin. In what follows, I want to reflect on Keserü's claim about freedom and her commitment to the abstract in relation to histories of abstraction and creative freedom in Hungary.

As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, opportunities to create and present abstract work fluctuated according to shifts in political priorities over the course of the twentieth century. Following the brief but liberating experience of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, many avant-garde artists fled Hungary and went into exile. A wave of persecution of leftists followed the defeat of the Republic and the installation of the conservative Horthy regime. Those progressives who decided to return to the country later in the late 1920s and 1930s were subject to surveillance and treated with suspicion, resulting in various forms of self-censorship and subterfuge as artists sought to navigate the stylistic imperatives of the nationalist climate.[5] Therefore, as Éva Forgács explains, when abstraction resurfaced after the fall of Horthy and the end of the Second World War, "the mere appearance of abstract works in public exhibitions and publications was incomparably more meaningful in Budapest than in other parts of the world where no particular obstacles had stood in abstraction's way."[6] The optimism of avant-garde artists in 1945 was captured in the formation of a new creative grouping, the Európai Iskola (European School). "Budapest was in ruins, and there was hardly any food in the city when they founded the European School of the Arts and published an ambitious manifesto to mark the beginning of the new era."[7] Their manifesto proclaimed that a "new Europe can only emerge as the

synthesis of East and West,"[8] and strove to forge fresh links: "We have to create a vital European School, which formulates the new relationship between life, man and community."[9] The school's adherents worked in diverse styles but were brought together by "the historical moment: the shared experience of the horrors of the war, survival, losses, and the euphoria of the opportunity to start a new life and a new cultural era."[10]

Artists and critics associated with the group pursued a dynamic exhibition program, promoting avant-garde culture and seeking out new audiences for their art. Critic Ernő Kállai even "packed a horse-driven cart with abstract paintings and transported them to an exhibition for residents of the working-class district Csepel in Budapest in May 1945. He could rely on a virgin audience there, and he was overjoyed when he saw the great spontaneous success of the abstract artworks," Forgács recounts.[11] Hungary was beginning to re-emerge as a center for progressive tendencies. A key player in the abstract branch of the otherwise Surrealist-dominated European School was Ferenc Martyn, who had been living and working in Paris, but returned and settled in Pécs in 1940. Martyn was behind the idea of holding *The First Hungarian Collective Exhibition of Abstract Art* in the spring of 1946, which was followed by a manifesto announcing "the unquenchable desire of man to recreate the world from its basic elements."[12] The next step was the formation of the Hungarian Group of Concrete Art, which sought to "re-establish the concrete connection of art and life in cooperation with the artists of the whole world" as part of the international concrete movement. The artists declared: "The group has no founding, leading members, etc. Each and every member has equal rights and obligations."[13] They proposed a vision of a network of likeminded individuals sharing ideas across borders, but this vision could not be realized in Hungary at that time.

When the time came to defend their position, proponents of abstract art attempted various arguments, including making a case for abstraction's fidelity to nature, but such claims failed to satisfy the ideological demands of the moment. The European School was formally disbanded in 1948, following critical attacks from György Lukács and others, and Socialist Realism became orthodoxy under the leadership of the Stalinist Mátyás Rákosi as of 1949. Facing a choice between conforming or abandoning their artistic careers altogether, some artists chose to outwardly adapt sufficiently to be able to continue to pursue their independent creative interests in the privacy of their studios. Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi have detailed how the school "survived as an undercurrent, a kind of legendary hermetic private culture"

in the apartments of members of the prewar avant-garde, who welcomed young artists to their homes, which became "islands of freedom" in an otherwise repressive Soviet cultural sphere.[14]

The openness that the artists of the European School had hoped for remained out of reach far longer in Hungary than anywhere else in East-Central Europe. The violent crushing of the Revolution of 1956 led to an unprecedented wave of emigrations among the intelligentsia. Any hint of a renewed cultural thaw was thus delayed until the mid-1960s, and, even then, experimental artists continued to be subject to surveillance and interrogations. I want to argue that this traumatically recurring experience of creative repression resulted in cementing a Hungarian version of what Antonio Negri once called "a community of the abstract," both as a myth and as actually experienced reality.[15] Negri argued: "In abstraction, [art] revealed a new quality of being: the participation of the singularities of labor in a single whole, which is, precisely, abstract ... with the invention of the abstract, nature and the world have been entirely replaced by art. The modern is this abstraction, this participation of the labor of each singularity and its interchangeability. A community which is abstract."[16] Hungarian artists' commitment to this community is remarkable in view of the prolonged periods of adversity they faced domestically. The unnerving return to the cultural constraints of the interwar years after the Communist "liberation"—a second major wave of adversity—pushed abstraction underground. In so doing, it reinforced existing associations of abstraction with the struggle for cultural freedom and resistance against political attempts to dictate cultural priorities.

Ilona Keserü's artistic pathway was intimately bound up with this creative history from the outset. She was initiated into the resistant creative lineage I have briefly sketched out early on; Ferenc Martyn recognized her talent and became her private tutor while she was still a schoolgirl in Pécs. The account she provides of her experiences under his tutelage combines a sense of rigorous training and freedom. She notes: "Something was already decided at that time. That all of my work will not necessarily be executed under total conscious control." Above all, her teacher believed in her and was ambitious for her. "At age 14 or 15 most people tend to feel like the whole world is against them and they start to fight against both themselves and others. By then—during Mátyás Rákosi's regime—I stood like an old sailor on the deck. I knew where I belong. Not to one group. I felt differentiated. With a greater power bestowed upon me a possibility and all the support I need, expecting a great deal of work from me."[17] However, she stresses that Ferenc Martyn never actually

[Fig. 2] Paul Cézanne, *The Buffet*, 1877, oil on canvas, 65.5 × 81 cm, Museum of Fine Arts—Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

taught his pupils abstraction: “Martyn taught us how a painter or draughtsman can, through thorough observation and detailed drawing, get in touch, almost become one with a small part of the world. This is essential ...”[18] This is an important point, highlighting Martyn’s commitment to allowing his pupils to draw their own conclusions from his rigorous training, on the one hand, and perhaps hinting at a degree of political caution, on the other.

Following her move to Budapest, Keserü and her friends at the University of Fine Arts spent a good deal of time educating themselves.[19] She explains that they passed their time in the Museum of Fine Arts “because we couldn’t have access to books on modern art anywhere else. And they didn’t teach us art history in a way that would let us discover these masters. All we knew was what we could see in the Museum, in the Old Masters Gallery and in the rooms of modern art. By ‘modern,’ I mean the paintings of Manet, Monet, Gauguin, and Cézanne that we went to see as if we were coming on pilgrimage. I know that most of us remember the essential role of Cézanne’s *Buffet* ❷ among these early memories. ... We were standing in front of the painting, wondering how he painted the top of the biscuits, the hues and values used to paint the powder sugar dusted on the rounded surface, what colors he mixed. So we were looking for the deepest and most indecipherable secrets of the craft and we found them.”[20] The museum library served as their refuge: “[W]e went to that desk to ask for

huge albums and books where we studied and looked at things that were prohibited from the official courses of art history. I believe that Manet was the last painter that we were allowed to talk about in the 50s when I came to Budapest.”[21] She recollects: “We were not allowed to talk about anything that came later. I don’t know how our professors could swallow that, but somehow they did.”[22] For those who had not made a one-way trip in 1956, travel was to remain severely restricted.

Reflecting on the importance of seeing works in person, Keserü notes: “[I]n our youth, aside from the museum, we missed the opportunity to see the world so much, we couldn’t travel in the 50s. It doesn’t matter now that we had access to books, albums published by Skira for example. I realised very soon that you can only relate to a work when you are in the same physical space, it is the only way you can actually *see* it. Only in such circumstances you are able to establish some kind of interaction with it. This way, the work can enter your mind and start operating in there.”[23] She recollects: “It was in 1959 that I went abroad for the first time, to Poland. I was shocked to see that, in 1959, the galleries in the streets of Warsaw were exhibiting abstract and surrealist works; that it was possible to enter these galleries, and that museums also collected modern art. I still have a little book with paintings by Jarema, but I also saw a Kantor exhibition in Warsaw.”[24] She was struck, firsthand, by how very repressive Hungarian cultural policy was compared with that of neighboring countries, recalling the “most incredible thing ... I had the opportunity to see original works by Braque and Picasso in Prague ... In Prague! They had the same political system as ours. What did our leaders do here in Hungary? What did they do?”[25] The outraged tone of her repeated question signals the long-term trauma of the ways in which Hungarian cultural policy had conspired to hinder her creative development, and that of the artists of her generation, studying in the 1950s, at every turn. Cultural policy was notoriously inconsistent and cruel in Hungary.

Edit Sasvári details how, “In 1960, Lajos Kassák, the internationally respected seventy-three-year-old doyen of the historical avant-garde in Hungary, was invited to have an individual exhibition at the renowned Galerie Denise René in Paris. The Hungarian state gave the go-ahead to the exhibition, but Kassák was not allowed to travel to Paris. State officials replaced the artist at the opening, representing the Hungarian political system rather than art ...”[26] ❸. She lingers on the absurdity of the situation, repeating the scenario: “Lajos Kassák [wa]s one of the most important figures of Hungarian abstract painting and at the same time the embodiment of the richly diverse idea of avant-gardism.

[Fig. 3] Lajos Kassák, *Monumental,* 1966, oil and canvas, 100 x 90 cm, courtesy Museum of Fine Arts—Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

On the other hand, abstract art [wa]s strictly rejected by the Soviet doctrine as a worthless product of the culture of 'declining capitalism.' Nevertheless, the Hungarian state participate[d] in the exhibition honoring Kassák's abstract painting in Paris in 1960, though the artist [wa]s prohibited from attending his own exhibition. Instead of Kassák, representatives of the state cultural bureaucracy [we]re present. Where is the logic in this? Nowhere."[27] Hungarian cultural policy was characterized by this lack of logic, and deliberately so; the authorities kept artists guessing, perpetuating a politics of terror, albeit in a post-totalitarian manner. That Kassák was a self-taught artist of proletarian origin whose determination to educate himself had taken him to Paris on foot as a youth was tragic. At the end of his career, he suffered the ultimate bureaucratic indignity of paying from his own pocket for the modest 1967 Budapest retrospective on his eightieth birthday. He was granted a state award on the occasion and died later that year.[28]

The trauma of abstraction's historical repression remained raw well into the Kádár era, despite official propaganda claiming that Hungary was the happiest barrack in the socialist camp. The sluggish half-heartedness of the rehabilitation of a key figure of Hungarian abstraction such as Kassák, despite the loyalty demonstrated by his decision to return from exile in the 1920s, must have contributed to abstraction's continued appeal for members of the younger generation. Even as others were impatient to go beyond the limits of the canvas and confront art and life in new ways, in line with developments in the West, where abstraction had peaked and waned by this point, Keserü and others remained loyal to abstraction as a creative line of enquiry. The landmark Iparterv exhibition of 1968 echoed in its conception the stylistic openness of the European School, bringing together the work of artists active across a range of styles, with abstraction just one experimental tendency among others.

Keserü's painting continues the history of Hungarian abstraction while refusing to be bound by strict stylistic distinctions. She rejects what she describes as the cultural Cold War's ideologically motivated, "absurd division between figurative and nonfigurative, which ... in Hungary made our lives so difficult."[29] Much of her work is concerned with exploring the radiant impact of painting on the viewer. Her serious interest in the spectator's experience is a form of social engagement that operates at the level of individual experience rather than mass politics. As such, it echoes the reticence that also characterized so much conceptual work of the 1960s and 1970s in East-Central Europe.[30] Like so many artists of her generation, she thought that art was above politics, even to the extent of rejecting the political implications of claiming an avant-garde lineage. She said: "I was never revolutionary. I am a good painter. And I am not avant-garde."[31] Keserü does not emphasize her originality but instead humbly underscores the importance of role models: "[I]t is enough to point at them and many things become clear at that very moment: 'Oh yes, there already was something like this, so the possibility exists, therefore it is feasible.'"[32] Keserü has devoted her life's work to exploring the affective possibilities of painting. For many years she did so by working outward from a figurative motif: a heart- or lip-shaped form discovered in the contours of a rare type of tombstone typical of those in the early-nineteenth-century graveyard in the village of Balatonudvari in Veszprém County in Western Hungary. While apparently determined by formal fascination, Keserü's choice of motif quietly positions Hungarian history, and the process of mourning lives lost in Hungary, center stage. The repetition of this motif across

[Fig. 4] Ilona Keserü, *Sounds Flying in Clouds (Felhőben szálló hangok),* 2015, oil and graphite on canvas, 100 × 120 cm, Balázs-Dénes Collection, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

her painterly practice might also be read in relation to collective mourning.

The community of the abstract to which Keserü belongs extends beyond Hungary, of course, beyond the dreams of the European School, and beyond the confines of Cold War art-historical discourse. She recalls: “Back in 1970, in my apartment on Belgrád rakpart, on the bank of the Danube, I pinned one of Kenneth Noland’s pictures onto the side of my radio. I often say that artworks know about each other. At the Metropolitan, I got a chance to be a part of an exhibition together with colleagues whose career I have been following for a long time. Louise Nevelson’s giant black construct stood in the middle of the exhibit and one of Kenneth Noland’s pictures got placed next to my tapestry. The artwork he brought to the exhibit was made in a completely different period but its presence was rather friendly. His picture was part of my room for at least 20 years.”[33] Artworks speak to one another irrespective of whether the artists have lived and worked under similar conditions. They form part of the same flow, the same art-historical conversation. Keserü encourages the next generation to continue this conversation when she explains to her students: “[A]rt is an immense, ever-moving stream, a living club to which you can belong as an artist if you are lucky enough. You can build a relationship freely with the other members, whether they are alive or not. Because the works are alive!”[34]

Negri’s take on the community of the abstract, written in the 1980s, while capitalism consolidated its cultural stronghold in the West, was gloomier: “We are living after the deluge, after life, after the modern. ... Now freedom has become total, because our misery is as great as our freedom, and our imagination has become capable of dealing with the infinite possibility of the void. ... The abstract is the sole community in which we exist.”[35] I think his reflections on the possibility of an alternative would have resonated in the Eastern Bloc context, where postrevolutionary artists like Keserü were pursuing their own ways of adapting to the realization: “[T]here has never been an alternative to the world, but always an alternative within the world.”[36] Praising the infinite innovation of imagination of the great abstract painters, Negri writes: “Abstract painting is a parable of the eternally renewed pursuit of being, of the void, and of potentiality.”[37] Keserü’s painting offers a vibrant invitation to this world of concerns ❹.

1. Judit Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü. The Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest and its Paintings: A Place in Memory,” *Artmagazin Online* (2017), https://www.artmagazin.hu/articles/in_english/32f0030168a5221080dbdcf075446345 (all URLs here accessed in August 2024).
2. Leader of the Hungarian People’s Republic from 1949 to 1956.
3. Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü.”
4. Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü.”
5. For a detailed account see Éva Forgács, “Unwanted by Both the Political Left and Right: Interwar Europe’s Hungarian Migrating Artists,” *Artl@s, Migrations, Transfers, and Resemanticization* 6, no. 2 (2017).
6. Éva Forgács, “A Forgotten Group: The Gallery of the Four Directions. Theory, Politics and the Practice of Abstract Art in Budapest 1945–1948,” in idem, *Hungarian Art: Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement* (Los Angeles: Doppelhouse Press, 2016), p. 139.
7. Forgács, “A Forgotten Group,” p. 140.
8. “Manifesto of the European School” (1945), cited in Forgács, “A Forgotten Group,” p. 140.
9. Imre Pán, “Bevezetés Európába” (1946), cited in Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, “Hungarian Culture +/- Europe,” in *Art in Hungary 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, ed. Edit Sasvári, Sándor Hornyik, and Hedvig Turai (London and New York: Thames and Hudson; Vince Books), p. 48.
10. Forgács, “A Forgotten Group,” p. 140.
11. Ibid., p. 141.
12. “Art is a Fight for the Future of Mankind” (June 1946), cited in Forgács, “A Forgotten Group,” p. 141.
13. Tamás Lossonczy letter to Makarius Sameer, October 1946, cited in Forgács, “A Forgotten Group,” pp. 143–44.
14. Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, “Hungarian Culture +/- Europe,” p. 49.
15. Antonio Negri, “Letter to Gianmarco on the Abstract,” in Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude* (2009), trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge, UK, and Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), p. 4.
16. Ibid., pp. 3–4.
17. Keserü in “Like the Sea.” Available online at https://international.pte.hu/news/sea-conversation-ilona-Keserü.
18. Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü.”
19. The university had produced a strong lineage of avant-garde artists, who were then persecuted under Horthy. See Éva Forgács, “Unwanted by Both the Political Left and Right: Interwar Europe’s Hungarian Migrating Artists,” *Artl@s, Migrations, Transfers, and Resemanticization* 6, no. 2 (2017).
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Edit Sasvári, “Autonomy and Doublespeak: Art in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s,” in *Art in Hungary 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, ed. Edit Sasvári, Sándor Hornyik, and Hedvig Turai (London and New York: Thames and Hudson; Vince Books), pp. 9–10.
27. Ibid.
28. Éva Forgács, “Does Democracy Grow Under Pressure?” in Forgács, *Hungarian Art*, p. 165.
29. Keserü in “Like the Sea.”
30. See also Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).
31. Keserü in “Like the Sea.”
32. Keserü in Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü.”
33. Keserü in “Like the Sea.”
34. Geskó, “Conversation with Ilona Keserü.”
35. Negri, “Letter to Gianmarco on the Abstract,” p. 11.
36. Negri, “Letter to Gianmarco on the Abstract,” p. 9.
37. Negri, “Letter to Giorgio on the Sublime,” in Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude* (2009), trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge, UK, and Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), p. 30.

Dávid Fehér

APPROACHES: TRADITION AND SUBVERSION, BODY, IMAGE, AND IDENTITY IN THE EARLY ART OF THE IPARTERV GENERATION AND ILONA KESERÜ

APPROACH

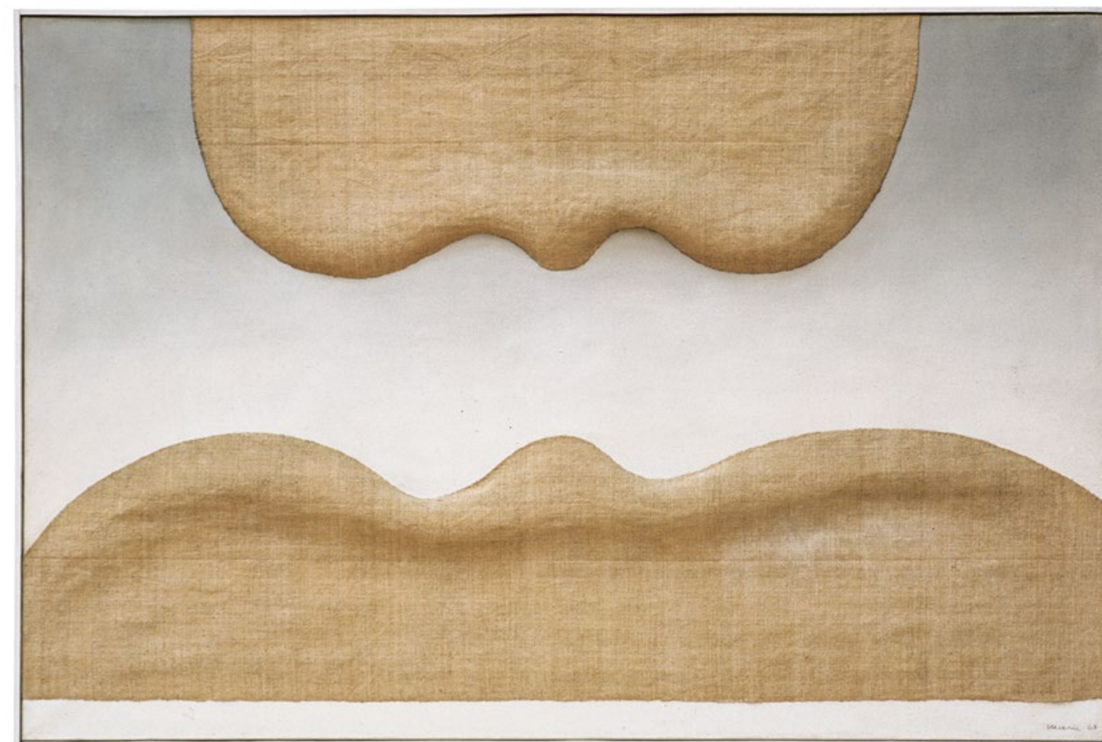
Ilona Keserü's *Approach (Közelítés)* paintings feature opposing pairs of undulating shapes: they evoke outspread wings, waves, clouds, hills, and protuberances, thus conjuring up a wide range of associations. The painted backgrounds are homogeneous, occasionally with subtle transitions of tone; in front of them, the shapes hover, float, and fly as central motifs in an indeterminate landscape, mirrored variants of one another, as if looking at the surface of water with all its plasticity and fluidity. But unlike the surface of water, everything here is definite, solid even, despite the sense of fragility and transience—especially when we realize that the referential models for these enigmatic wave formations are old tombstones. This association seems to unite the perpetual motion of existence with an awareness of death—the finite with the infinite—in the name of a sort of timeless, tangible–intangible dialectic. The title of the series, *Approach*, adds further nuance to the interpretation of the work. It might refer to the movement of the paired forms as they near one another (*Double Form 1 [Kettős forma 1.]* [1969]): to the motion and movement[1] through which a sense of space takes shape (*Forming Space 1, 18-1-1971 [Képződő tér 1. 1971–1–18]* [1969–71]). Keserü's works are a quest for the shapes of "approach," "formation," and undulating "flow," the relationship in which the mirrored forms seem to draw near to each other: they are close without touching; they resemble one another without being identical. They are the shapes of existence as transition. The title *Approach* might also refer to the narrowing of the distance between the artist and/or viewer and the work, to the sort of zooming-in typical of Pop Art. This feeling is reinforced by how the images are cropped: the shapes fill the pictorial space almost entirely; they appear to be details or fragments, as if the imaginary whole were impossible to capture and depict. Perhaps this has something to do with Ilona Keserü's avoidance of verbal descriptions and interpretations of her visual works: "Let us accept the fact that paintings are real, live bodies. Let us not limit their infinite possibilities by putting them behind letter-bars. Let the individual look at a painting with the uncertain, multitudinous, complete self that shares in the unexpected and incomprehensible events of their life,"[2] she wrote in 1979. In the words of one of the most important interpreters of Keserü's work, the poet Dezső Tandori: "The message cannot be grasped—thus it can be understood as reality."[3]

We might also see Keserü's art as a space in which different qualities converge, where the reciprocal influence of the abstract and the figurative, gesture and geometry, comes into play. The oeuvre as flow might also be described as the play of mutually metamorphic qualities, their occasional coherence as "patchwork,"[4] and the suggestion of labyrinthine relationships: as a series of approaches, tangents, counterpoints, and separations.

In the present essay, I attempt to approach Ilona Keserü's works understood as "live bodies." I look for connections between Keserü's work and that of her contemporaries; I try to address their reciprocal approaches, to shed light on possible correlations, pointing not only to the "changing spaces" that unfold as through the colors, shapes, planes, and plasticity of the artist's oeuvre, but also to the change in intellectual and discursive spaces that essentially determines the evolution of that oeuvre.

VARYING SPACE

The second *Approach*, which exploits the plasticity of embossed canvas (*Approach 2, [Közelítés 2.]* [1969]) ❶, was first shown in 1969, at the second Iparterv exhibition. The exhibitions organized in the ceremonial hall of the Iparterv State Architectural Office (in 1968 and 1969) later became legendary on the Hungarian art scene; they might even be considered milestones, events that announced the joint appearance of a new generation of artists.[5] Ilona Keserü was a key figure in this generation.



[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *Approach 2 (Közelítés 2.),* 1969, oil and embossed canvas on canvas, 120 × 170 × 4 cm, Kolozsváry Collection, Győr, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsolt Szabóky

Most of the members of the Iparterv Circle had studied art in the 1950s. While the dominant aesthetic at the University of Fine Arts in Budapest at this time was Socialist Realism, some of the teachers, for instance, Aurél Bernáth and István Szőnyi—as former members of the post-Impressionist Gresham circle, which can be associated with the period between the two world wars—attempted to harmonize this aesthetic with a sensual, relaxed, naturalistic pictoriality. Although traditional art education proved to be an important impetus—Keserü studied under László Bencze, then István Szőnyi—the creation of a "more contemporary" visual language that could be understood in an international context emerged as a fundamental concern—a language connected to the classics in art history, the local traditions of modernism and the avant-garde, and contemporary international trends. The first half of the 1960s was defined by the Kádár regime's policy of consolidation: according to the regime's categorization of the arts, significant numbers of artists ended up in the gray zone of "tolerated" art—between the promoted and the banned. The Iparterv exhibitions were not without precursors: Works by artists who would later come to be known as the Iparterv Circle had occasionally been shown at colleges, clubs, and small alternative venues,[6] while figurative artists of this circle had occasionally appeared in larger national exhibitions, too; in 1966, the Studio of Young Artists—the most important association of young fine artists—organized its annual exhibition, Studio '66, without a jury, and even accepted nonfigurative works, although the experiment was not continued in subsequent years.[7] The Iparterv exhibitions showed, for the first time, a substantial selection of works by contemporary artists seeking international correlations. Organized by the young art historian Péter Sinkovits, the exhibitions showcased works linked to international tendencies: Pop Art (László Lakner, Gyula Konkoly, György Jovánovics, Ludmil Siskov, András Baranyay, János Major), Hard-Edge and Post-Painterly Abstraction (Imre Bak, István Nádler), Lyrical Abstraction (Sándor Molnár), Neo-Dadaism and Art Informel (Krisztián Frey, Endre Tót), and Op Art (Tamás Hencze) at the first exhibition; and, at the second exhibition in 1969, Fluxus (Tamás Szentjóby) and Photorealism (László Méhes). Keserü was the only woman to participate: her work, with its ties to Pop Art, Art Informel, and, occasionally, Geometric Abstraction, was characterized by an extraordinary sensitivity and intensity.

Almost from the outset, theoretical dilemmas emerged in connection with the Iparterv exhibitions, related to the stylistic crossovers generated by the artists' "international orientation" and their striving to "keep pace," as Sinkovits put it in his introduction to the first exhibition catalogue.[8] In the words of Lajos Németh, one of the most important art historians in Hungary at that time:

> This exhibition, organized by eleven young artists in the exhibition space of an architectural office, likewise aroused conflicting feelings. "Op Art" and "Art Informel" were represented at the exhibition, sometimes *at the level of servile imitation*, and sometimes enriched by *individual invention*. Although Ilona Keserü's richly colorful Op Art compositions permeated with a decorative internal rhythm and László Lakner's tightly composed, monumental easel painting were, in themselves, exciting works of extraordinarily high quality, what was fascinating about this small-scale exhibition was not so much the quality of the works as the passion with which the artists set themselves up against Hungarian tradition and the currently dominant trends in Hungarian fine art. The fact that this gesture of refusal is currently *incapable of finding its own voice and creating its own style and form*, and that it is clearly *a copy of fashionable, international trends* is incontrovertible, even though the phenomenon is no doubt inevitable. In any case, the young exhibiting artists also asked themselves the question: Did they wish to assimilate into tendencies that have become international in recent decades and that, devoid of any sort of autochthonous development or national tradition, are flooding international exhibition halls with homogeneity; or should they bravely attempt the undeniably more difficult task of creating art that is both modern and, at the same time, relevant to the Hungarian reality.[9]

Lajos Németh's trenchant criticism essentially ignores the aspirations of the Iparterv artists to find a delicate balance between the international and the local, to embed the stylistic devices of international tendencies in the context of local tradition, and occasionally to reflect on the local social reality. The question nonetheless remains an important one today: How and to what extent can phenomena that are meaningful in the context of international discourse but are nevertheless essentially local, and therefore reflect a local character, be described using "Western" concepts?

It is apparently no coincidence that, apart from László Lakner, Lajos Németh singles out Ilona Keserü in particular from among the exhibiting artists. As he put it in a later article: "The two most outstanding Hungarian proponents of Pop Art, Ilona Keserü and László Lakner, are also outstandingly skilled at their craft in the traditional sense of the word: professional merit, the quest for aesthetic necessity that precludes contingency, and a humble veneration

for artistry and professionalism are perceptible even in works that are innovative in approach."[10] Beyond the mastery of *techne*, understood in the traditional sense of the word, it is also important to emphasize that Keserü offered one of the most complex and most authentic responses to the dilemma of how to resolve the tension between the international and the local.

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Besides familiarizing themselves with international tendencies, several of the Iparterv artists felt that it was important to explore local traditions of modernism and the avant-garde that were relevant in the context of international discourse, and to acquaint themselves with the recent history of Hungarian art, which there was no opportunity to do at the University of Fine Arts. From this point of view, too, Ilona Keserü's position can be regarded as an exception. She was born in Pécs, a city with special significance in terms of the history of modernism in Hungary, and in 1945, at the age of twelve, she had become a student of Ferenc Martyn, who, from the very outset, as a member of the Parisian Abstraction-Création group, introduced Ilona Keserü to the international tendencies of lyrical, and occasionally biomorphic, abstraction. Martyn was also a member of the European School (in existence from 1945 to 1948), which, as the most important artistic group in the years following the Second World War, was a central reference point for members of the Iparterv generation. The former members of the European School were virtually unable to show their work at all until the mid-1960s, although several members of the Iparterv generation began to seek them out as their unofficial teachers. Dezső Korniss played a prominent role in this respect. What was of crucial importance in Korniss's art was the shaping of a typically East-Central European visual language, Surrealist and modernist in approach and based on the collection and reinterpretation of local—often folk-art—motifs (something that can be traced back to the so-called Szentendre Program, drafted jointly with Lajos Vajda in the 1930s), which can be interpreted as a fine art parallel to Béla Bartók's music drawn from a "pure source." In works such as *Chanters (Kántálók)* (1946), Korniss transforms the appearance and ornamentation of the traditional wooden chests that featured prominently in peasant interiors into a semi-abstract vision suggestive of heads, which can, at the same time, be understood as pure, abstract geometric forms.[11]

Works by Imre Bak and István Nádler continued and elaborated this tendency in the Iparterv exhibitions. Bak's paintings based on dynamic relationships between repeated stripes as well as his shaped canvases paired the Hard-Edge painting of Frank Stella and Georg Karl Pfahler with the visual world of folk embroidery motifs, while in later years, Bak developed a structuralist, geometrical visual language that reinterpreted folk-art motifs and archaeological findings and reflected on questions of anthropology and semiotics in what can be regarded as a post-conceptual continuation of Korniss's program. István Nádler's *Petal Motifs* *(Szirommotívumok)* and his works inspired by Avar motifs likewise transposed folk-art idioms to monumental, geometric paintings.

"There is no freely expanding, floating gesture or brush mark in Korniss's oil on canvas works. These works, technically perfect in their planning and composition and executed through the layering of paint, exclude time from the medium of the image; the work does not deteriorate or change. I would not call the images sterile, although there is a kind of disturbing severity about the way they are positioned in time, how they defy the passing of time. How they do not age is astonishing or almost unbelievable. Even formally they are ageless, although it is chiefly the perfect arrangement of their material particles and surface layers that appears to be eternally valid," wrote Keserü about Korniss's painting. Later in the same text, with respect to a painting seen in a private collection in Washington, D.C., she stated: "I was moved at the sight. It was familiar, powerful, precise, and very beautiful. It represented the twentieth century in Central Europe, encompassing the past and anticipating the future of painting. A focal point."[12] The duality of timeliness and timelessness, and the compulsion and intention to pursue visual intensity, to condense twentieth-century Central Europe into an image, to bring together its antecedents and anticipate a potential future understanding of the image can also be observed in the art of Ilona Keserü. Among the artists of the Iparterv generation, it is in Keserü's oeuvre that the transcending of folk-art motifs and ethnographical and archaeological artifacts and their rendering in painting are to be found most consistently. Consider the series of painted linen chest (*szuszék*) studies produced in the year of the second Iparterv exhibition: "I explored the theme of the painted linen chest[13] for a brief, very specific period. I ended up going to Drávasztára quite by chance. I wanted to help someone purchase some painted linen chests, *skrinya*, as the Southern Slavs call them. I was used to seeing chests like these decorated in black. We went into one of the houses and I saw one that was red, blue, green, and white. As colorful as that. The painting in the Kiscelli Museum is of one such chest. I didn't make it up. I can't help the fact that it resembles a Klee or a Delaunay. I painted what I saw on a wooden chest."[14] In *Painted Linen Chest Study I (Szuszék tanulmány 1.)*

(1969) (fig. see p. 49), the undulating lines, concentric circles, and squares together form a stylized, surreal face, a suggestive look that can be compared to the looks and the intensity of red in Korniss's *Chanters*. The allusions to Delaunay and Klee, and the parallels with contemporary Hard-Edge painting, are reinterpreted and reevaluated in the context of the reworking of local motifs. Motifs are frequently transformed, made more abstract (*Foreshortening [Painted Linen Chest Study 3] [Rövidülés (Szuszék tanulmány 3.)]* [1969]) (fig. see p. 103), and structured into heterogeneous, polyphonic images (*Light Picture [Painted Linen Chest Study 4] [Világos kép (Szuszék tanulmány 4.)]* [1969]).

The key motif in Keserü's oeuvre—the curved and undulating tombstone motif that reinterprets the curved shape of the those in the Balatonudvari cemetery—can be understood in this context: it becomes a multilayered metaphor, an imaginary body and landscape, repeated and transformed in Keserü's paintings, such as *Tombstones 4 (Sírkövek 4.)* (1968) (fig. see p. 127), which was shown at the first Iparterv exhibition. Further examples of the integration and reinterpretation of folk-art motifs and objects are the finely folded works reminiscent of the traditional white linen underskirt, or *bikla*. The endless folds in the ethereal, fragile surface of *Two Hills (Két domb)* (1969) (fig. see p. 50), and the sensual details of the body and/or landscape underlying them, are an abstract and at the same time concretely sensual variant of folk-art traditions rethought in the context of the materialist artistic tendencies of the 1960s.

GESTURE AND SEQUENCE

The evolution of landscape-like figures and motifs and the development of abstract forms and the sequences that emerge from them can be closely followed in Keserü's early art. Her landscape-like, biomorphic abstract compositions, which can be compared to the work of Ferenc Martyn, the "pebble forms" (*Pebble-Like Forms [Kavicsalakok]* [1963]), "internal forms," "sea grasses," "shells," "tangles," "growths," "formations," and "waves," the stylized Prague gravestones (*Graveyard in Prague, 1–5 [Prágai temető 1–5.]* [1964]), the various pictorial qualities appearing within a single pictorial space, and the "image within an image" compositions (*Morning [Backlighting] [Reggel (Ellenfény)]* [1964]) anticipate the artist's later motifs and image structures, leading toward *Silvery Picture (Ezüstös kép)* (1964) (fig. see p. 46), which can be regarded as the *origo* of the oeuvre. In terms of the development of forms, the artist's yearlong stay in Italy was crucially important. Besides her encounters with classical artworks and buildings,

Keserü describes in detail the value of contemporary artistic stimuli: the scriptural Abstract Expressionism of Cy Twombly, replete with cultural and art-historical references; Alberto Burri's use of raw materials and stitched burlap; the slashed canvases of Lucio Fontana; and the spontaneous gestural painting of Georges Mathieu. These experiences nuanced the earlier impacts of her visit to Poland and her encounter with the work of Maria Jarema and Tadeusz Kantor.[15]

Keserü's "numbered" paintings, produced in 1965, build on the dialectic between the drawn (scribbled) and painted motifs and the self-enclosed (self-referential) gestural figures ("eights"), anticipating the artist's later pictorial structures based on repetition and variation. Repetition and variation, however, are also closely connected with another trend: Pop Art.

HUNGARIAN POP ART?

This was the question posed by Hungarian critic Géza Perneczky, a defining figure in the 1960s, in the title of a 1969 review[16] in which he discussed László Lakner's solo exhibition held at the Institute for Cultural Relations, and the group exhibition of works by István Bencsik, Ilona Keserü, and János Major in Adolf Fényes Hall. The question—which can be raised equally well in connection with other artists, including Gyula Konkoly, György Jovánovics, György Kemény, Ludmil Siskov, Endre Tót, and Sándor Altorjai[17]—remained a crucial dilemma: to what extent could the tendencies in 1960s Hungarian art, expressed in often strident colors and motifs that were occasionally repeated within the same image, be described—using a term primarily applied in the British and American context—as "Pop Art"? The question of stylistic borrowing—also raised by Lajos Németh—which determined the reception of the Iparterv exhibitions, was subsequently raised by numerous researchers, including Katalin Keserü, who argued for a radical expansion of the concept of Pop Art[18]; and Katalin Timár, who warned of the dangers of adopting Western terminology without due reflection.[19] Several exhibitions and research projects in recent years have also undertaken to reinterpret the concept of Pop Art, to examine the phenomena of "global Pop" and "international Pop,"[20] and to highlight the essential differences that lie behind their superficial similarities, while the exploration of women's attitudes associated with Pop Art, or "female Pop," has likewise become an important trend.[21]

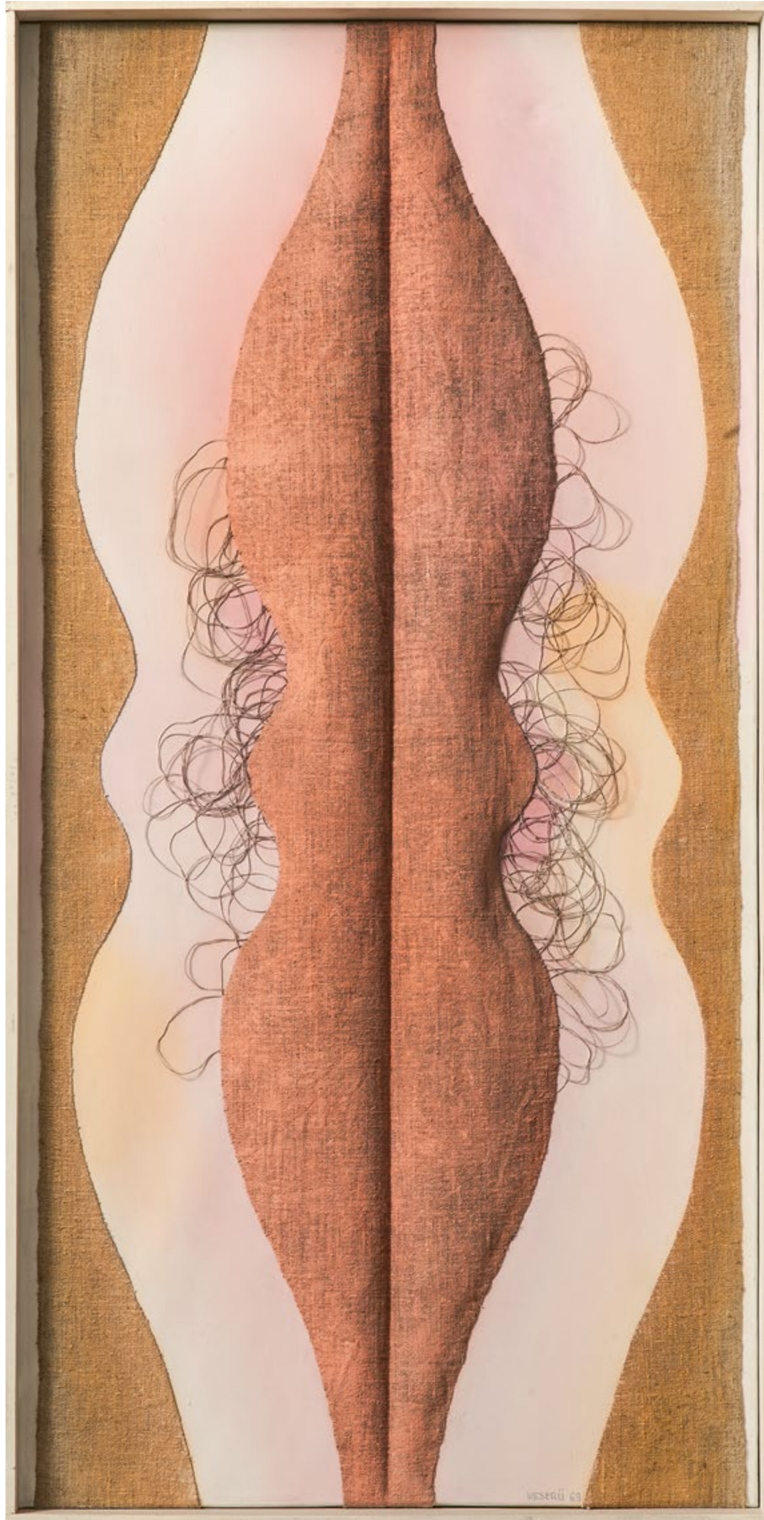
This raises an important question: In what way and to what extent can certain works in Keserü's oeuvre be categorized as "international Pop" and "female Pop"—in the same way that

attempts have been made to integrate into a similar context works by East-Central European female artists such as Jana Želibská, Alina Szapocznikow, and Maria Pinińska-Bereś?[22] The painting *Couple (Pár)* (1967) ❷ seems particularly important in this respect: the work is a unique amalgamation of the various tendencies in Keserü's painting—drawing, design, scribble, folk-art-style decorative elements, the rhythmic repetition of rounded forms, and the intensive use of color—paired with a figurative approach that is quite rare in Keserü's work, although by no means without precedent: the naked couple might be associated with both with the biblical motif of the first human couple and with contemporary hippy culture; the latter is given particular emphasis by the photographs of Ringo Starr and Julie Christie cut out of magazines that are stuck onto the heads of the anonymous figures, and the kitschy artificial roses in the couples' hands, which are glued onto the picture plane. The references to Pop culture hand in hand with allusions to folk art lend this painting special significance among the work that Keserü was producing at this time, although such references might also perhaps further nuance our understanding of other works from this period through an association between the pictorial devices of stylization, repetition, and strident colors with Pop Art forms.

BODY, IMAGE, AND IDENTITY

The group exhibition mentioned and associated with Pop Art in Géza Perneczky's review deserves attention in another respect. Keserü's work was shown in Adolf Fényes Hall—a space reserved for the "self-financed exhibitions" of tolerated artists—along with works by two male artists, István Bencsik and János Major: the exhibition thus brought together a painter, a graphic artist, and a sculptor in one space[23] (fig. see p. 18). What connected the three was perhaps not so much the sporadic stylistic references to Pop Art as the central role of the human body and body image. Bencsik's torso-like sculptures depicting male and female chests demonstrated the process of inhalation and exhalation specifically as anatomical illustrations in the context of scientific research[24] (*Body [Inhalation] [Test (Belégzés)]* [1969]; *Idol I–II [Idol I–II.]* [1969]), and as examples of objectification and an objective, and very impersonal, examination of the human body. The works shown by János Major, which can be described as merciless *Self-Caricatures (Önkarikatúrák)*—to quote the title of one of works exhibited[25]—are photorealistic, yet at the same time grotesque depictions of the artist's own body. In the 1969 *Self-Portrait (Önarckép)*, which is accompanied by the quotation "He who, conscious of manly

[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Couple (Pár)*, 1967, oil, graphite, newspaper clipping, and artificial flowers on canvas, 195 × 135 × 6 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth



[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Form (Forma)*, 1968–69, oil, string, stitching, and embossed canvas on canvas, Budapest History Museum, Kiscelli Museum—Municipal Gallery, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Ágnes Bakos, Bence Tihanyi

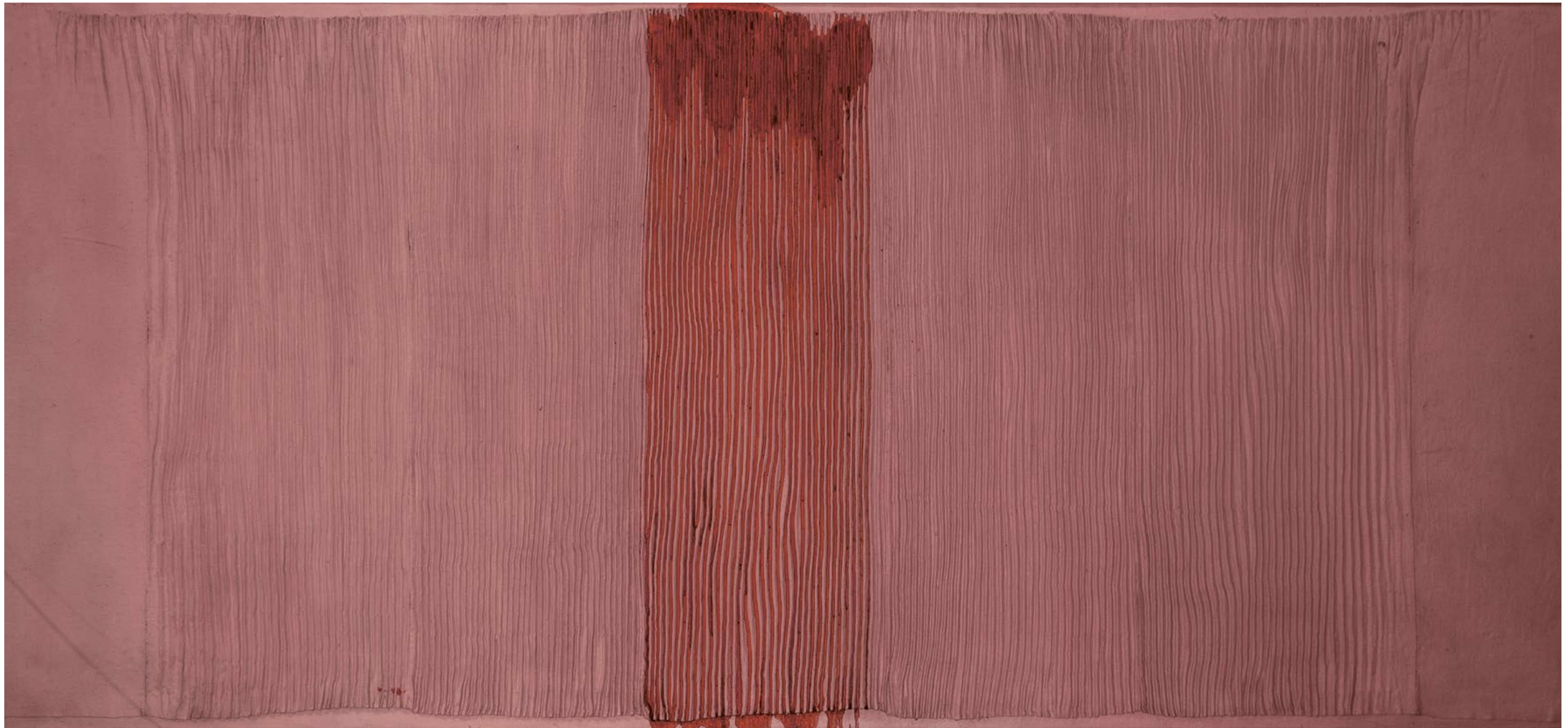
strength, guards a womanly weakness, becomes the channel of the whole Empire" (Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 28), Major's body is shown in a twisted pose; the image contains a peculiar mixture of male and female sexual characteristics, the face evokes antisemitic caricatures, and the depiction as a whole subverts the propagandistic ideal of the masculine body.

In this context, the fleshly character of Keserü's works and the stylized, torso-like depiction of shapes that evoke female nudes (*Varying Space [Változó tér]* [1969]) take on special emphasis—especially in the case of *Form (Forma)* (1968–69) ❸ and *Black Line (Fekete vonal)* (1968–69), which can be associated with female genitalia. In this context—as the artist's monographer, Katalin Aknai, has discussed in detail—the question arises as to how and to what extent it is possible to talk about the uniquely *female* character of Keserü's work in association with the undisguised appearance of the female body, viewed from a female perspective.[26] In *Form*, it is as if the motif that features in the *Approach* paintings, with its landscape associations and its allusions to the undulating lines of tombstones, is transformed into labia, and the tangle into pubic

[Fig. 4] László Lakner, *Mouth (Száj)*, 1969–69, oil on canvas, fiberboard, ø 140 cm, Collection Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, photo: Ferenc Eln

hair—landscape becomes body and body becomes landscape. An examination of both the selection of motifs and the choice of materials may be crucial in an interpretation that would touch on analogies from the male-dominated world of painting and the rather female-dominated world of textile art, and on the visualization of soft shapes and soft figures that is not always alien, even to the Pop Art approach (for instance, in the art of Zsuzsa Szenes).

But what is even more exciting is comparing these works—following the question raised by both Katalin Keserü and Katalin Aknai[27]—with the *Mouth (Száj)* ❹ series produced by László Lakner in the same period (1968–69), pieces of which were shown in Lakner's first solo show, the other event mentioned by Perneczky, which took place at roughly the same time as the exhibition in Adolf Fényes Hall.[28] An extremely important element in Lakner's art at this time, as in Keserü's, was the Pop Art motif of approaching (approximating), or "blowing up." Lakner's works feature a monumentally enlarged mustachioed mouth in a deep brown tone that can be associated with the artist's earlier Rembrandt series and interpreted not only as an emblem of the sexual revolution but also as a veiled reference to the New Left—the mouth is that of Fritz Teufel, founder of the German



[Fig. 5] Ilona Keserü, *Bloody Picture (Véres kép)*, 1975, oil and stitching on embossed canvas, 80 × 180 × 0.5 cm, Szent István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár, © Ilona Keserü

New Left commune, which the artist painted from a magazine photo.[29] Lakner's mute mouth gives shape to involuntary silence and muteness—attributable to political reasons, while also being permeated with layers of sexual associations. Compared with Lakner's essentially masculine mouths—and as their dialectic opposites and parallels—the labia in Keserü's paintings become particularly exciting metaphors. They become images of the body and identity that can be read together with the many depictions of global female Pop, images that take up the motifs in *Couple* and are, at the same time, related to the frivolous iconography of folk art. "One of my colleagues told me that the things I'm doing are very flesh-like, always very physical. They say the same about things I did earlier, too. Perhaps they're right. I'm not going to argue, if that's what they think," said Keserü in 1966.[30]

Associative motifs of this kind recur from time to time in Keserü's art. *Bloody Picture (Véres kép)* (1975) ❺ can perhaps be regarded as the most radical and subversive of such works: here, the surface of the pleated linen underskirt, or *bikla*, is saturated with blood, bringing the female body into an embarrassing yet intimate immediacy. At the same time, the blood-soaked surface evokes associations with violence. Think of the work *Bloody Approach (Véres közelítés)* (1985–86), painted at the time of Gábor Bódy's death, in which the rounded shapes approaching one another drip with red, blood-like paint.

A comparison of the 1969 version of *Approach* with the versions produced in 1985–86[31] sheds light on one of the important features of Keserü's oeuvre: the varied repetition of forms that can be arranged into sequences, and the process by which motifs change over time and turn into one another. The subversive, and occasionally decidedly vertiginous, experience of the impression, revelation, and touch of the body is one of the crucially important elements in Keserü's art, evoking, recalling, and reinterpreting folk-art motifs that occasionally convey bodily metaphors, the associative motifs of Surrealism, the elemental bodily gestures of Art Informel, and the direct Pop Art representations of the body, which reveal, as a multilayered patchwork or entangled labyrinth, the shapes of approach and removal, separation and contact—the pulsating existence of the body.

1. It is perhaps no coincidence that *Approach 2* (1969) was shown at the 1970 exhibition *Movement '70 (Mozgás '70)* at what is now called the Modern Hungarian Gallery in Pécs.
2. Ilona Keserü, "Autonomous Painting," trans. Judith Szöllősy, in Ilona Keserü, ed., *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Works 1982–2008*, exh. cat. MODEM, Debrecen (Debrecen, 2008), p. 58.

3. Dezső Tandori, "Variations on the Works of Ilona Keserü II," trans. Judith Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Works 1959–1982*, published by the artist (Budapest, 2002), p. 26, translation slightly altered. Tandori is referring here to the artist's *Message (Üzenet)* series, although I believe that the statement can be extended to refer to the oeuvre as a whole.
4. In connection with Keserü's art, "patchwork" is an obvious and apt metaphor, which can occasionally even be understood in the strict sense of the word. It was earlier used perceptively by Katalin Aknai in her doctoral dissertation on Keserü's work: Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából*, Ph.D. diss., (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2014), p. 6, http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/phil/aknaikatalin/diss.pdf (all URLs here accessed in August 2024).
5. On the Iparterv exhibitions, see, among others: Dávid Fehér, "Pop Beyond Pop: Some Exhibitions of the Hungarian 'Iparterv-Circle,'" in *Art in Transfer in the Era of Pop: Curatorial Practices and Transnational Strategies*, ed. Annika Öhrner (Stockholm: Södertörn University, 2017), pp. 343–72; Viktória Popovics ed., *Iparterv 50+*, exh. cat. Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (Budapest, 2019).
6. Ilona Keserü showed her works in 1964 at the Jókai Klub, and in 1967 at the Vásárhelyi College of the Technical University.
7. On this, see Szilvia Csanádi-Bognár, ed., *Tiltás és tűrés. A Fiatal Képzőművészek Stúdiójának 1966-os és 1967-es kiállítása*, exh. cat. Ernst Museum, Budapest (Budapest, 2006).
8. See Dávid Fehér, "Western Art and Local Context: The Iparterv Exhibitions and the Paradigm of 'Keeping Pace,'" in *Iparterv 50+*, pp. 162–75.
9. Lajos Németh, "Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben (A 68-as évad őszi tárlatairól)," *Kritika* 4, no. 37 (1969); emphases by the author.
10. Lajos Németh, "Szakmai hitel és művesség," *Élet és Irodalom*, January 24, 1970, p. 5.
11. See Katalin Keserü, "Korniss Dezső: *Kántálók* 1946. Képelemzés," *Yearbook of the Janus Pannonius Museum* 20–21 (1975–76), pp. 311–19.
12. Ilona Keserü, "Töredékes emlékek KORNISS DEZSŐ után kutatva," in Korniss Dezső, ed., *Marianna Kolozsváry*, exh. cat. Directorate of Pest County Museums (Szentendre, 2008), p. 13.
13. The *szuszék* is a large chest that stands on four legs.
14. Annotation by the artist to the image *Painted Linen Chest Study 1* (1969, IKI.1969.934), in Katalin Aknai, ed., *Ilona-Keserü Ilona: Self-Powered Works / Önerejű képek: Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. 1. 1959–1980* (Budapest: Kisterem Galéria, 2016), p. 178, translation altered.
15. András Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," in *Hatvanas évek*, ed. Ildikó Nagy, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest (Budapest, 1991), pp. 142–44.
16. *Géza Perneczky, "Magyar pop-művészet?," Élet és Irodalom,* October 4, 1969, p. 9.
17. For more detail on this, see Dávid Fehér, "'Where Is the Light?' Transformations of Pop Art in Hungary," in *International Pop*, ed. Darsie Alexander and Bartholomew Ryan, exh. cat. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (Minneapolis, 2015), pp. 131–48.
18. Katalin Keserü, *Variations on Pop Art—Chapters in the History of Hungarian Art between 1950 and 1990*, Ernst Museum, Budapest (Budapest, 1993).
19. Katalin Timár, "Is Your Pop Our Pop? The History of Art as a Self-Colonizing Tool," *ARTmargins online*, March 15, 2002, http://artmargins.com/is-your-pop-our-pop-the-history-of-art-as-a-self-colonizing-tool/.
20. *International Pop*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, April 11–August 29, 2015, curated by Darsie Alexander and Bartholomew Ryan; *The World Goes Pop*, Tate Modern, London, September 17, 2015–January 24, 2016, curated by Jessica Morgan and Flavia Frigeri; *Ludwig Goes Pop + The East Side Story*, Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, October 9, 2015–January 6, 2016, curated by Katalin Timár, Soma Bradák, and Viktória Popovics.
21. Angela Stief, ed., *Power Up: Female Pop Art*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (Cologne: DuMont, 2010); Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minoudaki, eds., *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968*, ed. Brooklyn Museum, New York (New York, 2010).
22. See Lucia Gregorová Stach, "Possibility of Discovery: Jana Želibská in the Art of the Sixties," *Acta Historiae Artium* 56 (2015), pp. 279–96; Agata Jakubowska, "Personalising the Global History of Pop Art: Alina Szapocznikow and Maria Pinińska-Bereś," in *Art in Transfer in the Era of Pop 2017*, pp. 239–59.
23. János Frank, ed., *Bencsik István, Keserü Ilona, Major János*, exh. cat. Adolf Fényes Hall, Budapest, September 26–October 19, 1969, curated by János Frank.
24. According to the catalogue, the sculptures were produced in relation to the academic work of the medical doctor Dr. Ferenc Kováts.
25. For the list of works featured in the exhibition, see Dániel Véri: *Major János (1934–2008). Monográfia és œuvre katalógus*, Ph.D. diss. (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2016), p. 120; for an analysis of the work, see p. 162, http://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handel/10831/32560/dissz_Veri_Daniel_filozofiatud.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
26. Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba,"* ibid., pp. 107–26.
27. Keserü, *Variations on Pop Art*, p. 46; Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba,"* p. 123.
28. *Lakner László,* exh. cat. Institute of Cultural Relations, Budapest, September 19–October 5, 1969 (curated by János Frank).
29. See, for example, Fehér, "Pop Beyond Pop," pp. 366–69; Dávid Fehér, "Constellations of the Self: References and Identities in the Art of László Lakner," in idem, ed., *Lakner László: Alter Ego*, exh. cat. MODEM, Debrecen (Debrecen, 2023), pp. 33–35.
30. "Visszaszámlálás után. Rozgonyi Iván beszélgetése Keserü Ilonával," in Aknai, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*: *Self-Powered Works, Vol. 1*, p. 18.
31. *Bloody Approach* (1985–86) is the negative, or "afterimage," of *Approach I* (1969). On this, see the artist's note in *Ilona-Keserü Ilona: Self-Powered Works / Önerejű képek: Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. 2: 1981–2000* (Budapest, 2020), p. 134.

Katalin Aknai

BAROQUE REASONS AND VERNACULAR RHYMES: ON ILONA KESERÜ

When Ilona Keserü made her powerful gestural paintings following her 1962–63 trip to Italy, only two people immediately noticed the paradigm shift. Her old master, Ferenc Martyn, who had returned to Hungary from Paris in 1946, recognized that the new works coming from Keserü's hands were completely in line with Western European artistic trends. The other sharp-eyed individual was the art critic Géza Perneczky, who was the first to say that Keserü's painterly world had, in one great leap, "left the vacuum of three or four decades behind to join the stylistic trends of the present ... [I]t is full of strong, instinctive gestures, motifs with authenticity and natural movement. She is one of the few Hungarian painters who, in addition to understanding contemporary tasks, also possesses the power of execution."[1]

These genuinely programmatic artworks, this painterly world based on free gestures and the structural power of color, did not appear out of nowhere. Understanding the task then and there meant posing the question of how to forget what she had learned, shake off the constraints of academic study, and abandon the paths that her narrow and closed circle, the Hungary that was emerging as of the 1950s, had prescribed for her. (She graduated from the Budapest University of Fine Arts in 1958.) The first major study of Keserü's work, written by Dezső Tandori in 1966, describes her first steps on the path of forgetting as being based on drawings that recall the "motion of primordial matter." Later on, Éva Forgács, on the occasion of Keserü's first retrospective exhibition—in the mid-1980s—characterizes the drawings as a total *tabula rasa*, as an "overwhelming artistic and psychic struggle for freedom" with which Keserü swept away everything that stood in the way of her actual, authentic message. There are only a few contemporary examples of such radical introspection in the period.

Yet every forgetting and every method presupposes something else that points to, as Tandori stated, Keserü's artistic "inner world," to an autochthonous creator with an autonomous aesthetic field recreating herself and setting herself new tasks. In this domain, all forms, objects, even colors, have a lived and massive reality.

From this perspective, the oeuvre has another solid foundation—which can be regarded as a complement to forgetting—somewhere in the original landscape of folk art, a source from distant times and of material memories. And there is a group of works in which forgetting, in conjunction with drawing, anticipates decisive moments. One of the most important periods in Ilona Keserü's career—a central aspect in her interviews, chronologies, and apparatus of reception—was her stay in Italy in 1962–63. This period was filled with picaresque stories that impacted her artistic development. The stories are, of course, intertwined and none of them are purely artistic or practical. Nor would that be realistic, since it was chance rather than a southern mentality that brought Keserü to Italy—like her American contemporary Cy Twombly. However, her simultaneous exposure to multiple milieus and cultural-linguistic contexts almost immediately confirmed the unease that arose from her own social experience, measured tasks, and prescribed boundaries in Hungary.

From that year onward, Keserü has regarded her work as a continuity. It was the experience of the city (Rome!), or more precisely the fragmented beauty and enduring grandeur of the Baroque cities of Sicily, that had an elemental influence on her. Baroque art as a worldview was an original realization. "I was extremely fascinated by the built world in Italy. ... I am not thinking of styles, but of a kind of essence of architecture that they were able to possess in all the different ages ... I am thinking of the pure spectacle, not of stylistic elements, but of the combination of mass, organic cohesion, and function. These hilltop cities have affected me most profoundly."[2]

If one is driven to Sicily by curiosity to seek out the influences that captured Keserü's attention and intellect, one is touched by the "baroque" in strange and unexpected ways. "Organic combination of cohesion and function" is indeed a precise expression of this as we attempt to discover the Sicily of 1963 in a building, a staircase, or even a door handle. Objects: the volutes of a church façade, rippling stone balustrades, blocks of carved pulpits in dark corners, organ cases, the undulating, spatial lines of shuttered windows in the hands of an unknown stone- or woodcarver lend vernacular art a vibrancy that enriches its art-historical context ❶. The material of folklore is highly variable with respect to geographical space, but less so in terms of time. It is perhaps for this very reason, as a reward for observation, that it, obeying mostly contradictory laws, can provide a valuable complement to "high art." Folk art is not a professional art, but rather an ontogenic one based on widely shared skills. It is propagated through the hands of generations and tradition, disappears, and then re-emerges, resulting in a construction of knowledge that allows for innovation in both content and form. It was with this inherent knowledge that Keserü recognized the profound similarity between the weaving and carving patterns of Baranya (in southwestern Hungary) and the Baroque carvings in Italy ❷.

[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *Cheerful Picture (Vidám kép)*, 1964–67, walnut stain and oil on wood, 35 × 52 cm, Collection of the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

The conditions for moving on were forgetfulness, speed, and the elimination of reflection. Keserü takes the pondering and control out of image-making, leaving herself only the most elementary movements of touch or soft pressure on the paper. She likes to use ink, which models both volition and vegetative staining on the smeared paper. In these more limited waking moments of the creative state, the "life" of the line, the present experience and inner history of the self, takes place before her eyes, a process that is simultaneously a process of abandoning "patterns," inscribed constructions. The drawing, as Keserü discovered, does not explain anything beyond the event of its own embodiment. There is something festive about it. While the projecting of forms of consciousness in drawings continued until 1965, upon returning home from Italy, a new sign that took on a life of its own in Keserü's visual morphology emerged: a vertical wavy line that intertwines in several places. This wavy form, reminiscent of the bulging balusters, the pulsating façades of Baroque buildings, and the gliding profiles—at least until the discovery of the self-identical form lurking in the heart-shaped tombstones of the late-Baroque cemetery in Balatonudvari—became a "nonrepresentational ornament" (Alois Riegl). This became the expanded world

of Keserü's Baroque drawing series, *Baroque Drawing* (*Barokk rajz*) (1965) [3] (1965), mere automatisms at the boundary between the ornament and the gesture of Baroque swirls. As Keserü's confidence in her newly formed painterly medium grew, drawing took a back seat to painting and the forming of objects. The curved, heart-shaped tombstones of the cemetery in Balatonudvari with their simple, infinite form polished over the centuries pointed to the surviving resources of a specific culture. Their origin goes back further than the inscriptions on the tombstones—with 1825 as the earliest legible date. Keserü discovered the hidden traits of her own artistic character in the late Baroque swirl: the vivid geometry of the double arch, its organic duality, the multipliable and continuous nature of the curved upper part, the material purity of the object.

When considering the dramaturgy of Keserü's paintings from 1964 to 1969, it is not easy to remain within the constraints of linearity. Under the aegis of the tombstone motif, she simultaneously created collages, assemblages, the first sewn pictures, and canvas decorations. But she was concerned above all with a new alchemy of forms and treasures derived from folklore. In Hungary, this was manifested in a particular interpretation of Central European Pop Art. Keserü and her contemporaries István Nádler and Imre Bak also recognized the structure-forming impulses of folk art. Nor does Keserü seek a common denominator between

[Fig. 2] Pulpit, ca. second half of the seventeenth century, Noto, Sicily, photo: Katalin Aknai

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Baroque Drawing (Barokk rajz)*, 1965, India ink on paper, 24.5 × 21.4 cm, © Ilona Keserü

folk art and Pop Art in contemporary consumer-oriented practice. Her original interest in folk art was filtered through a code system that, with greater or lesser latency, everyone still assumes to be familiar. In the case of the gingerbread motif of the canvas appliqués, it is not the surface, the knitted egg-colored border decoration, or the pinkish-orange glaze that establishes a connection to consumer culture, but the methodical way in which Pop Art looked at everyday objects. And Keserü thus created a new environment for repetition and everyday objects. The only work that combines the playfulness of folk art with the extravagance of Pop Art, and the only figurative, "representational" painting from this period, is *Couple* (*Pár*) (1967) (fig. see p. 89).

The picture is painted on canvas in oil, along with graphite, artificial flowers, and cut-out newspaper photographs, showing an incorporation of everyday materials into the traditional repertoire of painting. With liberating lightness and immediacy, Keserü elevated the ephemeral newsprint and the paper rose—a motif that László Lakner also used around this time and painted into cheeky, monumental kitsch. All this makes the painting so lively and light that the evocative banality and captivating charm of its figures are only faded out to the point at which our eyes become accustomed to the dreamlike images of various figures of liberation. The heroes of the painting are a naked young man and woman standing life-size in front of a painted background of white-orange-black-interleaved lettering on a red background.

The pattern, which is taken from the writing-like motifs of Kalotaszeg (Transylvania, Romania) or Ormánság (Baranya County, Hungary), weaves around the figures like living folk graffiti. The two nude figures are crowned by "specific" faces cut out of a magazine, proclaiming the emancipation of their bodies as a carefree new Adam and Eve and the happy life to come. The faces depict two of the emblematic icons of their time, the broadly laughing Ringo Starr and Julie Christie, cut out of a *Paris Match* magazine from 1966. Nudity is transformed into a manifesto-like communication reminiscent of the slogans of the counterculture of the 1960s. But the opposite also becomes clear: the hopeless isolation at home, the magazine reporting on a Western life that could only be imagined.

While European modernism provided cultural role models in tangible proximity and intimacy for the great female figures of Pop Art, for Keserü it was folk art that offered connection with a comparable vitality. It pointed in an authentic direction, regardless of ideological constraints, it connected past and present, and geographical distances. Keserü has a personal identification with the function and form of folk art. This was not a search for the folkloristic, rather for the universal value of the objects, the sources of a particular culture. Surprisingly, the compositions

[Fig. 4] Ilona Keserü, *Foreshortening (Painted Linen Chest Study 3) (Rövidülés [Szuszék tanulmány 3.])*, 1969, oil on canvas, 110 x 170 cm, Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs

inspired by folk art became Keserü's most geometrically shaped paintings. In a small village in Baranya (Drávasztára) she saw a *szuszék*, a painted chest commonly used for storage on farms and known as a distant relative of sarcophagi, whose decoration—limited to a few colors and motifs—impressed her almost as much as the sight of the tombstones in Balatonudvari. In *Foreshortening (Painted Linen Chest Study 3) (Rövidülés [Szuszék tanulmány 3.])* (1969) ❹, three colors—green, blue, and red—and the waves, small rectangular groups, and a floral motif cut out with a compass symbolizing the water of the river brought back the pulsation of folk songs in the form of a rhymed visualization. This is where Keserü comes nearest to Victor Vasarely, who in his most exquisite—and earliest—works also referred to the vital richness of the colors and rhythms of Baranya weaving, for instance in the *Helios* series of the 1950s. While in *Light Picture (Painted Linen Chest Study 4) (Világos kép [Szuszék tanulmány 4.])* (1969), Keserü synthesized the infinite variations of motifs and colors with stitching and appliqué in her own "dialect," alluding to the mysterious function of the chests, in the silhouette of the tombstones.

One day Ilona Keserü cheerfully said to me: 'I've been sewing recently. And her studio has become even messier. The estuaries, the waves of the rivers, the banks of the Danube, were almost bulging out of the pictures to such an extent that one might shake hands with them. Then she painted these canvas reliefs in bright colors. From the scraps that remained, she made a memorial box and hung them up. Keserü was in fact one of the first to turn to sewing not as an "applied art." She has the dexterity, the precise mechanics of the hand—heritage, she laconically says—the patience and perseverance, but the visual energy that drives her strength and energy is not tailored to the subtlety of lacework. She has never embroidered, embellished, or laced, but rather makes tight stitches and folds and embossed designs. Keserü's collages exploring the folding of fabric from 1966 onward were performative, illusionistic experiments with a ubiquitous intimacy of body and material. One gets the feeling that these works are active, play lightly with the viewer, draw one into the picture through their mere physical appearance, which is, yet again, a characteristic of Baroque playfulness.

By the time she found the object of her hand movement in the tombstones, her attention to the abrasions and porosity of the surface of the sandstone had deepened and she thus brought all of this into play. She then turned to raw linen and hemp rolls, which she knew well from the famous monthly fairs of her hometown, Pécs. This rough, coarsely woven textile,

[Fig. 5] Ilona Keserü, *Double Form 3 ("Farewell to Morovany") (Kettős forma 3. ["Búcsú Morovanytól"])*, 1972, oil and stitching on embossed canvas, 95 × 150 × 4 cm, Grażyna Kulczyk Collection, Warsaw

which follows the minute regularities of chance, remained Keserü's dominant material for a very long time, since she recognized its unique sculptural capacities. In doing so, Keserü invented the brand-new genre of the embossed and/or molded canvas. *Approach 2* (*Közelítés 2.*) (1969) (fig. see p. 81) is the first in a series of hemp reliefs in which the tombstone motif emerges from the picture plane as a tactile, breathing body. The malleability and rawness of the movement of the bare material, with its allusion to the mysterious alchemy of dough, distantly recalls the sackcloth assemblages of Alberto Burri, which Keserü encountered on her trip to Italy back in 1963.

For Keserü, the tombstone motif broadened the horizon to include various applications and dimensions. She set about creating larger visual systems with energies scaled for wall and mural painting. Through gradual enlargements and transpositions of scale she arrived at the actionism of landscape formation and intervention, where painting and sculpture, and even the built environment, become a kind of "transitional," intermediate territory. Previously fixed functions were questioned and transformed. As in the beginning, when Ilona Keserü in her action at Balatonudvari unfolded a sewn tapestry with a tombstone motif [6] and cut a path through the paper prints multiplying the heart-shaped silhouette, *the self-power of expanding* the world and transcending and recovering the frame was in operation in this new gesture as well.

1. Géza Perneczky, "Keserü Ilona festményei, *Budapester Rundschau,* 1968. január 5.," in *Keserü Ilona kiállítási katalógus,* exh. cat. Szent István Király Múzeum Közleményei, 125., Székesfehérvár, 1978 (Székesfehérvár: Szent István Király Múzeum, 1978), p. 8.
2. András Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," in *Hatvanas évek,* ed. Ildikó Nagy (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 1991), p. 145.

Agata Jakubowska

ILONA KESERÜ: BEING A WOMAN ARTIST IN STATE-SOCIALIST HUNGARY

Born in 1933, Ilona Keserü, belongs to the generation of women artists who began their academic careers in the 1950s. In Eastern Europe, this decade was marked by the turmoil of intensive Stalinization and the subsequent dynamic changes after Stalin's death. In Hungary, the dramatic character of these changes was particularly visible in the Revolution of 1956 and its aftermath. In the field of art, the doctrine of Socialist Realism held sway. It gradually lost its influence in some countries and gave way to modern (abstract) art, but this process took a comparatively long time in Hungary. In the social field, gender equality was promoted as a crucial component of socialist society, bringing numerous possibilities to women but not guaranteeing their success. As Hedvig Turai rightly claims in her text titled *Limited Access to Greatness: The Position of Women Artists*, "inequality still characterized women's access to professional careers," also in art.[1] While no systematic study of the situation of women artists has hitherto been conducted in either Hungary or other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, analysis of individual artistic biographies reveals that women had to struggle with the persistence of conservative views of their skills and the place they should occupy in society and in the field of art.

It was, however, not disbelief in her talents that Keserü remembers most from her studies at the University of Fine Arts in Budapest. In the middle of her studies, she moved to a studio run by István Szőnyi, and recollects, "He didn't like to take on women, but he said something like I was strong, powerful enough, and I would be able to do what had to be done."[2] In the years that followed, he proved to be very helpful in strengthening her self-confidence and encouraging her to find her voice. Keserü was lucky to receive support during her studies, but this seems to have been primarily the result of meeting the right person, not of systematic solutions introduced by the government.

The difficulty of finding her artistic path followed her years at the university, from which the artist graduated in 1958. Keserü often said that she felt "helpless" during these years, but always refers in this context to her internal struggles, not to any external difficulties she may have encountered. Keserü found a possibility to earn a living as a graphic designer, making book covers and illustrations, for example, for the important cultural magazine *Élet és Irodalom*. At the time, she was a member of a vibrant cultural milieu that brought together not only visual artists but also people working in theater, music, or literature. Some of the meetings took place in the studio/apartment that she moved into in 1960.

In her own words, Keserü finally found her artistic voice in the mid-1960s and developed it in the years that followed. The

second half of the 1960s was a special time in Hungarian art. It was a turbulent time everywhere, but each region had its specific determinants. In Eastern Europe, it should be perceived in relation to the strict cultural politics of the 1950s, which were superseded in the next decade by many governments' more open attitude towards artistic experiments. In Hungary, it was marked by relative intellectual openness and the liberalization of various restrictions, for example, in connection with travel outside the Eastern Bloc.[3]

On the art scene, the liberalizing of cultural policy and its restrictions was manifested most visibly in several events that became iconic in the history of Hungarian art: the exhibitions of the Studio of Young Artists in 1966 and 1967 and the two Iparterv exhibitions held in 1968 and 1969.[4] Keserü participated in all of these events. In the Iparterv exhibitions, she was the sole woman artist among the exhibiting artists. This fact, however, does not indicate the low number of women artists active in Hungary at the time, but rather the marginal position they occupied on the art scene. The position of Keserü herself was analyzed in an interesting way by Katalin Aknai, who focused on a photo featured on the cover of *Documentum 69–70*, a catalogue of the Iparterv exhibitions published, after a delay, in 1971[5] ❶. The photo, taken on László Lakner's terrace on July 23, 1968, presents participants in the exhibitions in a way that underscores the close, friendly relations among them. Keserü appears at the bottom and seems as if added to the photo. This was actually the case—she was not on the terrace and her portrait was added at a later point in time.[6] As

[Fig. 1] Cover of *Documentum 69–70*, catalogue of the Iparterv exhibitions, Iparterv actions and exhibitions—Parallel Chronologies (tranzit.org)

Aknai explains: "Keserü wasn't there because she was a few years older than the 'boys,' and of course, she was on friendly and collegial terms with almost everyone, ... but there was a generation gap." With generation gap, Aknai, however, does not mean age per se—there was only a difference of a few years between them. It was artistic interests, such as her lack of interest in conceptualism, that actually made Keserü something of a separatist.

Mirror Image (*Tükörkép*) (1968), shown at the first Iparterv exhibition, was closely related to Keserü's previous works (fig. see p. 129). It presented a combination of forms—waves, tulips, concentric circles—doubled as if reflected in a mirror. The use of intensive, contrasting colors made it close to what is sometimes referred to as "Hungarian Pop Art," often with a question mark, as in the title of Géza Perneczky's 1969 text.[7] The second Iparterv exhibition featured *Approach 2 (Közelítés 2.)* (1969), which was characteristic of a new phrase in Keserü's art (fig. see p. 81). The two main elements are formed by the coarse, undyed, embossed canvas. As these elements refer to a motif discovered in 1967 during a walk in the cemetery of Balatonudvari, they might evoke the material quality of stones. But we can also reference them to a body, to the curves of its outline. Keserü's art at the end of the 1960s is often described as a period when she worked intensively on the abovementioned, newly found motif. But for the discussion of her position as a woman artist, it is much more important to take a look at two other aspects: first, the introduction of new materials (fabrics) and sewing as a new technique, and, second, references to the female body that are more direct than ever in her art.

The 1960s saw the intensive development of experimental textile art in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The so-called "soft movement" offered an alternative path for developing artistic experimentation to the one taken by the artists forming the Iparterv generation. *Textile Wall Hangings '68' (Textil falikép '68')*, an exhibition organized at the Ernst Museum in Budapest, marked the intensive development of this trend. Among the participants were various artists who addressed gendered issues in their works, such as Zsuzsa Szenes, whose later use of bright, intensive colors, as in *Against Cold in General (Hideg ellen általában)* (1976), resonates with that of Keserü[8] ❷. Keserü did not belong to this group. When asked about her decision to incorporate sewing into her art, she said that she had learned it from one of her grandmothers, always liked it, and practiced it a lot.[9] But she felt that it kept her from her artistic practice, so she combined the two. In the artistic sense, adding sewing and using coarse, undyed fabric supplemented the painterly devices at her disposal.

[Fig. 2] Zsuzsa Szenes, *Against the Cold in General (Sentry box) (Hideg ellen általában [Őrbódé])*, 1976, object, wood, wool knitting, 220 × 60 × 60 cm, Savaria Museum—Art Gallery Szombathely

The bodily aspect of her works from this period was best visible at the exhibition she organized in 1969 with two friends, István Bencsik and János Major, at Adolf Fényes Hall in Budapest. All three artists explored different aspects of bodily identity in their works. István Bencsik presented torsos evoking the ideals of classical sculpture. But their subtitles—inhalation, exhalation—turned attention to the basic functions of the human organism. János Major showed his self-portrait in which distorted features corresponded to antisemitic representations, while the reduced presentation of the body emphasized gender issues. Keserü presented works like *Black Line (Fekete vonal)* ❸ or *Form (Forma)* (both 1968–69), which offer direct reference to intimate fragments of the female body.[10] Today, such a description is self-evident, but that was not the case at the end of the 1960s. Members of Keserü's artistic circle perceived these works as violating taboos and

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Black Line (Fekete vonal)*, 1968–69, oil, string, ribbon, and stitching on canvas, 160 × 80 × 3 cm, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsolt Szabóky

expressed their concerns about exhibiting them. Yet, as Katalin Aknai claims, the memory of it "was relegated to the untraceable registers of *oral history*."[11] In art criticism, the subject matter of these works was referred to in a very subtle way. László Beke, for example, claimed in 1971 that analysis of recent works by Keserü "cannot convey ..., the changes of meaning which often appear by merely turning the motif ninety degrees," as happened when "the symmetrical doubling of the tombstone contours, shrunk into a connecting link, becomes a symbol of femininity."[12]

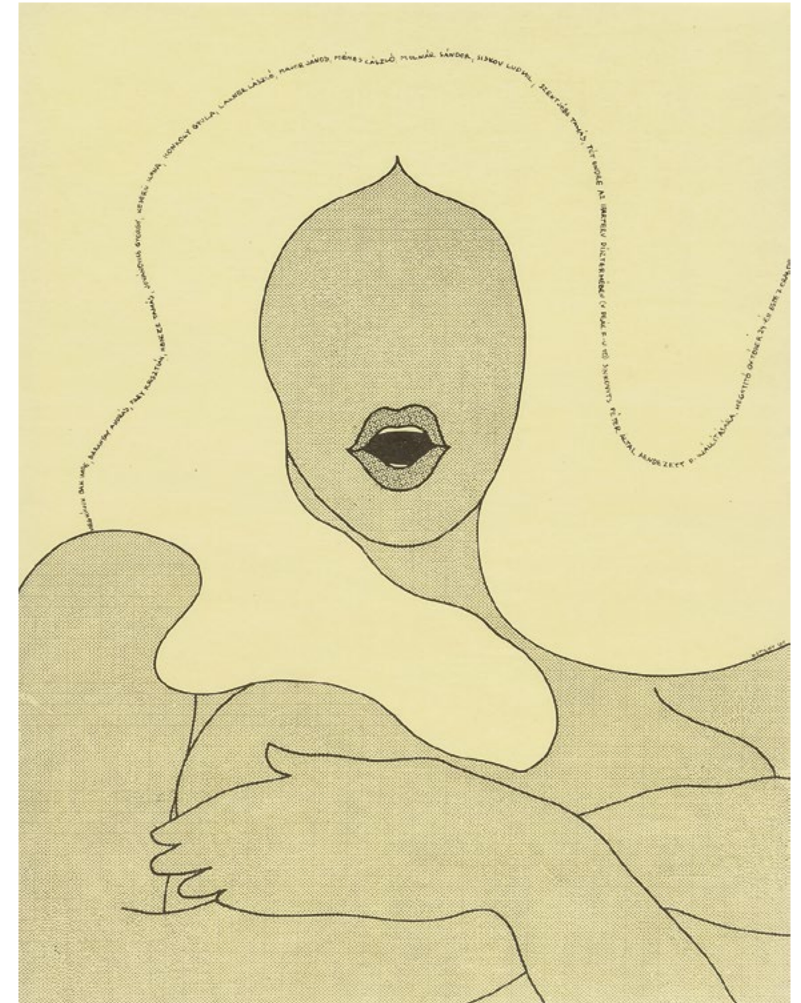
Keserü herself somehow put this overtly feminine episode in her art behind her. While in subsequent years she did produce a couple of works referring to the female body and its functioning, for example, *Bloody Picture (Véres kép)* (1975) (fig. see pp. 92–93), in which she used a petticoat known as a *bikla*, a textile that was part of the attire of peasant women, they were less directly representational, more metaphoric, and, as such, less provocative.

In an interview summarizing research on gender issues in Hungarian art after 1960 conducted for the *Gender Check* exhibition, it is directly suggested that Keserü, "aiming for recognition," abandoned "essentialist, sensual female body representation for abstraction."[13] Considering how abstract her representation of the female body already was at the end of the 1960s as well as the difficult position that abstraction still occupied at that time in Hungarian cultural politics, I would instead suggest a different interpretation of the aforementioned abandonment. The reception her works received and various events that were taking place on the Hungarian art scene at the turn to the 1970s proved that there was no space for an open expression of female erotic experiences. I refer mainly to the scandal around Katalin Ladik, a Hungarian artist living in Novi Sad, performing *UFO Party*.[14] The action was first presented in Belgrade in March 1970 and then at the experimental film festival in Zagreb, and immediately attracted a great deal of attention. What was most shocking to the audiences was that Ladik violated conventions regarding the appearance of women artists. Ladik transformed a traditional recitation of poems into a phonic performance in which her voice was supplemented by musical instruments and her movements, whereby she regarded the nearly naked body as yet another means of expression. Ladik presented a similar performance again during a poetry reading that took place in Budapest on June 6, 1970 ❹. It triggered negative reactions from the Hungarian press and authorities. The former accused the "naked poetess," as she was referred to, of expecting an offer of a higher fee for nudity; the latter, in the person of the Minister of Culture, reprimanded the organizer of the event.[15] Ladik's colleagues supported her by sending letters to the press,

[Fig. 4] Katalin Ladik, *Shaman Poem V*, 1970, black-and-white photographs, 10 × 15 cm each, courtesy the artist and acb gallery, Budapest

but they remained unpublished. As Emese Kürti claims, the event "destabilized the Budapest underground community, pushing them out of their macho comfort zone by offering the unfamiliar experience of a female position."[16] It must have also made other women artists realize the consequences of breaking taboos around the representation of the female body. Keserü could not have been unaware of this event, as it happened in her milieu.

It has often been underscored that artists like Keserü and Ladik created their works breaking normative conventions of dealing with the female body with no knowledge of feminist theories. Aknai claims, for example: "Keserü instinctively felt the identity issues raised by feminism, which in Hungary had neither a movement nor a background, nor even a narrow network sensitive to the problem."[17] Indeed, feminist theories associated with second-wave feminism and developing in the United States and Western Europe were barely known in Hungary until the second half of the 1970s. Nevertheless, we should not forget that other emancipatory theories developed in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. While they have often been dismissed as propaganda tools of totalitarian governments, they cannot be reduced to them. They were often related to prewar gender politics and formed part of postwar international expert debates around issues shaping the woman question. Such was the case of the discourses on female sexuality developing in state-socialist Hungary that are important in the context of Keserü's works. As claimed by Gábor Szegedi, the Kádár government inaugurated a new era



[Fig. 5] György Kemény, poster for the second Iparterv exhibition, 1969, courtesy György Kemény and Vintage Galéria, Budapest

of sexual politics, which manifested itself, for example, in a 1956 decree making abortion free and easily accessible, the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1961, and the beginning of the manufacture of contraceptive pills in 1967.[18] In the 1960s: "After a decade of almost complete silence—explains Szegedi—issues of sexuality could be discussed and debated in the open, which meant that new, more permissive sexual discourses appeared and gained momentum."[19] This period also brought the development of popular culture, with its eroticized images of the female body. György Kemény's graphic works, including his poster for the second Iparterv exhibition, could be regarded as one manifestation of this ❺. Although Keserü is sometimes seen in relation to Hungarian Pop Art, as stated above, she made direct references to popular culture only sporadically. Her representations of the female body should thus be regarded as an expression of her

bodily experiences as a woman rather than as comments on how cultural norms discipline such experiences. These works did not include social criticism, but were expressions of bodily aspects of women's lives.

When Hungarian women artists, sometimes influenced by Western second-wave feminism, in the second half of the 1970s started discussing women artists' ambiguous position in a culture that concentrated so much on the female body, she did not join the discussion.[20] Again, she must have been aware of these discussions. One of the artists involved in disseminating feminist ideas in Hungary was Dóra Maurer, one of Keserü's colleagues, who was interested not so much in exploring feminist subjects in her art as in the challenging position of women artists in the art field. Some of Keserü's male colleagues also participated in Orshi Drozdik's performance *The Nude (Az Akt)* realized in January 1977 at the Club of Young Artists (FMK) in Budapest. For five consecutive days, the artist drew a naked woman in a room that was accessible to viewers only through the open doors. A different male critic or artist inaugurated the event each day with a speech.

During the very moderate development of feminist discourse in Hungarian art, Keserü entered a new phase in her life. In her "Autobiographical Fragments and Excerpts from a Book in the Making," published in the 2004 exhibition catalogue, she wrote: "1976, February 20—László Vidovszky moves in ... December 28—Emma Vidovszky is born."[21] In her accounts of her earlier period, no other partner appears; here, she mentions a partner and a baby, and a family thus becomes part of Keserü's artistic biography. In the years that followed, she cooperated with Vidovszky, a musician, on creating, for example, an environment called *Sound-Colour-Space (co-work with László Vidovszky) (Hang-szín-tér [Vidovszky Lászlóval közös mű])* (1981). Emma seems to have accompanied them everywhere. In photos from that time, Keserü is often seen with her young daughter. When asked if she needed childcare to have time for her art, she told me she did not.[22] The message I received from Keserü was that they were together all the time, and it was wonderful.

For the publication *Iparterv 68–80*, she offered biographical information in an interesting form—at the top, there is information about the artist's date of birth; at the bottom, we can read when and where Emma Vidovszky was born. The whole space between is left empty, as if Keserü wanted to say that nothing worth mentioning happened between these two events. *Iparterv 68–80* was the first attempt to look at the Iparterv generation from a distance and see how the careers of artists of that generation developed.[23] In Keserü's case, it seems as if the most recent years were

[Fig. 6] Ilona Keserü, *Cylinder Robe (Hengerpalást)*, 1978, hand-stitched, dyed linen on metal rings, 176 × 55 × 55 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

[Fig. 7] Ilona Keserü and Emma Vidovszky at the exhibition *Gyűjteményes kiállítás*, Csók István Képtár, Székesfehérvár, 1978, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsuzsa Fábri

most productive. Motherhood did not bring a period of decline in her career, as often happens when a young artist becomes a mother. On the contrary, it was when her first retrospective exhibition was organized, which took place in Székesfehérvár in 1978. It was followed by smaller shows and culminated in the 1983 exhibition at the Budapest Kunsthalle (Műcsarnok), her first big show at the significant public institution in Budapest.

At that time, any direct references to the female body disappear from Keserü's art. The body is still present but in a different form—she concentrates on human skin, not its texture but its color. This interest developed gradually during the 1970s, and did not come to an end with pregnancy and giving birth. One might have expected a concentration on individual experiences, perhaps confronted with social and cultural expectations. But in Keserü's case, motherhood instead deepened her interest in relational aesthetics. She later stated: "Towards the end of the 1970s, I was able to express precisely something that had occupied me for years, namely that each and every shade of color of the rainbow is in harmony with each and every shade of skin color of people living on Earth."[24] This observation led her to numerous

actions and gestures underscoring the significance of human relations and the priority of them over individual experience. One of them was a joint hanging in the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest, of the huge (300-by-1900-cm), multicolored textile at the New Year's Eve event in 1977 (fig. see p. 167). Even when she seems to have concentrated on one person—as in the action in 1982, when her *Cylinder Robe (Hengerpalást)* was pulled up to reveal a woman who goes on to engage with other objects in the exhibition—she created a social event ❻. Klara Kemp-Welsh noted that a film documenting the action shows how "[t]he installation produces a remarkably spontaneous social situation, revealing or concealing anyone interested in playing the game and participating in the embodied experience of being caught up 'in' color."[25] Though still creating art objects, Keserü saw them as other living beings. In November 1979, the artist wrote: "Let us accept the fact that paintings are real, live bodies. Let us not limit their infinite possibilities by putting them behind letter-bars. Let the individual look at a painting with the uncertain, multitudinous, complete self that shares in the unexpected and incomprehensible events of their life"[26]

[Fig. 8] Ilona Keserü on the cover of the 1984 issue of *Új Tükör*, © Ilona Keserü, photographer unknown

In the 1990s, Keserü began organizing documentation of her previous work, which led to the preparation of subsequent catalogue raisonnés. The first volume, which appeared in 2016, covers the years 1959 to 1980.[27] The image concluding the volume depicts the artist and her young daughter at her 1978 exhibition ❼. Another image opens the second volume as if illustrating the different characters of these subsequent periods in her career. Keserü changed the register from private to public, reproducing the cover of the 1984 issue of *Új Tükör* featuring a big photo of her in her studio, alone, looking directly at viewers ❽. I will not analyze this later period here, but I would like to emphasize that the photo can be regarded as announcing a change in the roles that the artist would play in the upcoming years of significant political, social, and economic transformations. In addition, Emma gradually disappears from images depicting her mother's artistic life in the 1980s, as if being a mother is given a more discreet place, giving way to other roles: an artist/color researcher, artistic life organizer, and teacher.

By calling attention to these images, I would like to underscore the necessity to look not only at artworks but also at other activities and gestures of artists in the field of art, both at this time and later on. They tell us a lot about how they positioned themselves in the art field, for example, to what extent they did so (ir)respective of their gender. In Keserü's case, an analysis of her appearances in art world publications does not enable us to easily see, as holds true for various other artists, that she abandoned figurative painting for abstraction in order to avoid gender associations and challenge the modernist ideal of the universal artist. When these associations disappeared from her art almost entirely, they were still present in her other manifestations. The latter should be considered in relation to the world that Keserü created with her artistic devices—at least until the beginning of the 1980s—a world that embraced differences and stressed relationality, not individual experience.

1. Hedvig Turai, "Limited Access to Greatness: The Position of Women Artists," in *Art in Hungary 1956–80: Doublespeak and Beyond*, ed. Edit Sasvári and Hedvig Turai (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 252. In it, she discusses the artistic biographies of four women artists: Erzsébet Schaár, Margit Anna, Júlia Vajda, and Lili Ország.
2. "After the Countdown. Iván Rozgonyi: A Conversation with Ilona Keserü" (1966), in *Ilona Keseru Ilona, Self-Powered Works / Önerejű képek: Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. 1. 1959–1980*, ed. Katalin Aknai (Budapest: Kisterem Galéria, 2016), p. 21.
3. János M. Rainer, "The Sixties in Hungary—some historical and political approaches," in *Muddling Through in the Long 1960s: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary*, eds. János M. Rainer and György Péter (Budapest and Trondheim: 1956 Institute—Program on East European Cultures and Societies, 2005), pp. 4–26.
4. Csanádi-Bognár Szilvia, ed., *Tolerance and Prohibition: The 1966 and 1967 Exhibition of the Studio of Young Artists*, exh. cat. Ernst Museum, Budapest (Budapest, 2006). József Készman and Viktória Popovics, eds., *Iparterv 50+*, exh. cat. Ludwig Museum, Budapest (Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2019).
5. Katalin Aknai *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek perspektívájából*, Ph.D. diss. (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2014), p. 92. http://doctori.btk.elte.hu/phil/aknaikatakin/diss.phf [all URLs here accessed in August 2024]. This doctoral dissertation discusses Keserü's art from the 1960s in detail.
6. Portraits of Miklós Erdély and Tamás Szentjóby were also added.
7. Géza Perneczky, "Magyar pop-művészet?," *Élet és Irodalom* 40 (1969), p. 9.
8. See e.g. Katalin Néray, ed., *Eleven Textil / Living Textiles. 1968–1978–1988*, exh. cat. Budapest Kunsthalle (Budapest, 1988).
9. Meeting with the artist in Budapest on June 24, 2024.
10. For an interesting analysis of the historical and contemporary reception of *Black Line*, see Aknai, *Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba*.
11. Aknai, *Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba*, p. 118.
12. László Beke, "The Painter and the Tombstones: Ilona Keserü's Art and Style," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* XII, no. 43 (1971), p. 198.
13. "Interviews with the Researchers. Hungary: Edit András," in *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić, exh. cat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Vienna, 2009), pp. 351–52. This suggestion appears in the words of the interviewing person (unspecified) and in Edit András's answer.
14. See also Erzsébet Tatai, *The Case of a Rejected Diploma Work. Ildikó Várnagy: Eve's Flight from Paradise*, The Long Sixties Research Project, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, http://longsixties.ludwigmuseum.he/research/ersetet-tatai/.
15. For a detailed analysis of this performance and its reception in Yugoslavia and Hungary see Emese Kürti, *Screaming Hole—Poetry, Sound and Action as Intermedia Practice in the Work of Katalin Ladik* (Budapest: acb research lab, 2017), pp. 49–62.
16. Kürti, *Screaming Hole*, p. 49.
17. Aknai, *Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba*, p. 105.
18. Gábor Szegedi, "The Emancipation of Masturbation in Twentieth-Century Hungary," *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 5 (2021), pp. 1403–27.
19. Ibid., p. 1409.
20. Beata Hock, "Women Artists' Trajectories and Networks within the Hungarian Underground Art Scene and Beyond," in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchanges in Communist Europe*, ed. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), pp. 113–24.
21. Ilona Keserü, "Stories, Connections, Interconnections: Autobiographical Fragments and Excerpts from a Book in the Making", in *Approach, Tangle, Stream—An Investigation of Causes and Effects in Ilona Keserü*, exh. cat. Ludwig Museum, Budapest (Budapest, 2004), p. 98.
22. Conversation with the artist in Budapest on June 24, 2024. On the politics of women's labor and childcare in state-socialist Hungary, see Susan Zimmermann, "Gender Regime and Gender Struggle in Hungarian State Socialism," *Aspasia* 4 (2010), pp. 1–24.
23. László Beke, Lóránd Hegyi, and Péter Sinkovits, eds., *Iparterv 68–80* (Budapest: Iparterv Printing House, 1980), p. 96.
24. Ilona Keserü, in *Keserü Ilona*, exh. cat. Ernst Múzeum, Budapest, and Kecskeméti Képtár, Kecskemét (Budapest, 1989), p. 5.
25. Klara Kemp-Welch, "Presence, Radiance, Pulsation: Ilona Keserü's Restless Objects," in *Ilona Keserü* (London: Stephen Friedman Gallery, 2022), kemp-welch-keseru-text-for-sf-gallery-frieze_gvn_kkw_final-1-.pdf (stephenfriedman.com). A film can be seen at Ilona Keserü, Hengerpalást / Cylinder Robe, 1978 | Stephen Friedman Gallery.
26. Dated November 9, 1979, *Iparterv 68–80*, p. 99.
27. *Ilona Keseru Ilona: Self-Powered Works, Vol. 1.*

Flavia Frigeri

DEATH, LOVE, AND DESIRE: ILONA KESERÜ’S POP ABSTRACTIONS

[Fig. 1] Action in Balatonudvari cemetery, 1969, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Yvonne Kranz

[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Tombstones 4 (Sírkövek 4.)*, 1968, oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm, courtesy Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs

> I had a friend, a German girl, a photographer, who took brilliant pictures. She came to Hungary once with her friend in a small van. They were staying with me and we were talking about going to Lake Balaton. I said, why not take a few paintings with us to the cemetery there and take some photos. Into the van we got and off we went. There was no audience in Udvari (Balatonudvari), apart from a couple of people looking from a distance. It was just the three of us and Yvonne was taking pictures. I lay a tapestry on a burial mound. I paved a path with colored prints. These were all prints of the tombstone motif, but there was also one painting, *Tombstones 4*. It was great that these things could return to where they had come from.[1]

The year is 1969 and the Hungarian artist Ilona Keserü is in Balatonudvari, the village of Udvari on the northern shore of Lake Balaton, with the German photographer Yvonne Kranz ❶. A few years prior, this very site inspired Keserü to produce the series of *Tombstones (Sírkövek)* paintings. As described by the artist, the mood of the aforementioned outing was upbeat and the possibilities for creative output felt endless. The result was a pastiche of natural resources, folk art, and avant-garde abstraction. Kranz's camera captured it all, thus recording this spontaneous moment for posterity.

In one picture we find the painting *Tombstones 4* (*Sírkövek 4.*) (1968) ❷, propped up between two sandstone graves. Weathered by age, yet untarnished in their symbolic value, the graves are the product of local handcraft. Their originality resides in the wave-like shape that marks their tops, lending them a sensuous feel, distinct from the rigidity of the angular ones more commonly found in cemeteries. The tragedy of death appears to be tamed here by the softness of these ebbing and flowing curves—perhaps, a mirror of the rhythm of life itself, caught between highs and lows. With its garish palette *Tombstones 4* commands all the attention while bowing to its ancestors—throbbing, heart-like painted shapes inject new life into the silent graves. Meanwhile, a series of dichotomies take hold in this impossible dialogue: painting versus sculpture, high art versus folk art, nature versus the manmade, religious symbolism versus agnostic symbolism, and the list goes on.

It is precisely the impossibility of the dialogue between Keserü's painting and her declared source of inspiration, the graveyard of Balatonudvari, that make Kranz's picture so enticing.

As another photograph from the same series makes even more apparent, the artist's action is tongue-in-cheek—prints featuring the tombstone motif are laid out on the grass to form a path that remains unwalkable, even if one tries. Make-believe was at the heart of this exuberant action, which invited both play and reflection. But beyond the layer of playfulness lies, in fact, a more complicated contextual reality that demands careful pondering.

The freedom that Keserü experienced that day in 1969 in Balatonudvari was an exception rather than the norm. The almost complete absence of onlookers meant that she could do as she pleased with her abstract paintings, which were otherwise subject to careful scrutiny by state functionaries, whose allegiance was to figuration, preferably of a Socialist Realist kind. With her tombstone-inspired abstraction, Keserü was paying tribute to a quintessentially Hungarian folk tradition and at the same time breaking free from state-mandated art. Her position was precarious, despite the serenity conveyed by Kranz's photographs. In 1967, two years before the Balatonudvari outing, she had submitted *Tombstones 1* (*Sírkövek 1.*) (1967) and *Tombstones 2* (*Sírkövek 2.*) (1967) to an exhibition mounted by the Studio of Young Artists. Authorities caught whiff of the show, which included nonfigurative works, and immediately shut it down. The blow that Keserü experienced on this occasion did not dampen her commitment to abstraction, but it certainly made her painfully aware of what she could display, as well as where and how. With this in mind, the freedom afforded by the performative action in Balatonudvari—if we can define it as such—takes on a completely different meaning, showing how radical Keserü's gesture was.

While there was virtually no audience in attendance, news of Keserü's action reached the Hungarian critic László Beke, who, writing in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, described it as an openair exhibition in which, "the assembly of mossy, crumbling tombstones was confronted with the scattered series of blatant orange and red compositions."[2] The contrast between the two could not be starker and yet Beke argues for a natural flow between such distinct visual languages, as if a justification is needed to make sense of Keserü's stylistic choice. Writing in 1971, Beke was looking for a framework that could contain the exuberance of the artist's painting, which eschews immediate categorization. Movements such as Pop Art and Minimalism are brought into play, alongside terms like assemblage and *objet trouvé*—Beke is grasping for references.[3] This search produces no concrete results, but it does open up a series of paths that can lead us in the right direction.

In one passage Beke relays how Keserü's paintings "emphasize 'soft,' 'warm,' 'sensuous,' 'feminine' characteristics."[4] In

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Mirror Image (Tükörkép)*, 1968, oil on canvas, 140 × 110 cm, courtesy Kecskeméti Képtár, Kecskemét, © Ilona Keserü

another he borrows the words of an unnamed critic who referred to Keserü's palette as a "honey-cake color scheme" for its selection of hues—orange, crimson, pink, violet, and gray.[5] In yet another instance, Beke reads the symmetry of Keserü's painted shapes as a symbol of femininity—with this suggestion having a veiled erotic underpinning.[6] In each of these cases, the artist's pictorial language is framed as being quintessentially feminine; as if being a woman necessarily inflects how and what Keserü paints.

Keserü, like many women artists who came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, turned to abstraction in a move that would today be described as protofeminist. Feminism, with its many forms, had yet to make a decisive mark on art, but ideas were starting to percolate among interested individuals. It would be a few years before self-declared feminist artists like Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and VALIE EXPORT would turn their bodies into a battlefield on behalf of the feminist cause. Meanwhile, women artists on either side of the East-West divide were grappling with largely patriarchal societies and looking for ways to express their dissent, both consciously and unconsciously. With its lack of naturalistic references, abstraction offered the perfect outlet. It spoke to the postwar avant-garde, as well as drew on one's own lived experience, because, as the feminist diktat goes, the personal is political. In Keserü's case the turn to abstraction was even more radical, given the hostility that officials showed towards nonobjective painting. So, choosing abstraction was a bold move. But even bolder was the reference to the female body that Keserü's abstractions engendered.

In 1968 Keserü painted a diptych titled *Mirror Image* (*Tükörkép*) ❸. The work consists of two abutting canvases that mirror each other in form, but not in color. As viewers we are asked to imagine a mirror reflection that has abstraction as its main subject. The wavy lines on the one side of the work are matched by those on the opposite side; one begins where the other one ends, with an ongoing exchange between the two ensuing. By most accounts, this is an abstract work concerned with the vagaries of abstraction, but if we look beyond the surface, we find traces of a body hiding in plain sight. Like the *Tombstones* paintings with their heart-shaped forms doubling up as wombs, *Mirror Image* also conceals the curves of a body within the folds of abstraction. The mirror, which usually offers back a reflection of the self that is standing in front of it, here evokes a body whose form has been subjected to abstraction. Keserü applies this same principle to all her abstract works: in *Black Line (Fekete vonal)* (1968–69) and *Form (Forma)* (1968–69), for example, she juxtaposes the painted curves of a biomorphic shape with a set of tangled strings; the inner gut

[Fig. 4]

Ilona Keserü, *Slit (Hasítás)*, 1969, embossed canvas and graphite on canvas, 160 × 60 × 4 cm, Kolozsváry Collection, Győr, © Ilona Keserü

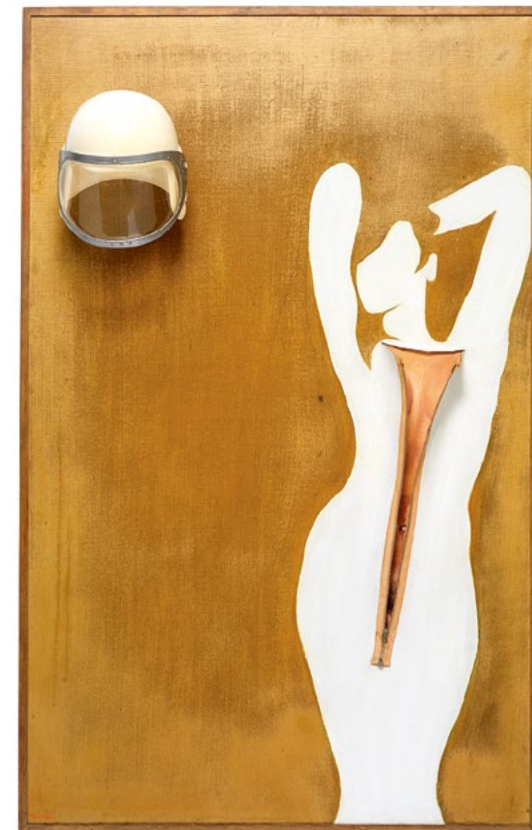
[Fig. 5] Maria Bartuszová, *Folded Figure,* ca. 1965, plaster, 150 × 180 × 240 mm, Tate, London / The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, Košice

appears to be exposed here. More sensual in their purview are the shaped canvases, stitched by hand, in which the soft curvatures of the *Tombstones* extend into a new dimension, assuming a sculptural feel. With their bulging forms, they mirror the shape of one or multiple bodies in the space of an encounter that has just happened or is about to happen. In *Slit (Hasítás)* (1969) ❹, two identical forms are joined together as in a puzzle. They are separate and yet they are one—an apt metaphor for two lovers.

While the body is conspicuously present in Keserü's work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, its existence is never tangible; it is always on the cusp between presence and absence. The works of the Slovakian sculptor Maria Bartuszová ❺ and those of the Czech artist Daniela Vinopalová hover in a similarly hybrid space. Both artists incorporate elements of the human body, but they conceal rather than reveal the body in its wholeness. Veiled nods to living and desiring creatures are present in Bartuszová's and Vinopalová's organic forms, akin to Keserü's suggestive silhouettes. In this game of hide-and-seek, it is not only the body that is disguised, but also abstraction itself, which had to remain out of sight. To avoid friction with local authorities, Prague-based Vinopalová lent to her vessel-like sculptures a functional slant that removed them from the realm of art to inscribe them in that of daily use. Whereas Bartuszová navigated the local politics in Czechoslovakia more seamlessly with her sculptures, which, while firmly rooted in the realm of art, occasionally also doubled as teaching aids for blind and partially sighted children.

Keserü, like Bartuszová, Vinopalová, and many artists from their generation working both east and west of the Iron Curtain, had to contend with a world that was still extremely conservative when it came to women's bodies. As counterintuitive as this may sound, female nudes were still the purview of men alone.

Women had long been one of the most beloved subjects in the history of art—for centuries, male artists both major and minor objectified women in their art. Sensually posed and erotically charged, women were poised to satisfy the male gaze alone. As objects of contemplation, they were stripped of their agency and it was only with the rise of the avant-garde that a countermovement emerged. Though representations of nudes by women, such as Paula Modersohn-Becker's reclining self-portrait of 1906, appeared at the dawn of modernity, it was not until the postwar era that a more concerted effort to reclaim the female body from male claws emerged. Pop Art, largely construed as a male-driven movement, was, in fact, the first site of systematic rebellion against the crude objectification of women. Aided by Pop's natural penchant for the everyday and its appropriation of mechanical and



[Fig. 6] Evelyne Axell, *Valentine,* 1966, oil paint, zip-fastener, and helmet on canvas, 1330 × 830 mm, Archive of Evelyne Axell

inexpressive techniques typically associated with mass culture, artists like Evelyne Axell ❻, Kiki Kogelnik, and Marta Minujìn turned to Pop to interrogate how women were represented in society. The outcome was radical and foreshadowed the sexual liberation invoked by feminism. Despite this, women Pop artists found themselves shoehorned between a still male-dominated artworld and a nascent feminist art that rejected them as allies. In other words, they were too radical for mainstream Pop and not radical enough for feminism. To the latter, it seemed that Pop's close affiliation with mainstream culture even made it impossible for women artists to break away from the exploitation to which the female nude had long been subjected. A point that today has been discounted by the many readings that now acknowledge how instrumental Pop Art in the hands of women was in laying the foundation for a full-fledged feminist awakening.[7]

To frame Keserü as a Pop artist is perhaps a stretch, as Beke's own off-the-cuff remark suggests.[8] However, to dismiss this notion entirely also misses the mark. Keserü's portrayal of female nudes—if indeed we accept this as a valid reading of her abstract forms—are chromatically and thematically attuned to the protofeminist type of Pop Art described above. The feminine trait that Beke invoked in his reading of Keserü's painting is not the quaint candy-floss femininity that has long been associated with women, but rather a pugnacious one. Her canvases take a symbol of death as a starting point for evoking the intensity of life. The heart-shaped tombstone is given a facelift by the industrially manufactured bright colors chosen by Keserü, who turned the wave-like motif into a pulsating body at a time when female desire was still taboo. Her abstraction went hand in hand with the nascent protofeminist Pop, while she was also negotiating the limitations imposed by the Hungarian context. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the action performed on that day in 1969 in Balatonudvari was filled with the joy that only a sliver of freedom can give you—if you are able to catch it.

1. András Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," in *Hatvanas évek (szerk.: Nagy Ildikó),* exh. cat. Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, Budapest (Budapest, 1991), p. 145. The text is reprinted in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Self-Powered Works / Önerejü Képek:s: Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 1, 1959–1980,* eds. Katalin Aknai and Iván Rozgonyi (Budapest: Kisterem Galéria, 2016), p. 140.
2. László Beke, "The Painter and the Tombstones: Ilona Keserü's Art and Style," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* XII, no. 43 (Autumn 1971), p. 199.
3. Ibid., pp. 196–99.
4. Ibid., p. 197.
5. Ibid., p. 198.
6. Ibid.
7. See, for example, Angela Stief, ed., *POWER UP—Female Pop Art,* exh cat. Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, 2010–11 (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2010); and Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minoudaki, eds., *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968* (Philadelphia, New York, and London: University of the Arts/Abbeville Press Publisher, 2010).
8. For more on Ilona Keserü's relationship to Pop Art, with a particular view to the Hungarian context, see Katalin Keserü, *Variations on Pop Art: Chapters in the History of Hungarian Art between 1950 and 1990* (Hungary: Ernst Museum, 1994), and Dávid Fehér, "The 'Pop Problem'—Pop Art and East Central Europe," in *Ludwig Goes Pop + The East Side Story,* ed. Katalin Timár Katalin, exh. cat. Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2015 (Budapest: Nemzeti Kulturális Alap, 2015), pp. 116–29.

Susanne Altmann

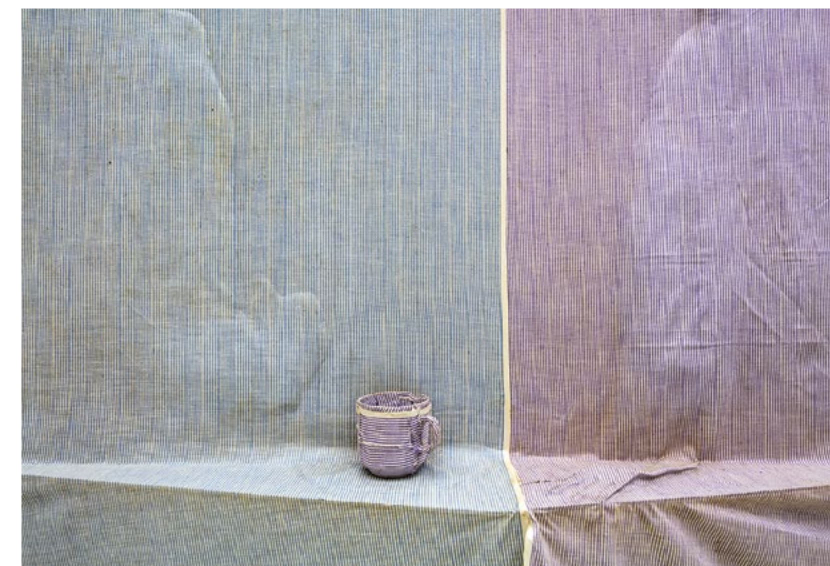
THE CURTAIN IS TEXTILE, TOO: AN ATTEMPT AT MAPPING FIBER WORKS

On This Side of the River Elbe is the title of an exhibition that took place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2024, a one-person show of Ana Lupaș from Romania. The title refers to the geopolitical divide once caused by the Cold War, even though it has been over for some thirty-five years now. An explanatory text on the wall informed visitors that the "... Elbe [is] a river which at the time was the dividing line between Eastern and Western Europe ...," and, furthermore, about the "impossibility of getting to the other side of this border." For Ana Lupaș, who chose these particular phrases for her retrospective in the Netherlands, the erstwhile experience of being excluded from a huge part of the world seems to still reverberate strongly, even after decades.

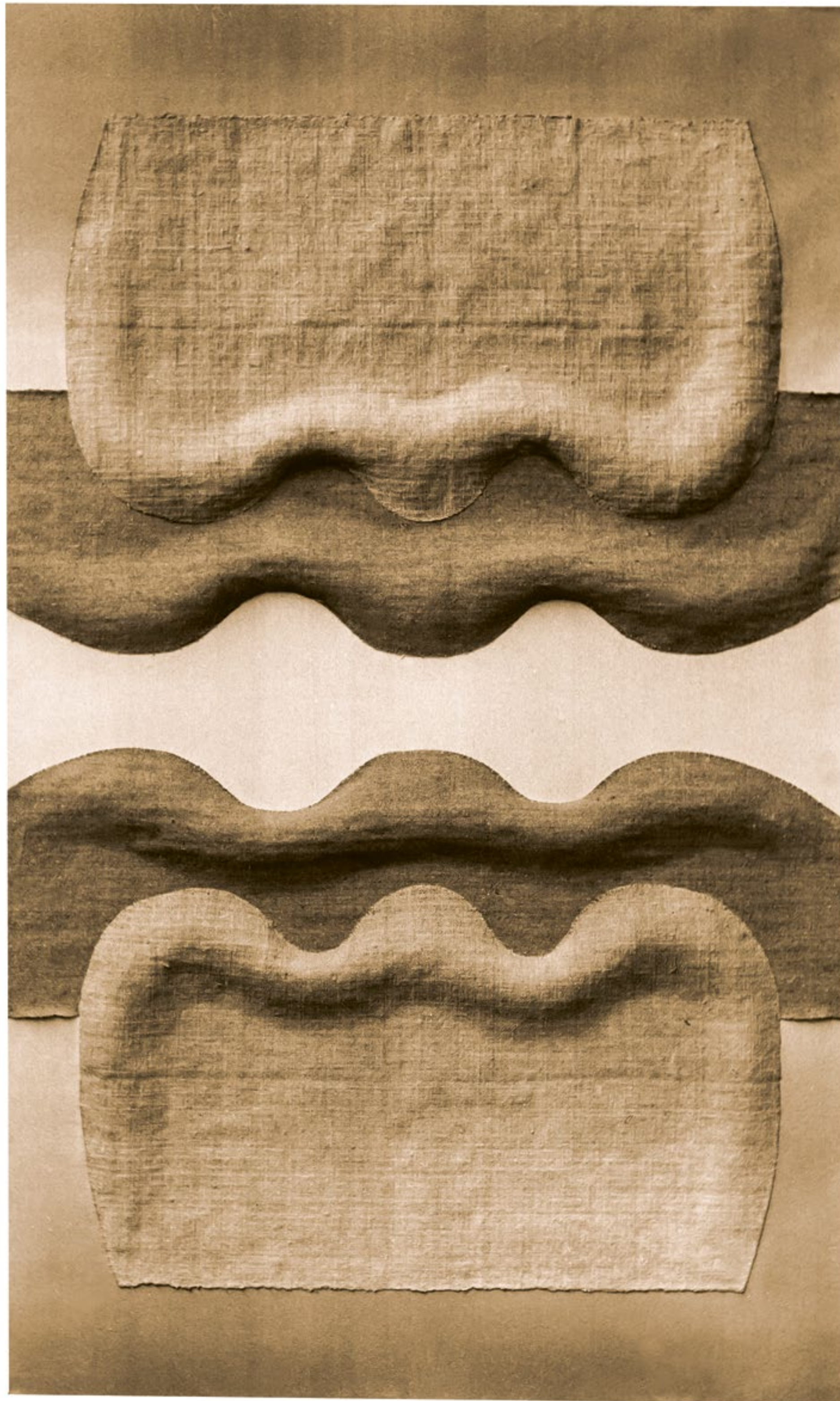
The artwork that lent its name to the retrospective, sixty years after it was created, is an experimental tapestry ❶. Based on a scroll of plastic mesh, *Elbe* (for short) consists of loosely applied brownish, yellowish, and darker threads that gradually form a riverbed and its banks. It is programmatic for several reasons: Not only does it mark the 1960s as the period when mainly female artists from Central and Eastern Europe brought Fiber Art to the attention of the art world.[1] *Elbe* also refers to the radical divide between East and West resulting from the implementation of the Berlin Wall starting in August 1961. The proverbial Iron Curtain between the two political camps, which sounded intimidating enough, was thus physically fortified as a real wall. Yet Ana Lupaș's work seems to disregard this new quality of isolation by interpreting it as a curtain or veil, which still suggested permeability and, therefore, hope. With its loosely attached structure of threads, transparency persists and the actual demarcation lines made of a shimmering material appear temporary.

Another remarkable characteristic of *Elbe* consists of the artist's use of a minimalist structure like the mesh grid, and the "undermining" of its rationality with unregulated interventions of fibers. If we, though critically, would like to apply Western paradigms to this work, then this Romanian artist invented her own version of Post-Minimalism. When describing the highly original and independent trajectory that Fiber Art took under the hands of women artists from the "East," we have to consider that the climate there did not welcome experiments. While today's reception likes to draw clear divisions between Fiber artists, especially those working with new, sculptural manifestations of weaving or knotting, and the conceptual artists of the so-called neo-avant-garde, the author feels reluctant to apply those categories to the context of the 1960s entirely. Positions that we clearly identify as neo-avant-garde today—such as those of Ana Lupaș or Geta Brătescu from Romania—participated, for example, in the famed Lausanne Biennales along with Magdalena Abakanowicz or Jagoda Buić. The atmosphere, which generally encouraged artists "to take up the thread" of textiles as a medium, transcends more recent classifications. Furthermore, these developments in East-Central Europe did not take place in a discursive vacuum. Exemplary responses to modernist and, subsequently, contemporary currents are manifold in Ilona Keserü's turn to reductive forms and her charging them with a boldness and colors reverberating with traits of Pop Art, Op Art, or Hard-Edge painting. Simultaneously,

[Fig. 1] Ana Lupaș, *On This Side of the River Elbe*, 1963, mixed media, threads, textiles, etc. on plastic mesh, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, © Ana Lupaș, photo: Peter Tijhuis



[Fig. 2] Adriena Šimotová, *Near Distance (Blízká vzdálenost)*, 1976–77, detail, courtesy National Gallery Prague, © Adriena Šimotová and Jiří John Foundation, photo: Oliver Killig (detail)



[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Double Form 2 (Kettős forma 2.),* 1972, oil on embossed canvas, 180 × 110 × 4 cm, Collection Piestany Artist's Colony, SK, © Ilona Keserü

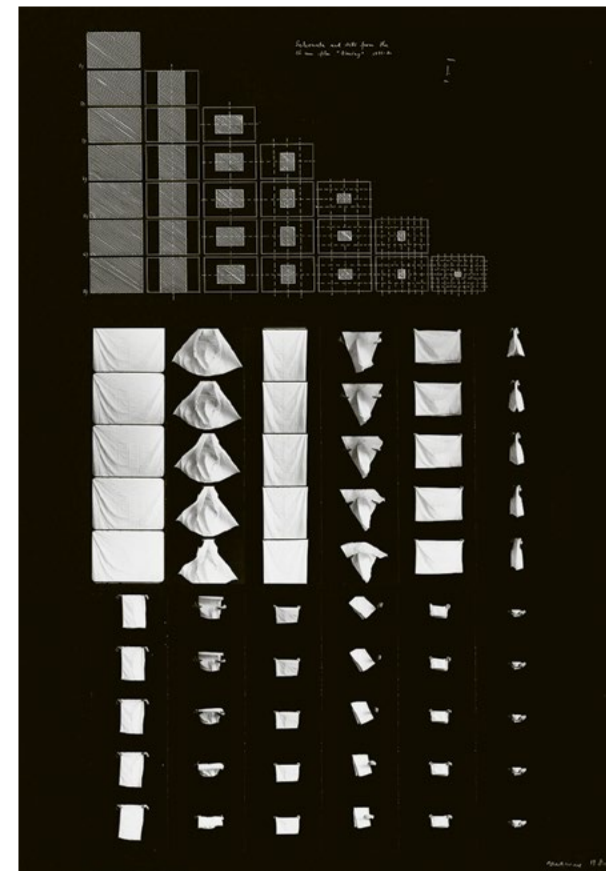
her line-ups of organic forms starting in the late 1960s and carrying through into the 1980s contain references to the human body and its soft malleability, even more so when the artist ventured into three-dimensionality. The shape of the old tombstones that partly prompted these works, since they emerge from the soil organically, bears a semblance to the bodies once interred there. It seems all-too logical that the soft character of these "ornaments" is emphasized by their being (re-)created in fiber. They increasingly suggest an almost breathing physicality—and eventually result in "quotations" of body parts.

This "animative" practice calls to mind a phase in the oeuvre of Czech artist Adriena Šimotová and her seminal object *Near Distance (Blízká vzdálenost)* (1976–77), in which she subtly sculpted two human figures facing one another in a mundane, striped fabric, most probably a bedsheet ❷. Still mourning the death of her husband, Jiří John, the artist evoked intimate feelings of loss and the desire to hold on to the deceased alongside remnants of their everyday life together—such as the imprint of his body on a once-shared bed. The work suggests an anthropological bond between human figure and textile. We also find such connections expressed in Ilona Keserü's embossed, relief-like works such as *Approach 2 (Közelítés 2.)* (fig. see p. 81), *Two Hills (Két domb)* (fig. see p. 50), both from 1969, or the variations of *Double Form (Kettős Forma)* somewhat later on ❸. While, for some viewers, the aspect of geometrical abstraction as introduced in her "regular" paintings such as *Tombstones (Sírkövek)* (1969–70) may stand out, I would like to draw more attention to the anthropomorphic moments in these fiber reliefs, as they refer to both body parts and pillows, to bedding, as it were, soft objects that conjure up contact with human skin. Often, the "nude" tonality of the raw canvas adds to this skin-like impression. Through suggesting touch, or rather "touchability," Keserü's approach has a lot in common with Šimotová's textile phase and, interestingly, the starting point for both artists was the classical canvas with its formal anchors in the pictorial plane and its position on a wall.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś from Poland, by contrast, claimed three-dimensionality as hers from the outset. Her proverbially pink pillows, oscillating between comfort and provocation, started to emerge in the early 1970s. Pinińska-Bereś parodied seduction and cliches of femininity in a playful manner, casually overturning traditional notions of sculpture as male, apodictic, and hard as marble, bronze, or steel. She soon arrived at performative means of expression—in a way, crossing paths with Keserü's again, when she engaged the audience, for example with *Colour-Space (Happening at New Year's Eve) (Szín-Tér [szilveszteri akció])*

(1977) (fig. see p. 167). Apparently, fabric—with all its cultural facets between protection and fashion, liturgy, and diapers—contains an imperative for human activity. The latter also inspired Maria Pinińska-Bereś's work pointing critically to the workload of women, in which she performatively washed and hung laundry in *Laundry* (*Pranie, I & II)* (1980–81).[2] Before that, in 1969, Ana Lupaș captured the participatory spirit of the same activity in the context of rural life and handicraft. Her collective choreography *Humid Installation* in the Transylvanian village of Mârgău in 1970 recontextualized the archaic gesture of drying linen "with new functions and meanings. ... Thus, the ultimate goal of linen washing is achieved, for each individual, through an aesthetic act, enabling these subjects to identify themselves, through this symbol, as members of the community."[3] The formal language of the processual installation—as captured photographically—also resembles a Post-Minimalist structure, a work of serial repetition or Land Art of "familiar" Western origin. Yet the implication of the physical involvement was an intrinsic part of *Humid Installation*. The same applies to *Laying out Nappies at Sudoměř (Kladení plín u Sudoměře)* (1970) by Zorka Ságlová from Czechoslovakia ❹. A graduate in textile design, she translated serial principles of manufacturing textiles into her constructively designed material images from early on. Often using stamps, painting on rough canvas, or embroidering or weaving on a wire mesh, she relied on the creative potential of fabric (making) and remained loyal to the material in her outdoor performance. In it—articulating a provocative political message at the start of the gloomy period

[Fig. 4] Zorka Ságlová, *Laying the Diapers at Sudoměr (Kladení plín u Sudoměře),* 1970, documentation of a performance, courtesy Jan Ságl and Hunt Kastner, Prague, photo: Jan Ságl



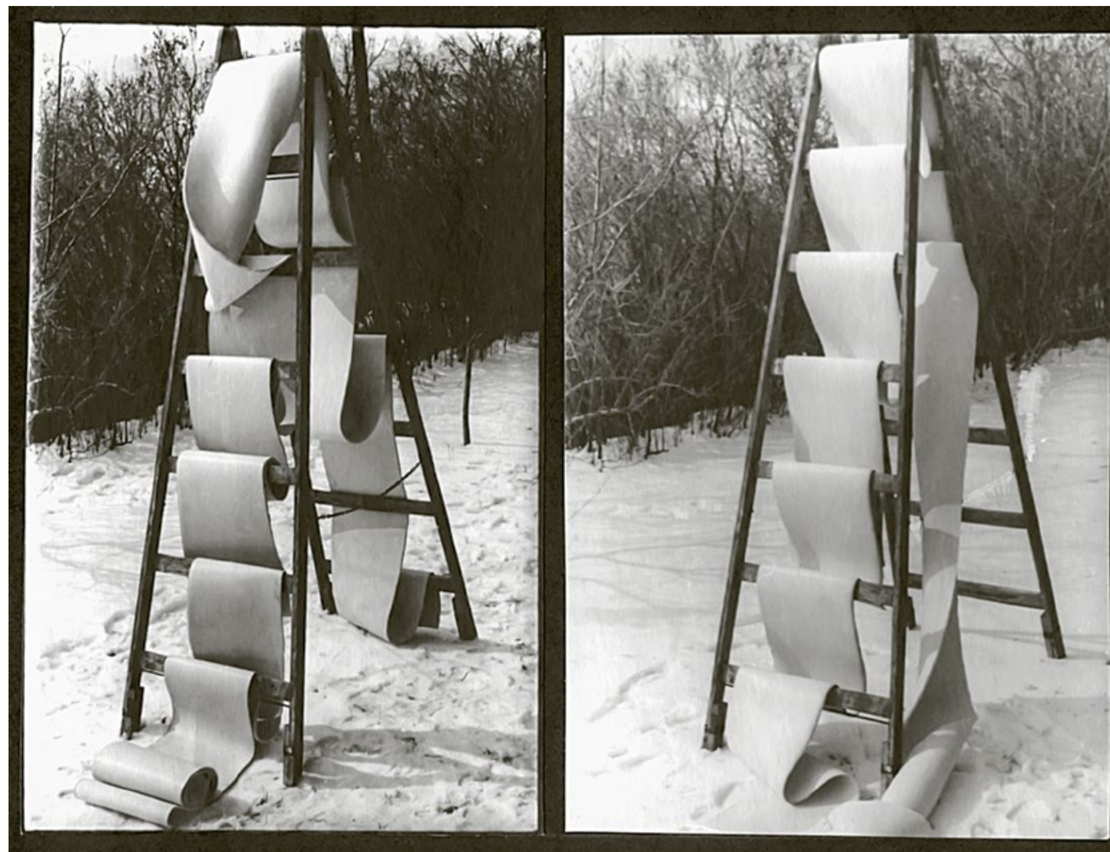
[Fig. 5] Dóra Maurer, *Timing (Időmérés),* 1973–80, black-and-white film, 16 mm, 10 min., transferred to DVD, camera / directors of photography: János Gulyás, Károly Stocker, label: SUMUS, still from digitized 16 mm film, no sound, 10:09 min., courtesy Dóra Maurer and Vintage Galéria, Budapest

of socialist "normalization" in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic[4]—she and her collaborators spread out 700 pieces of white linen (diapers) on a field near the Bohemian village of Sudoměř. It was where the enemy's horses and soldiers were defeated in 1420 as a result of an amazingly bloodless trick, which, just as importantly, included female agency, which originates from the domestic realm, along with the archaic iconography of a simple piece of fabric.

Wojciech Sadley, one of the rare male practitioners of Fiber Art, emphasized the increasing importance and versatility of fabric during this period, stating: "The material itself has no ethics or morality, everything depends on its action."[5] The symbolism that arose when textiles were imbued with such "action" can be observed in certain performative works by the Hungarian artist Dóra Maurer. Conceived in a Constructivist and/or conceptualist manner, she created *Timing (Időmérés)* (1973/1980), captured on 16 mm film, in which she folded a piece of white cloth against a dark backdrop, repeatedly reducing its size in seven steps ❺.

As rationalized and analytical as this process might appear, "the simple act of folding laundry, performed in the household, becomes an instrument for measuring time,"[6] and thus, one might add, alludes to the never-ending efforts involved in household labor.[7] As if part of a pantomimic play, solely Maurer's hands remain visible—not even attempting to sacrifice the presence of her whole body behind the scenes to the reductive concept.

Poland has widely been hailed as the heartland of textile artistic practice.[8] However, a lesser-known material turn to fiber-based work took place in Hungary at nearly the same time. A crucial artist who brought this movement wider recognition was Margit Szilvitzky. Unlike Keserü, Sadley, or Šimotová, for example, all of whom had studied and continued to practice fine arts, Szilvitzky graduated from the Budapest Academy of Applied Arts and conquered the new territory from that perspective. As Kata Balázs reminds us, Szilvitzky was one of the artists responsible for co-founding the Industrial Textile Art Biennial and the, from today's point of view even more seminal, Textile Art Workshop in Velem,[9] under the auspices of the influential art center in Szombathely. Unlike in Poland, where culture officials used the fame of Fiber Art to their own political advantage, the situation in Hungary was more delicate. According to Balázs, the experimental activities of textile artists were well understood by the state as having a controversial potential. But both the peripheral location of Szombathely and Velem and a popular belittling of textile art as a decorative, "ornamental practice" helped the artists stay under the critical radar.[10] As for Margit Szilvitzky's own artistic trajectory, it was predominantly this "ornamental practice" that led to her innovative interpretations of serial patterns in textile sculptures. Methods of repetition and reductivity contributed to her developing geometrical abstractions such as *Adjustment (Igazodás)* (1976), *Spatial Textile Ideas (Tértextil-vázlatok)* (1976) ❻ in open space, or her *Modulation (Moduláció)* (1977), conceived for and installed on the floor. The "human factor," though later invisible in a mimetic sense, remains present in her more geometrical work, not least because her interests were rooted in "the beginnings of human culture ... and stages of human life."[11] Szilvitzky's early wall-hanging *Spring (Tavasz)* (1967–68) not only combines application, embroidery, and sewing, but also references mythology and folk art with a mix of ornaments and figures. Keserü, who does not regard her work as part of the New Textile tendency, represents a different approach, as the relatedness to corporeal forms is evidenced not only by her ongoing portrait drawings and sketches, but also by her examinations of femininity, in both embossed textiles and more classical mediums. Folding and molding, the evocation of touch, allusions to reproductivity or even to cell division accentuate her anthropological approach—nevertheless only occasionally resulting in figurative representations. We find similarly conceptual balancing acts in Maria Pinińska-Bereś's soft sculptures such as *My Enchanting Little Room (Mój uroczy pokoik)* (1975), *Venus of the Sea Froth (Wenus z morskiej piany)* (1977) ❼, and *Door (Drzwi)* (1980), to name just a few of her works. A less celebratory yet more meditative approach was undertaken by Ana Lupaș with her *Identity Shirts, Second Generation* (1970) which are meant to be arranged in a repetitive, minimalist fashion. But, modeled along folded pieces of a garment, they symbolically bear the imprint of the person who once wore and tore them. Two of them are distinguished by a, rather archetypical, semblance of female breast—one as a stitched drawing, the other as a slightly protruding form. By making the process of mending, patching, and repairing visible, Lupaș conjured up a universal notion and elevated these efforts involved in mainly female domestic occupations to a universal level of interpersonal contact.



[Fig.6] Margit Szilvitzky, *Spatial Textile Ideas (Tértextil-vázlatok)*, 1976, wood and polyester, courtesy the artist's heirs and acb Gallery, Budapest, photo: László Lelkes

[Fig. 7] Maria Pinińska-Bereś, *Venus of the Sea Froth (Wenus z morskiej piany)*, 1977, tempera-painted dicta, fabric, 83 × 152 × 56 cm, courtesy National Museum, Wrocław

Ultimately, fiber's tangibility as a material, its potential vulnerability, bears the archetypes of our existence. When Adriena Šimotová turned toward this new materiality, she felt she "identified with what I was doing," and "went down the path of existentialism."[12]

Or, to address the anthropological dimension of this phenomenon in the words of Astrid Schmetterling: "Each touch strengthens the self, but it also blurs the borders between self and other, between inside and outside. Fabrics, with their ability to envelop us, to cover us, to clothe us, strongly appeal to our senses. Even if we are not permitted to handle them in an exhibition, they suggest and make us conscious of our body's presence."[13]

1. Due the limitations that naturally come with a brief survey like this one, it was necessary to omit references to the works of Zsuzsa Szenes, Ewa Kuryluk, Geta Brătescu, and Christa Jeitner, even though they share specific "entanglements" with the artists mentioned here.
2. See Jerzy Hanusek, ed., *Maria Pinińska-Bereś. Działania efemeryczne 1967–1996* (Warsaw, 2017). In her essay "The Pink Flag" in this volume, Agata Jakubowska writes on pp. 31–42, esp. p. 40: "With *Laundry,* Pinińska-Bereś was joining the feminist discourse in art, remaining loyal to the art of women ..., but distancing herself from its instrumentalization in feminist politics." Revealingly, the pink letters in the respective pieces of laundry added up to spell the word "Feminizm."
3. Quoted after Ana Lupaș's portfolio at P420 Art Gallery, Bologna: Ana Lupas_artist_portfolio_eng.pdf, pp. 8ff. See also my essay "Disentangling: Women artists in the Eastern Bloc reinvent textile and fibre art," in *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm / Metamorphism*, ed. Marta Kowalewska (Łódź, 2018), pp. 228–53, esp. pp. 243–45.
4. The site and the activity referred to a crucial moment in the Bohemian independence movement, when a famous battle between the Hussites and the Catholic emperor took place in 1420, with the reformists as the victors, because—as legend has it—the peasant women of Sudoměř were in the process of laying out all their linen on the battlefield, whereupon the enemy's, horses got tangled up in it and fled.
5. Quoted after Marta Kowalewska, "Historia Rewolucji," in *Splendor Tkaniny*, ed. Michał Jachuła, exh. cat. Zachęta-Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, (Warsaw, 2013), pp. 71–89, esp. p. 80.
6. Katarina Lozo, "Dóra Maurer," in *The Medea Insurrection: Radical Women Artists Behind the Iron Curtain*, ed. Susanne Altmann and Katarina Lozo, exh. cat. Kunsthalle in Lipsiusbau, Dresden, et al. (Cologne: Walther König, 2019), p. 118. The *Timing* project resulted in the 1980 photo sequences *Timing Analyses*.
7. Despite Maurer not being a "member" of the "Hungarian 'New Textile' Movement" (see Balázs, "Little Material, Lot of Thought"), this reference to textiles and gender-specific labor is not an over-interpretation of her work, even if it is generally perceived as being mainly nonnarrative. This is due to the fact that one her preceding works, *What Can One Do with a Paving Stone* of 1971, also shows clear connotations of female gestures of care and nurturing—as a result of her holding and wrapping the paving stone like a baby. Also evident are correspondences with Margit Szilvitzky's series of repetitively "unwinding" ornaments.
8. See Kowalewska, "Historia Rewolucji," in *Splendor Tkaniny*, p. 80.
9. For the activities of the Velem workshop, see Mária Mihály, ed., *Velemi Textilmüveszeti Alkotomühely / Velem Workshop for Creation 1975–1976* (Szombathely, 1977).
10. See Kata Balázs, "Little Material, Lot of Thought: Margit Szilvitzky's Early Works in the Context of the Hungarian 'New Textile' Movement," in *Miejsce. Studia nad sztuką i architecturą polską XX i XXI wieku* 07 (2021), pp. 197–222, esp. pp. 198–206.
11. Eva Körner, "Margit Szilvitzky," in *Németh, Szenes, Szilvitzky* (Szombathely, 1976), pp. 14–21, esp. p. 17.
12. Karel Hvížďala, "Dotyky spirituálna Adrieny Šimotové," idnes.cz, 2003, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/revue/spolecnost/dotyky-spiritualna-adrieny-simotove.A030303_204624_lidicky_pol (accessed in September 2024).
13. Astrid Schmetterling, "The Whispering of Fabric," in *Ulrike Grossarth. Bławatne z Lublina/ Stoffe aus Lublin / Fabrics from Lublin,* ed. Kunsthaus Dresden, Kunstfonds Sachsen, and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Leipzig, 2011), p. 89.

Judit Radák

ILONA KESERÜ AND THE THEATER

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ilona Keserü created stage designs in addition to paintings. This was also when she produced the first of her iconic embossed canvases, stepping for the first time outside the classical pictorial plane into the spatial dimension. There are crossovers between the two spheres of activity not only in terms of spatial experimentation but also in her choice of material. In what follows, I explore the connections between Keserü's autonomous and applied art based on concrete examples.

With the introduction of Soviet-style cultural policy in Hungary in 1949, Socialist Realism became the mandatory style. The situation changed somewhat following Stalin's death, in 1953, and the Revolution of 1956, when János Kádár's policy of consolidation began easing pressure on artists. Although the socialist ideology remained in place, a scattering of neo-avant-garde artists were able to show their work as of the mid-1960s. Among them was Ilona Keserü, whose gestural paintings and various appliquéd works became known to a limited audience. The loosening up of cultural policy that took place in the fine arts could also be observed in the world of theater. In the 1960s and 1970s, neo-avant-garde artists and architects—in other words, "nonprofessional" stage designers—were given a role in scenography. There were two reasons for this: On the one hand, collaboration with nonprofessional designers was appealing to the more progressive directors, who were keen to break away from the kind of naturalist scenery that had been dominant until the turn of the century and subsequently required by the official ideology starting in the late 1940s. The other reason is connected to the institutional situation. Training in stage design was unavailable in Hungary between 1964 and 1978, thus from the late 1960s, so apart from professional designers who had graduated prior to 1964—who strove for fidelity to historical styles, thought in terms of readymade templates, and were approved by the socialist system—stage design attracted growing numbers of fine artists, who prioritized the function of the theatrical space over naturalist sets and scenery. Ilona Keserü belonged to this first "nonprofessional" generation. What is interesting about her stage designs is not only that they are functional in terms of performance, but also that they share the same characteristic features as her autonomous works of art. Impressed by Ilona Keserü's gift for shaping space, and the material sensitivity displayed in her 1964 painting *Silvery Picture (Town) (Ezüstös kép [város])* (fig. see p. 46), the director Tamás Major (1910–1986) invited the artist to work with him in 1967. With respect to the substantial shift in dimension between painting and stage design, it is also telling that Keserü studied fresco (mural) painting at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts.

Keserü designed twenty-one theater sets between 1967 and 1976.[1] In fact, she was frequently involved in set construction, too. This is a remarkable number, considering that she was also actively working as a fine artist and book illustrator at the same time. Set design is a meeting point for several branches of the arts, encompassing theater, applied art, and fine art. Set and costume design are applied fine art, and the set designer is at home in both the theater and the fine arts. By referring to her sets as performance spaces, Keserü pointed to the essence of her work as a designer: she thought in terms of a functional space in which—with no changes of scenery—the setting for the action was created merely by changing individual elements. There is an ongoing interplay between Ilona Keserü's work as set designer and fine artist in terms of both her choice of material and her exploration of the recurring questions of space and form.

The finished sets often differed significantly from the original designs.[2] This is not only entirely natural; it is, in fact, a *sine qua non* of theater work. According to Peter Brook—who had a significant influence on Keserü—many designers tend to feel that their own creative work is only complete once they have delivered their set or costume designs.[3] He points out that this applies in particular to good painters working in the theater, since, for them, a finished design is complete and unchangeable. Ilona Keserü adopted a different working practice. Her ideas took shape gradually. After reading a work, Keserü discussed it with the director, producer, and dramaturge, and even attended rehearsals. Her work progressed alongside that of the director: when designing costumes, she took note of the actors' characters, movements, and "physical defects," in the belief that function is more important than the ideal of conjuring up faithfulness to a particular historical period. Her "performance spaces" changed continuously over the course of rehearsals: the first stage of the work was familiarizing herself with the director's concepts and with the peculiarities and limitations of the specific theater and stage, and only then did she begin designing. Her designs were constantly in flux: during rehearsals, she was mindful of the fourth dimension, time, and the need to adapt to events as they unfolded during the performance. As Ilona Keserü's art is defined by space, material, form, and color, I will address the connections between her autonomous art and her work as a set designer by exploring each of these aspects in turn.

SPACE

There is a noticeable change in the role of spatiality in Ilona Keserü's work. In parallel with her appliquéd paintings, Keserü also worked on embossed canvases, and eventually industrial canvas reliefs, at the turn from the 1960s to the 1970s.

In *Forma (Form)*, a work produced in 1969, the central motif emerges from the pictorial plane. The portrait-format work features an embossed wave motif, painted in pink, starting from the central axis. With reference to the technique and spatial characteristics, Keserü categorized works of this type as embossed canvases. As a fine artist, she was pushing the boundaries of the two-dimensional pictorial space, an endeavor that then culminated in her performance spaces.

The reduced space of what Peter Brook calls "rough" theater in his 1968 book had an enormous impact on Ilona Keserü's simple, puritan performance spaces, which are devoid of superfluous decorative elements.[4] She eliminated naturalist, painted scenery, and instead adjusted the elements of the set to the stage space and the movements of the actors. According to Brook, in the luxury of a high-class theater, each set has a single function, while in "rough" theater the arsenal is limitless, and the meaning of the set changes in different situations. This is consistent with Ilona Keserü's approach to design: a single space had to serve as the set for an entire play, and it was within this space that she had to generate the transformations demanded by the plot of the work being performed.

It is the functional variability of the elements in the set that defines Keserü's design for the 1970 production of *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogey*.[5]

The play is a depiction of Portuguese (Lusitanian) imperialism in Angola. The bogey, or monster, takes the side of the colonizers, who, in the name of civilization, impose their doctrines on the oppressed "for their own good." The performance space was extremely narrow, and there was no fly loft ❶. One feature of the set were the painted ropes that hung down into the empty space. Their meaning changed over the course of the performance: sometimes they represented the jungle, and at other times a coffee plantation. By exploiting the low interior space of the stage, the cascading ropes also conveyed the airstrike on the rebellious natives. The actors really did fall beneath the weight of the ropes crashing down from above. The second definitive element was the bogey: The café parasol that gave it its internal structure meant that the figure could be inflated and collapsed, and was enormous even when closed. The monster was able to move around, operated by actors inside it. The bogey was present

[Fig. 1] The performance space for Peter Weiss, *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogey*, directed by Tamás Major, Katona József Chamber Theatre of the National Theatre, Budapest, 1970, courtesy Magyar Távirat Iroda, photo: Éva Keleti

throughout the performance: When playing an active role, it was brought to the center of the stage in its open state; otherwise, it was visible in the background in its closed state, as a permanent element of oppression.

USE OF MATERIAL

Keserü's choice of material is extremely significant in both her fine art and her stage designs. For her 1969 work *Small Stitched (Kis varrott)*, she selected textiles with different textures. The most coarsely woven fabric is positioned in the background, with two organic gravestone shapes cut from finer material. She then overlaid this layer with fabric that is coarser in weave in the upper motif than in the lower one. In the upper motif, she then sewed on another shape cut from finer material as the top layer; while in the lower motif, this uppermost layer is a tangle of string. Rather than pasting the shapes on, she stitched them to the planar surface, with the threads thus clearly demarcating the outlines of the motifs. While in *Small Stitched* she varied the density of the linen weave, in the case of *Pasted Forms (Tapasztott formák)* (fig. see p. 22),

a work produced between 1971 and 1973 at the artists' colony in Villány (1000 × 685 × 53 cm), she experimented with combining stones of different sizes. In this work, she transferred the motifs from her embossed canvases to real space, with her materials being marble, limestone, and mortar. The three parallel wavy lines are identical in terms of material, size, and shape, although the different-sized stones create different surfaces. Ilona Keserü's uniquely sensitive ability to achieve different plastic effects through variations of the same material is also characteristic of nearly all of her appliquéd works.

In the case of the Lusitanian bogey, too, she produced a variety of plastic effects by exploiting the different qualities of her material. Although the bogey is on the side of the colonizers, the figure was made from the same coarsely woven hessian and sackcloth as the costumes worn by the oppressed. Along with the coffee sacks, the shape of the bogey's left eye was an allusion to the forced labor on coffee plantations. The bogey's hessian skin was not neatly finished but instead hung loosely, with the shapes that defined its face, created from a combination of stuffed canvas and colored felt, attached to it. The two thick, sausage-shaped lips were made from dark pink felt and were even able to be opened and closed. The lips provided access to the bogey's insides, and in the pivotal scene in the play—the insurrection—parts of the victims' bodies hung from them. The eyes stitched onto stuffed cushions and the downward-pointing arrow sewn onto the bogey's nose were also colored. The bogey had a metal cauldron in place of its right ear, with the visual impact enhanced by dangling tin funnels.[6]

With respect to Keserü's choice of material, another fascinating example is her stage design for the 1972 production of *The Good Person of Szechwan*.[7] The play involves frequent changes of location, and the performance space had to be designed with this in mind: the stage was therefore dominated by a wide, two-story, massive wooden structure made up of elements that could be rolled out to function as different locations. The extant designs clearly show the ragged cloth that formed the backdrop ❷. As in the works presented above, the crumpled lengths of coarsely and finely woven hessian made a powerful impact here, too. Keserü combined a patchwork of differently textured fabrics with transparent materials that hung from the rigging. Beneath these rippling fabrics, the wire rods spanning the structure created the illusion of rain as a result of the specially directed lighting.

[Fig. 2] Stage design for Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan,* directed by Tamás Major, National Theatre, Budapest, 1972, paper, watercolor, and pen, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

[Fig. 3] The performance space for William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night,* directed by István Iglódi, Teatrum, Szentendre, 1973, photo (slide): Zsolt Szabóky

FORM

In the same way that Keserü uses materials with different textures, she employs particular recurring forms—albeit from different materials and in different sizes. A fascinating illustration of this is the motif of the tangle, which is a defining element in both Keserü's fine art and stage design work. In the abovementioned *Form*, tangled strings hang from the embossed surface, while the handstitched tangles hanging from around the eyes and mouth of the Lusitanian bogey determined the monster's outward appearance to a significant extent.

Another example from the stage is the 1973 production of *Twelfth Night* in Szentendre.[8] In this case, there were countless new considerations to be borne in mind, as the performance space had to be created not on a theater stage but on the main square in Szentendre ❸. The use of scenery—a silvery table and a tangled crocheted net—that could be moved around the performance space to fulfill various functions gave rise to the impression of changes in location. The enormous piece of hand-painted, crocheted plastic netting was constantly in motion during the performance. By means of the integrated metal poles, it could be reshaped into extremely diverse forms, evoking both buildings—the palace of the duke and the countess, or the streets of Illyria—and nature—the palace gardens.

[Fig. 4] Costume design, 1973, paper, watercolor, and felt-tip pen, for William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, directed by István Iglódi, Teatrum, Szentendre, 1973, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

COLOR

As a set designer, Ilona Keserü was conscious of the fact that the audience is looking at the scenery at all times, making it important for her to avoid strident colors that were distracting or tiring for the eyes. Bright colors were reserved for the costumes: the actors in the different scenes appeared as living statues, generally dressed in bright colors. In the Szentendre production, a spatial unity was created by the actors' colorful costumes and the striped fabrics hanging from the surrounding windows in the performance space. In the early 1970s, Keserü began the color research that would define her oeuvre. The 1972 industrial canvas relief *Waves (Hullámzás)* features colored fields similar to those found in the clown's costume in the Szentendre production ❹. The playfulness inherent in the clown's role is enhanced by the fact that the colorful patchwork lining inside his apparently black cloak could be glimpsed only when the actor moved.

The two defining features of Keserü's theater work are distilled in this one character: The audience was perplexed by an apparent contradiction—deviating from clown iconography, the character was dressed in black rather than bright colors; in other words, the connections between Ilona Keserü's two spheres of activity explored in this essay are clearly illustrated in the figure of the clown. It was the clown's spinning motion that revealed the space-dominating intensity of color emblematic of Keserü's work as a fine artist.

1. For the first two productions, the costume designer was Nelly Vágó (1937–2006).
2. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ilona Keserü for the many interviews I have conducted with her in connection with this topic, first in 2003, for my university dissertation—see Judit Radák, *Ilona Keserü's Performance Space and Costume Designs,* Ph.D. diss. (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2003)—and the most recent one, in 2023, as a continuation of my research. Besides my conversations with Ilona Keserü, my research is based on extant designs, photographs, essays, theater reviews, and video recordings. In the 1960s and 1970s, theater journals did not address the question of stage design: Essays tend to contain information about the actors' performances, while the set is mentioned only in passing. Extant photographs of productions only very rarely show the entire stage: available in the archives of the National Museum and Institute of Theatre are, at most, close-ups of actors.
3. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), p. 101.
4. Ibid., pp. 66ff. When I interviewed Ilona Keserü, she mentioned Peter Brook's influence on her work on several occasions.
5. Peter Weiss, *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* (Katona József Chamber Theater of the National Theater, Budapest, 1970, directed by Tamás Major). A copy of the bogey was shown at the 1971 Quadrennial in Prague.
6. According to Keserü's recollections, the Hungarian-born Oscar-winning set designer Alexander Trauner (1906–1993) was present at one of the rehearsals, and the funnels were his suggestion. Besides functioning as loudspeakers, they had a visual significance.
7. Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan* (National Theater, Budapest, 1972, directed by Tamás Major).
8. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (Teatrum, Szentendre, 1973, directed by István Iglódi).

David Crowley

SOUND-COLOUR-SPACE

In 1981, Keserü, working in partnership with her husband, the composer László Vidovszky—created one of her most ambitious works to date, an installation that they named *Sound-Colour-Space* (*Hang-szín-tér*). In preparation for it, she painted dozens of acoustic pipes in precise monochrome colors in her studio in Szentendre. Each was tuned to a different pitch within the range of a single octave. These slim PVC tubes were designed to be suspended from the ceiling by invisible threads in a hexagonal formation ❶. The one hundred and twenty-seven pipes of three meters in length were then organized according to a classical color wheel, with the strongest hues at the edges of the hexagon, and white—the brightest point and the highest-pitched note—at its center. When he experienced *Sound-Colour-Space*, critic and curator László Beke saw a line of ideas about chromatics and tonality, which had been linked by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe at the beginning of the nineteenth century and has fascinated artists and composers ever since.[1]

Sound-Colour-Space was first installed in the grand cupola of the Hungarian National Gallery (Magyar Nemzeti Galéria) in Budapest in 1981; and then again, in June 1982, at the Budapest Kunsthalle (Műcsarnok) ❷. There, the pipes were hung eighty centimeters apart and almost floor to ceiling, with the vertices forming a tight chromatic grille. Visitors were invited to take their own path through the installation while the pipes sounded "automatically" in long whistling pulses (a mechanism created by kinetic artist István Haraszty). When walking along the perimeter, audiences experienced the mix of primary colors shift on the color spectrum as well as the lowest notes; or when following the diagonal lines intersecting the center, they felt the intensities of color and sound rise and fall. What experiencing the work was like is difficult to capture today. But it was reported on very widely, and its reviewers shared their feelings willingly and frankly, often coming to very different conclusions. For Beke, a champion of neo-avant-garde art, *Sound-Colour-Space* was "all meticulously calculated yet evoked strong sensory and emotional responses in terms of both color and sound"[2]; András Bán was far less enthusiastic in his review published in the *Magyar Nemzet* newspaper: "All this is understandable ... but not enjoyable: the sound solution of the current presentation does not resemble the music of the spheres, it is not an immaterial sound, not a delicate transition of sounds ... The most fitting term for the space itself is—disorder."[3]

In the publication accompanying the Budapest Kunsthalle installation, Keserü and Vidovszky characterized *Sound-Colour-Space* as an experiment that combined their distinct and separate preoccupations at the time:

[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *Sound-Colour-Space (floor plan) (Hang-szín-tér) (alaprajz)*, 1981, oil on canvas, hexagonal, 150 × 150 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

> The origin of this collaboration can be traced back to two activities that we previously carried out independently. One is the detailed and accurate development of the transitions of the colors of the spectrum, and the other is the division of sound into more detailed categories, unlike traditional patterns of perception. It seems that these two types of research share some sort of—perhaps not precisely definable—kinship, as we both had the idea to somehow connect them.[4]

Vidovszky, a composer with a keen interest in the ideas of John Cage, had been one of the founders of the New Music Studio (Új Zenei Stúdió) in Budapest at the start of the 1970s (of which more below). He had a declared interest in microtones, and thus in extending the customary system of intervals found in Western music, the twelve-tone scale.[5] Likewise, Keserü described her art

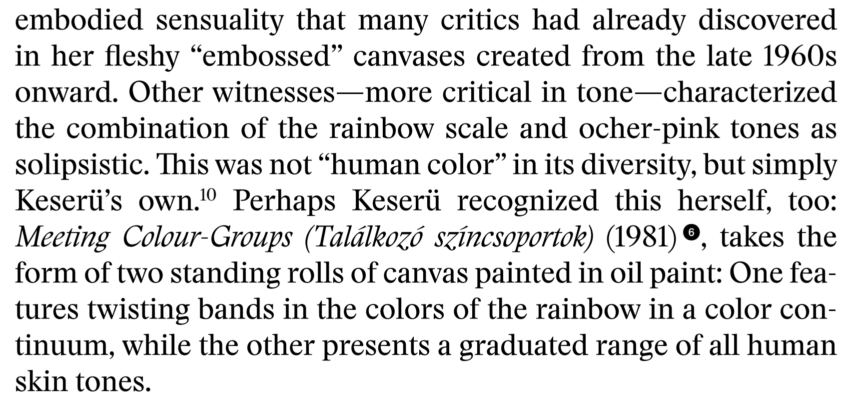
[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Sound-Colour-Space (co-work with László Vidovszky) (Hang-szín-tér [Vidovszky Lászlóval közös mű])*, 1981, 132 tuned PVC tubes, painted in oil, 3 m each, diameter of suspension: 10 m, © Ilona Keserü and László Vidovszky, photo: Gábor Horváth

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Waves (Hullámzás)*, 1972, oil on embossed canvas, 180 × 110 × 6 cm, Budapest History Museum, Kiscelli Museum—Municipal Gallery, Budapest

at the time as being an investigation of the fine gradients of color: "Since 1973, the topic of my images has been the breakdown of color (*színbontás*). My color theory paintings are didactic ones. I work with the colors of the rainbow and with the colors of skin."[6] Early trials include *Space Taking Shape (Alakuló tér)* (1972) (fig. see p. 53), in which she painted hexagonal patches of "pure" colors on the rolling surface of a corrugated canvas. As if in a puzzle, she determined the color of each patch in steps, each patch one shift away from its neighbor. Since her color paths started from a number of points, her instinctive harmonic system eventually produced clashes. By placing her hand over these discords, she saw that skin tones could "mediate" between jarring colors.

This "discovery" guided many of her color explorations in the years that followed ❸. They included her designs for theater—a key occupation for her at the time. She designed, for instance, the costumes and scenography of the 25 Színház (Twenty-fifth Theatre's) production of *M-A-D-Á-C-H*, an adaptation of Imre Madách's monumental play, *The Tragedy of Man* (1861), in the cramped theater space in the headquarters of the Union of Journalists in Budapest in 1974. The youthful company had been established four years earlier, declaring an interest in the revolutionary tradition of what Brecht called "dialectical theater." In *M-A-D-Á-C-H*, performers in Keserü's monochrome "costumes"—"from the actors' hair to the soles of their feet [in] the colors of the rainbow"—acted on a skin-colored carpet in the first scene ❹. Reviewers noted that the stiff costumes functioned as a constriction, inhibiting the natural movement of the characters, and detected in this an echo of the historical avant-garde interest in strangeness.[7] The props included large, probably aluminum, mirror-like panels, which the actors used to expand and constrict the space on the stage.[8] Keserü welcomed the tight setting: "The small hall of 25 Színház brings viewers and actors closer. This circumstance is enhanced by the exchange of the auditorium and the stage, so that the spectator passes through the stage upon entering."[9]

Audience and performers were drawn even closer on New Year's Eve 1977, when Keserü mounted a festive happening at the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest. She stitched a massive cloth "sheet"—almost twenty meters in length—from panels in a pinkish hue and the colors of the rainbow. It was stretched on a circular frame to create a temporary *Colour-Space (Szín–Tér)*. Participants were encouraged to assemble this structure, and photographs documenting the event show them playfully pulling the fabric into place ❺. All the while, Vidovszky's music provided an audio background. The event offered a ludic expression of the



embodied sensuality that many critics had already discovered in her fleshy "embossed" canvases created from the late 1960s onward. Other witnesses—more critical in tone—characterized the combination of the rainbow scale and ocher-pink tones as solipsistic. This was not "human color" in its diversity, but simply Keserü's own.[10] Perhaps Keserü recognized this herself, too: *Meeting Colour-Groups (Találkozó színcsoportok)* (1981) ❻, takes the form of two standing rolls of canvas painted in oil paint: One features twisting bands in the colors of the rainbow in a color continuum, while the other presents a graduated range of all human skin tones.

[Fig. 4] Tamás Jordán, László Pelsőczy, and István Wohlmuth in 25 Színház (Twenty-fifth Theatre's) production of *M-A-D-Á-C-H'*—in András Pályi's article, "Madáchról gondolkozunk", *Szinház* 9 (1974) courtesy Péter Korniss, photo: László Iklády

[Fig. 5] Ilona Keserü, *Colour-Space (Happening at New Year's Eve) (Szín–Tér [szilveszteri akció])*, 1977, hanging of chemically dyed linen, 300 × 1900 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: János Gulyás

Keserü and Vidovszky were by no means alone at the time in establishing close relations between art and music. A lively culture of exchange operated in what art historians call the "Second Public Sphere" in socialist Hungary, a dynamic zone that formed on the edges of the official culture.[11] Sometimes borrowing the spaces and resources of clubs, galleries, and other public institutions, temporary forms of expression—like *Colour-Space*—could be mounted without attracting official displeasure. Artists, theater workers, musicians, and filmmakers formed close-knit communities, sharing an appetite for "alternative" forms of expression uncontaminated by official ideology or the easy diet of popular culture in Kádár's Hungary. The New Music Studio—founded by Vidovszky, Zoltán Jeney, László Sáry, and others in 1970—was one such "center" on this periphery.[12] Initiated under the patronage of the Communist Youth Organization (Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség), the studio was a network of composers and performers who were drawn to experimentation. They treated the conventions of classical music as dogma to be questioned.

[Fig. 6] Ilona Keserü, *Meeting Colour-Groups (Találkozó színcsoportok)*, 1981, oil, canvas, pressed paper roll, and wood, 80 × 45 × 23 cm (each), Collection of Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs

The use of chance or the imposing of "unmusical" constraints could, for instance, act as triggers for surprise and innovation. Jeney, for instance, turned to different kinds of language systems found in games, texts, meteorological data, and even telex messages to provide nonmusical materials that he could code as musical compositions. *Impho 102/6* (1978), a minimalist piece played on shimmering antique cymbals, is, for instance, derived from the telex address of a Tokyo hotel. New Music Studio composers were also drawn to intermediality, rejecting the orderly categories separating the arts. Both Vidovszky and Jeney were commissioned—alongside visual artists including Miklós Erdély, Dóra Maurer, and others—by the multimedia K/3 studio of Gábor Bódy to make short experimental films exploring film language in the early 1970s.[13] Vidovszky also took keen interest in the staging of his compositions. For instance, his 1972 composition

Autoconcert (Autokoncert) was, in effect, a highly theatrical installation combining audio and visual elements: a number of musical instruments—cymbals, bamboo chimes, an accordion, and a music box—would be suspended on the stage, like a premonition of the colored pipes in *Sound-Colour-Space*. As if "played" by invisible performers, Vidovszky required that they all should sound before crashing noisily to the floor one by one. Quite exactly when they would succumb was not evident, adding much to the tension of the performance. The last instrument to be heard on the stage was a music box playing "The Blue Danube," until it wound down to silence.

The openness of such works was important, too. Indeed, New Music Studio composers often deployed techniques—unorthodox "graphic scores" and the use of "prepared" instruments—to ensure that each performance was unique. Katalin Keserü, the critic and curator of an exhibition of graphic scores by the Studio's composers in Budapest in 1978, wrote: "The openness of the works [is] often accompanied by the possibility of completely free performance. This is the world of infinite variations. It stems from the realization that interpretations are always individual; there is no single correct approach or performance method, thus allowing the work to constantly enrich itself ... Like contemporary visual art trends that rely on viewer participation, the work is completed by the viewer/performer."[14] Vidovszky's work of the 1970s was open and polysemic, but it was not indeterminate. *Autoconcert* no doubt contained many allusions—to works by Cage, and surely to those of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco as well. But perhaps it was the suggestion of invisible and irrational rules that impressed itself most firmly on audiences in Hungary.

That Keserü and Vidovszky characterized *Sound-Colour-Space* as an experiment is perhaps not surprising: The term had often been used in Eastern Europe under communist rule by modernist artists who wished to avoid conflict with the authorities or to secure access to resources. For instance, it allowed abstraction to be characterized as visual research into perception or as a branch of design rather than as "bourgeois aesthetics." Similarly, participatory forms of conceptual art in the 1970s could be offered as pedagogical experiments with social value.[15] While such strategies were not necessarily insincere, they were expedient. By 1981–82, when *Sound-Colour-Space* was installed, the ideological winds blowing in Hungary were relatively calm. Nevertheless, experimentalism was literally the curatorial proposition behind the display in Kunsthalle. It was one of a number of works that were installed in four rooms of the gallery that June

to coincide with the conference *Colour Dynamics 82* being held in the Hungarian capital.[16] Offered as a new science, color dynamics sought to understand the positive and negative effects of color in the environment on human perception and behavior. Color research—presented at the conference by besuited technocrats from both sides of the Cold War divide—offered itself to Hungarian planners and architects as a service intended to improve the built environment and human wellbeing, and, as such, a useful tool in socialist urbanism. Both the gray monotony of panel construction housing and the noisy clamor of commercialism could be combated with carefully controlled color. What was required was the discipline of color dynamics: "With our exhibition," said Antal Nemcsics of the Construction Science Association (Építőipari Tudományos Egyesület), "we want to draw attention to this: if we ruin the environment's color scheme now, we will have to bear the consequences for a long time. A painter can easily change the color on a canvas, but for a façade or interior of a building, this is an expensive affair."[17] In the Budapest Kunsthalle, Nemcsics presented a massive three-dimensional model of the Coloroid system of color harmonics that he had developed at the Technical University over two decades: dozens of colored spheres of varying shades of intensity along coordinates of luminosity, hue, and saturation. Here was a tool for designing color-coordinated cities.

Although *Sound-Colour-Space* was exhibited in the close company of these instruments of design, it is clear that Keserü and Vidovszky were far less interested in matters of practical application than their colleagues in the Construction Science Association. Their understanding of what experimental art might be was much closer to that of Cage, who had written in 1955, "the word 'experimental' is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown. What has been determined?"[18] Viewed in these terms, *Sound-Colour-Space* might well be understood as an experiment in perception. It was important to both artists that viewers could determine their own engagement with the installation. Each experience would be different and dependent on decisions made by a particular viewer: the time spent, the route taken, and the associations brought to the work. This reflected both the openness of the New Music Studio ethos and Keserü's interest in embodiment. And, importantly, the effects appear to have been discordant. Rather than producing a restorative synthesis of color and music, the piece seemed—at least in the minds of its viewers—to point to their breakdown. We know this from the highly descriptive reviews of the installation. Zoltán Nagy wrote: "[S]ound effects cannot be compared to the experiences brought about by colors ... Firstly, our ears can hardly distinguish between the 127 different pitches within an octave. Secondly, they lack the opportunity to do so, given that many pipes sound simultaneously, blending the diverse sounds into a single common hum."[19] Critics were looking for clarity and comprehension in *Sound-Colour-Space*, even for a kind of audiovisual epiphany in which they might lose themselves in "a forest of colors" (*színerdő*).[20] This, it failed to deliver. But perhaps it never set out to do so. Instead, the piece pointed to discordances and differences, not least between sight and hearing. Vidovszky himself noted: "The difference between the sound and color systems is that the eye can differentiate more easily than the ear, especially in an enclosed space, where many other effects must be considered."[21] Ultimately, what *Sound-Colour-Space* represented was the curiosity, openness, and interest in experimentation that its creators shared.

1. László Beke, "Tíz kortárs magyar képzőművészeti kiállítás, 1982 második feléből," *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 4 (1982), p. 323.
2. Ibid.
3. András Bán, "Hang-szín-tér Keserű Ilona és Vidovszky László kiállítása," *Magyar Nemzet*, June 16, 1982, p. 2.
4. Krisztina Jerger, ed., *Hang-szín-tér. Keserü Ilona és Vidovszky László kiállítása*, exh. cat. Budapest Kunsthalle (Budapest, 1982), n.p.
5. For a good contemporaneous overview of Vidovszky's practice, see Margaret P. McLay, "Musical Life: The Music of László Vidovszky in London," *New Hungarian Quarterly,* 92 (1983), pp. 202–6.
6. Ilona Keserü cited by János Frank, in *Keserü Ilona gyűjteményes kiállítása*, exh. cat. Budapest Kunsthalle (Budapest, 1983), n.p.
7. Molnár G. Péter, 'Madách A Huszonötödik Színház bemutatójáról' *Népszabadság* 03, March 27, 1974, p. 7.
8. See András Pályi, "Madáchról gondolkozunk," *Szinház* 9 (1974), pp. 21–23.
9. Ilona Keserü, statement published in the 1973–74 program of the Huszonötödik Színház, Budapest (Budapest, 1974), https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI862022 (accessed in August 2024).
10. József Vadas, "Ember-szín-tér," *Élet és Irodalom*, January 7, 1978), p. 12.
11. See Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, eds., *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); and Katalin Cseh-Varga, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: The Art of the Second Public Sphere* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).
12. The position of the New Music Studio within and outside the power structures of culture in the 1970s is brilliantly discussed in Anna Dalos, "Dissidence, Neo-Avant-Garde, Doublespeak: On the Context of the New Music Studio Budapest in the 1970s," *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest* 10, no. 1 (37) (2019), pp. 69–78.
13. The unit was established within the Balázs Béla Studio, a major film production house. See *Bódy Gábor, 1946–1985: életműbemutató*, ed. László Beke and Miklós Peternák, exh. cat. Budapest Kunsthalle (Budapest, 1987).
14. Katalin Keserü, "Kottaképek," *Bercsényi 28–30* 1 (1979), p. 8.
15. See Miklós Peternák, *concept.hu / concept.hu* (Paks: Paksi Képtár, 2014).
16. Another exhibition documenting the use of color in dozens of proposed and realized urban schemes was mounted in the Budapest Gallery. See Tibor Gyengő, "Colour Dynamics '82. II. Nemzetközi Színdinamikai Konferencia," *Magyar Építőipar* 7–8 (1982), pp. 500–1.
17. Antal Nemcsics cited in P. Szabó Ernő, "Hová szöktek a színek, Monsieur Leger?" *Magyar Ifjúság* 2 (1982), p. 649.
18. John Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in *Silence: John Cage Lectures and Writing* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 13.
19. Zoltán Nagy, "Színerdő Keserű Ilona és Vidovszky László kiállítása a Műcsarnokban," *Népszabadság*, June 23, 1982, p. 7.
20. Ibid.
21. Vidovszky cited by Nagy, "Színerdő," *Népszabadság*, June 23, 1982, p. 7.

Éva Forgács

PAINTERS ARE PART OF A VERY OLD TRADITION: CONVERSATION WITH ILONA KESERÜ

ÉVA FORGÁCS: You have had an extraordinary career, and you are hard at work in the present, too. The body of works that you have built up is powerful and consistent, and radiates an energy and strength that astonish viewers. Innumerable essays and interpretations have been published about your paintings, spatial works, combinations of the visual and musical, and stage designs. As I look around here in your apartment, I see mountains of catalogues, most of which are in Hungarian. Throughout the decades of our friendship, I've also written about your work and the two of us have published interviews as well. I was honored to write about your work for the Centre Pompidou's catalogue accompanying the international exhibition of woman artists *Women in Abstraction* in 2021, which put your work in the context of the best known and highest quality woman artists today. Your works in different mediums give rise to a unique oeuvre with a very personal use of material, techniques, color, motifs, and forms.

[Fig.1] Ilona Keserü, *Mimicry (Mimikri)*, 1969, oil and appliqué on wood with frame, 41.5 × 36.5 × 5 cm, Somlói-Spengler Collection, Budapest, photo: Dávid Biró

Looking back, still far from completing your oeuvre, what seems most important to you? [1]

ILONA KESERÜ: You might be surprised, but what I'm mostly preoccupied with these days is trying to put on show a number of works by my colleagues. I've had incredibly talented and interesting colleagues here in Hungary as well as abroad, many of whose works have happened to land here, with me. I think presenting these artworks together would make for an extraordinary exhibition. Some of these artists are, or were, my friends, while others I met briefly on various trips abroad or on the occasion of exhibitions we jointly participated in. The works include ones by Dezső Korniss, János Major, Piroska Szántó, French artists, and many others from very different parts of the world. I would like to exhibit these works together. Not for the market, but in a noncommercial venue. These works are not for sale: they are in my possession, and I attribute a significance to that. Some of them were given to me as presents, others I exchanged with another artist for a work of mine, and some of them I bought. I feel very strongly about these works as the broader context of my own art, and I also believe that as happenstantial as their presence in my life may be, they would offer a compelling image of the art scene that I share with those artists. Together, they have a very special significance.

EF: That brings to mind the catalogue accompanying your 1983 exhibition in the Budapest Kunsthalle, in which you filled five pages with the names of your contemporaries, colleagues, friends and acquaintances, adults and children in random order and also selected at random. You titled it: "My contemporaries, with whom I am living at the same time." In your flowing, balanced handwriting, you provide a very long list of a continuum of names, which are not separated from one another even by commas. This is an extraordinary gesture indicating that you not only embed yourself in the fabric of the Hungarian and international art of the years when you've been active, but that you also see yourself as part of a much larger context including everyone who shares the span of your lifetime, or any part of it. In this sense, the list could be endless.

IK: Indeed, this is how I see myself in the world, and I visualized this in the handwritten flow of names. All of us who live in what is our present time are shaping this historic period. We learn a lot from each other incessantly. For example, look at this printing press that you can see in this old photo, the frame of which is painted white. It is a press that I bought from my colleagues

Dóra Maurer and Tibor Gáyor ages ago and used to make various prints and etchings. Perhaps most importantly, back in 1972, my longtime friend János Major taught me how to make iron etchings on this machine. It's a technique that perhaps nobody else has used: we carved etchings into iron sheets. Major was an extraordinary draftsman, whose work in various techniques was incredibly sophisticated. Later on, I took this press to where I was teaching in Pécs and we used it in the graduate program I created there. Artists mutually influence each other, and very strongly. For example, there's this painting I produced in 1968, *Message (Üzenet)* ❷.

EF: It's is the one you stopped working on when you heard about the invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968.

IK: Yes, and as I interrupted my work on it, I cut off the lower, blank part of the canvas. But then the painter Judit Reigl, who lived in Paris, came to visit me in my studio, and when she saw it, she advised me to put it back: to let the picture have a rather large empty portion, since this would show the disruption. And indeed, that empty surface says a lot about the process and the situation at that time. It captures that particular state of mind and that historic moment. I have meanwhile made several versions of the painting.

EF: You've participated in a large number of exhibitions in museums and galleries in various countries on different continents, but I think it's very important to talk about your much more intense international presence after the political upheavals of 1989.

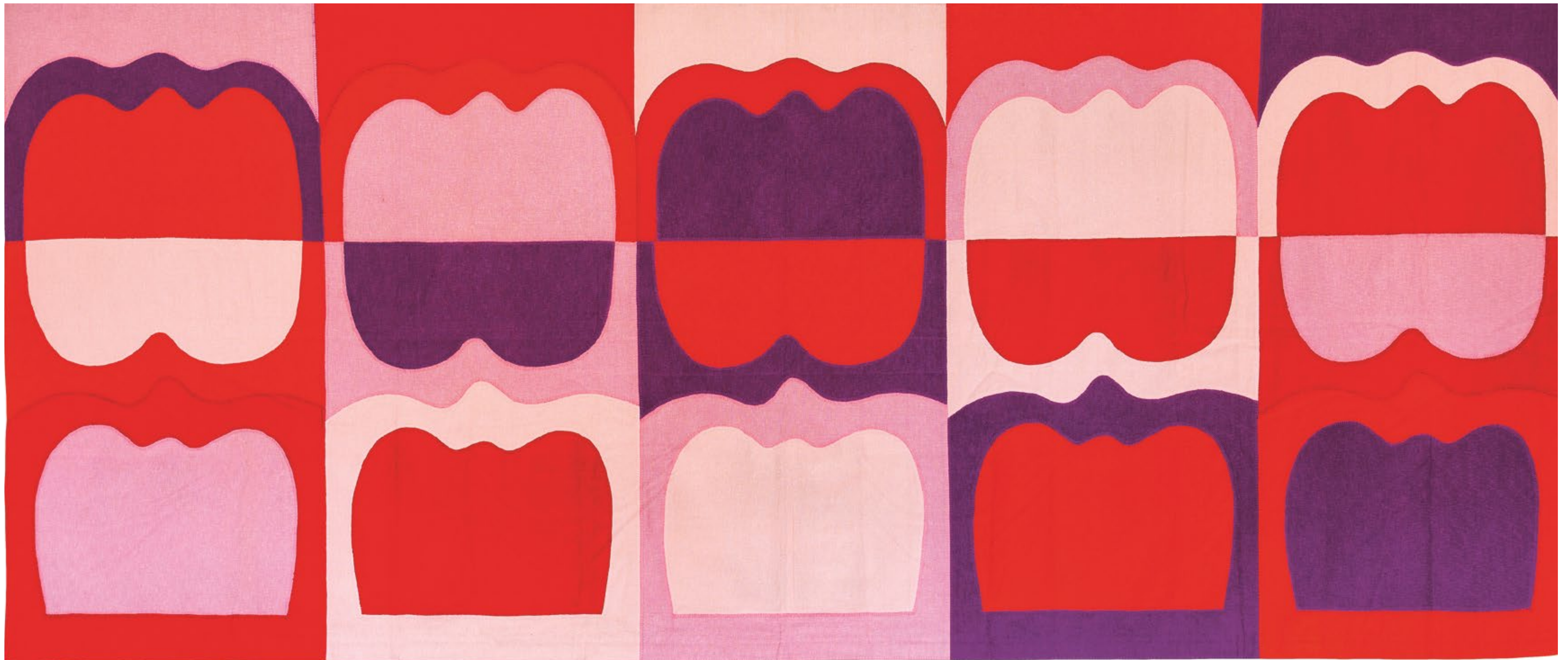
IK: You know, when I first attended an international exhibition in London, way back, held in a huge tent, in which many major, internationally known artists had works on show, it was unimaginable to me that I could ever be part of such an event. It was amazing to see young artists, some of them my age, having such an opportunity. It was not a fair, not a commercial event, which I found particularly attractive. And it gave an idea about currents in art in the world at that point in time. It struck me as valid.

EF: You are now very much part of this international art scene. Has that changed your ideas in any way?

IK: Needless to say, it was breathtaking to see my own work, a woven piece titled *Wall-Hanging with Tombstone Forms (Falikárpit sírkőformákkal [faliszőnyeg])* ❸, made in 1969, in the Metropolitan

[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Message (Üzenet)*, 1968, oil on canvas, 120 × 150 cm, private collection, Budapest

Museum of Art in New York, between a sculpture by Louise Nevelson and a painting by Kenneth Noland. That had previously been inconceivable. It was particularly dramatic for me to remember that that work, which is today in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was first exhibited in Budapest in 1969, and it brought back all the memories of that very difficult time. We organized an exhibition with the sculptor István Bencsik and the graphic artist János Major in what used to be Adolf Fényes Hall. We submitted an application to the Ministry of Culture—or Adolf Fényes Hall, which was responsible for all the gallery spaces in town—for an exhibition of our works, and the answer was that we could go ahead with it only if the works were at least "tolerable" from the point of view of censorship, and if we agreed to bear all the costs ourselves. So, we did. In comparison to that early struggle to show my works, it is now, of course, incredible to see the same work in New York, ranking with some of the greatest artists of our time, and thus to see it confirmed that I, too, belong to the art world of our age.



[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Wall-Hanging with Tombstone Forms (Falikárpit sírkőformákkal),* 1969, tapestry, stitching on chemically dyed linen, 156 × 370 cm, courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

[Fig. 4] Ilona Keserü, *Tombstones 2 (Sírkövek 2.)*, 1967, oil on fiberboard, 125 × 170 cm, European private collection, courtesy Einspach & Czapolai Fine Art

EF: The Metropolitan's website presents the work by writing: "A vibrant unframed tapestry, *Wall-Hanging* (fig. see p. 178) exemplifies ... desire to merge modern abstraction with references to Hungarian folk culture, making something with local resonance out of an otherwise international vocabulary of hard-edge painting." Of course, the fact that the tombstone motif is Turkish is overlooked, but it seems that merging traditional forms with contemporary artistic culture is captivating for international audiences, and that the author thus found it very important[4].

IK: Yes; it is significant to me, too, and is also a very important part of the international reception of many of my works.

EF: London is an important place for you, isn't it? The Stephen Friedman Gallery has shown your works and mentioned you alongside Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, and Judy Chicago. This list of artists positions you as experimental, as doing spatial works as well, and, importantly, as a woman artist.

IK: The Stephen Friedman Gallery was a truly important exhibition venue for me. I've had very well-curated exhibitions there, exhibitions that resonated with visitors.

EF: It has been a change of dimensions, I think, to occupy your due space in the international art world. I mean, I remember you mentioning, many years ago, that when you were a student in Budapest, that Cézanne was the most recent modern artist that you could legitimately be familiar with. The Friedman Gallery's catalogue is part of a different reality, as it informs visitors that you developed your art, "in the face of political and cultural adversity ... in defiance of Soviet rule following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956," and, like the Metropolitan, also underscores that your "distinctive approach combines modern abstraction with references to Hungarian folk culture and historic European imagery."

IK: Well, I wasn't that interested in politics and didn't care about that kind of rebelliousness. But I did insist on my own voice and my own way of painting. After all, it's what one does: work on a surface on the canvas in a certain way that nobody else does. That's my personal touch, my work ethic. And, importantly: that beyond working on the surface, I realized that can also create form. But as my aforementioned painting *Message* indicates, I've never been immune to what is happening around me, or in the world. Taking up folk-art motifs has always been important to me as well. My first mentor, Ferenc Martyn, taught me to always remember that I am part of a thousand-year-old tradition—an awareness that brings humility and responsibility along with it. My work must be measured against the formidable achievements of artists both famous and nameless.

The interview took place on June 21, 2024.

Dávid Fehér

FLOW FORMATIONS: RECURRENCE, REPETITION, AND FLOW IN THE ART OF ILONA KESERÜ[1]

Trying to grasp the thread means attempting to follow a train of thought, join in a process, pick up the rhythm of ideas, shapes, and bodies, and become part of the flow. While apparently linear, a thread, in fact, has no beginning and no end—it tautens, twists, and tangles, before once again lengthening in space. The thread itself creates space: the physical space occupied by bodies, and the discursive space of the flow of ideas. The space might be that of an artistic oeuvre, a space within the imaginary space of art history that is constantly expanding like the universe, a chaotic system of references and connections, stylistic and motivic loops and knots unfathomable to the eye and mind. The space might be an exhibition space that accommodates the oeuvre, in which the flow of the oeuvre reveals new conjunctions and connections: the spark that is ignited where motif meets color field exposes newer and newer strands in the imaginary thread that winds through the spaces.

I try to grasp the thread of Ilona Keserü's imposing oeuvre and slowly begin to understand that this thread cannot be grasped, that what makes Keserü's art so powerful is precisely the impossibility of grasping, holding, and untangling the thread; the fact that there is no way out of the "forest of images,"[2] the rhythmic repetitions of undulating colors and forms, the pulsating energy field of the image flow, or the endless dialectic of color becoming space and space becoming color. Keserü herself expressed this most succinctly: "With an eye to the progress of the careers of other painters, just like they, at first I was also inclined to divide my activities into linear 'periods,' but the drawings and paintings I made resisted. It took me some time to realise that my basic motif, the TANGLE, is also the spatial representation or formula of my activities as an artist. Everything returns, everything repeats itself, but not in the precise and comforting order inherent in a spiral; it takes the shape of sudden disappearances and appearances, arches, loops, knots that can't be untied, and flowing currents within the constant and unbridled mass of change."[3]

Tangles, loops, waves, and folds are thus more than simply recurring motifs. They constitute a model—a model of the universe, in fact, as Keserü explained: "As I see it, tangles and flows are the formations and movements living inside each one of us. The forms in which the Universe operates." She writes about formations and movements, all of them equally applicable to the functioning of the organic world, the laws of physics, the often apparently incomprehensible sequence of thoughts that flit through the brain, the seemingly impenetrable labyrinth of repetitions and recurrences. "I am permanently returning to my own past. I don't consider the individual stages of my career to be over. With a little warm-up I can pick up where I left off,"[4] Keserü declared. Elsewhere, she expressed it as follows: "I am tortured by pictures that have long since been made to disappear and were repainted, and now remain only on a photograph or slide, they urge me to paint them again; it is even possible that, given two choices, I made the wrong choice at the time, and the picture annihilated by painting over it would point the way to the path I should now tread."[5]

In this case, it is not merely a question of overpainting and repainting, but of the sequentiality of images from and to one another; of what is conveyed with such great sensitivity, even in the artist's early works, sometimes as flow and wave, and sometimes as a multilayered, sensual fold formation. In connection with Keserü's folds, Katalin Aknai, the artist's monographer, perceptively referred to folds, understood in the Leibnizian and Deleuzian sense,[6] as Baroque formations *par excellence*, from which the entire universe can be unraveled and opened out.[7] Starting from the sensory experience of the body, Keserü's art becomes universal. In the words of Péter Nádas: "In a demonstrative manner, yet with due humility, she proposes a metaphor for the world"[8]—a metaphor that is always the same, although it assumes many different forms, from the flourishes of Baroque architecture to the creases of the body, from the minute details of vegetation to rolling landscapes, from the dynamic curve of a tombstone to a twisted

[Fig. 1] Ilona Keserü, *Labyrinth 3 (Labirintus 3.)*, 1998, oil on canvas, 120 × 150 cm, private collection, Budapest, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

Möbius strip. Spheres and spectrums meet and touch: bodies of color, gestures of color, threads of color, and spaces of color, both inside the eyelid and beyond it. As physical impulses and ethereal afterimages.

I have lost my way in the forest of Keserü's images on many occasions: It happened in 2004 in the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, in 2008 at the MODEM in Debrecen, and in 2023 in the Budapest exhibition spaces of Q Contemporary. In 2008, the works loomed above and before me not so much as a forest but more as a jungle, an impenetrable, mesmerizing mass of flaming pillars of color; while in the Q Contemporary exhibition, the images floated and breathed, arranged according to an extraordinarily elegant and uniquely perceptive curatorial concept—tangled thread after tangled thread, pleated fold after pleated fold. The images in an exhibition appear to breathe, and if you grasp the imaginary thread, you begin to discern the waves of the oeuvre. You notice how the soft form in *Shell (Kagyló)*, painted in 1963, turns into the sensual, exuberant curve of *Form* (*Forma)* (1968–69), and even later into an intangible–tangible color vortex, a colored body, a gesture that evokes a glimmer of sound. You observe how the morning counter-light captured in an early painting (*Morning [Backlighting] [Reggel (Ellenfény)]* [1964]) is later worked into a patchwork of disparate painterly and plastic qualities, gestural images, geometrical shapes, and creases. You trace how the shapes in *Sea Grasses (Tengeri füvek)*, painted between 1959 and 1962—which still reflect the biomorphism of the post-Surrealist approach—become an inextricable tangle in the boxlike, plasticized pictorial field (*Bonbon*) [1969]), then a ribbon and a labyrinth (*Labyrinth 3 [Labirintus 3.]* [1998]) ❶. Ribbons sometimes emerge into space, while at times they float in the pictorial space as an illusory painted structure. Ribbons that do emerge often turn into floating Möbius strips (*Small Titan Moebius [Kis titan mőbiusz]* [2007]) ❷, calling to mind other motifs in the oeuvre: gestural swirls that form waves and figures of eight, although in this case the twisting ribbon encompasses the entire color spectrum, as if representing all colors, and thus the whole of the visible world, as a dynamic flow of merging hues.

My feeling is that Keserü is seeking the shape of this dynamic flow between gesture and geometry, space and plane, plasticity and painting, the figurative and the abstract, the corporeal and the incorporeal, perception and illusion, vitality and mortality. It is this flow that is reflected in the repetitive architectonic forms of the pivotal early work *Silvery Picture (Town) (Ezüstös kép [város])* (1964), the dense scribble of *Painting Number One (Egyes számú festmény)* (1965), the infinite, closed loops of *Picture with Eights (Nyolcasos kép)* (1966), the shapes of the Balatonudvari tombstones, the structures of folk-art objects: textiles and painted linen chests (*szuszék*), the pleats of an underskirt (*bikla* or *kebél*), the curved motifs evocative of traditional fences, the uneven crinkles and protrusions on canvas surfaces—suggestive of tectonic movements—which seem to shape the body of the landscape and the landscape of the body. This flow can be seen

[Fig. 2] Ilona Keserü, *Small Titan Moebius (Kis titán Mőbiusz)*, 2007, oil on titanium, 42 × 35 × 20 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

[Fig. 3] Ilona Keserü, *Color-Shifting Sounds (Színváltó Cangiante hangok)*, 2011, oil on canvas, 100 × 140 × 3 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

where Keserü stitches together, as simultaneous structures, fragments of works that characterize her different creative periods, and this pulsating energy becomes a visual explosion in works that thematize the connection between optical and color phenomena, between the colors of the rainbow and skin tones—in the *Light-Signals / Light Signs (After-Image 2) (Fényjelek [Utókép 2.])* (1984) and in the musical configurations, unfamiliar color tones, and infinite color series of the *Colour-Shifting (Cangiante) (Színváltó [Cangiante]*) paintings (*Colour-Shifting Cangiante Tones [Színváltó Cangiante hangok]* [2011]) ❸.

The oeuvre unfolds in space as a compact system of recurrences and restitching, bearing out Katalin Aknai's claim: "In Keserü's hand, the important motifs are never still: they turn, they change perspective—their views are interconnected."[9] In Keserü's case, reconnection should be understood literally. In her stitched pictures, she reinterprets not only her own formal repertoire but also the dense fabric of art and cultural history, from folk art to the Baroque, from Michelangelo to Filippino Lippi, from Ferenc Martyn to Dezső Korniss, from Maria Jarema to Howard Hodgkin, and, in Hungarian literature, from Dezső Tandori to Géza Ottlik.

Yet it would be dangerous to delve too deeply into the iconographic and cultural-historical context of her motifs. Keserü referred to her works as *Self-Powered Works (Önerejű képek)*. "The self-powered painting has no desire to impart any content, story, or theory that can be expressed in words. Approaching such paintings requires nothing more than to observe without preconceptions, and to spend time looking."[10] Words rebound from these works. Perhaps this is what Nádas meant when he said that Keserü's painting "is not reproductive but manifestly productive,"[11] or what Tandori had in mind when he wrote, concerning Keserü's graphic works: "[L]ines, points, and surfaces create a unity, thus suggesting, with no fragility, a kind of firmly chiselled, almost explosive archetypal quality. They are immediately obvious and at the same time reticent."[12]

Keserü's images are "immediately obvious and reticent"—visceral, if you like. "Let us accept the fact that paintings are real, live bodies. Let us not limit their infinite possibilities by putting them behind letter-bars. Let the individual look at a painting with the uncertain, multitudinous, complete self that shares in the unexpected and incomprehensible events of their life," wrote Keserü in 1979.[13]

Images are "live bodies"—the intensity of their presence does not allow them to be "put behind letter-bars." Any attempt to do so is doomed to failure from the outset. Perhaps it was this

[Fig. 4] Ilona Keserü, *Signs in Diagonal Spaces (Details of a Message 5) (Jelek átlós térben [Üzenet részlete 5.])*, 2022, oil on canvas, 170 × 120 cm, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Gábor Horváth

that I sensed as I meandered through the exhibition spaces, entirely unable to grasp and follow the taut, tangled, looping thread between the paintings.

Keserü's works defy textual interpretation. Occasionally, however, they themselves function as texts. Think of the artist's most recent works, which reinterpret the earlier *Message (Üzenet)* images: *Burning Sea (Message Detail 1) (Égő tenger [Üzenet részlete 1.])* (2022), *Counter-Motion [Message Detail 2] (Ellenmozgás [Üzenet részlete 2.])* (2022), *Message Detail 4 (Üzenet részlete 4.)* (2022), *Signs in Diagonal Space (Message Detail 5) (Jelek átlós térben [Üzenet részlete 5.])* (2022) ❹. "Cryptograms. I trusted in the expressive power of visible and mature forms; I believed that such things can indeed be read. That they are somehow able to communicate what I paint into them, how I feel when I'm doing it, the things I'm thinking about. That's not exactly what happens, of course, but the images were produced with that in mind. This was my intention with *Message*—I planned to paint these enormous signs one after the other, one huge sign to a canvas, and then assemble them into an enormous image, series, or pictorial process."[14] On another occasion, the artist wrote: "The *Message* paintings aim to carry the message of important things that truly cannot be said, as if we were attempting to condense things that cannot be translated word for word but must be said urgently just the same, because they are of utmost importance to us all, into coloured formations arranged into lines similar to writing. It is as if I were mute, and I couldn't write either, but I was thinking that I must make these lines public no matter what, that they must speak for themselves."[15]

Keserü paints signs again and again—signs that are nowadays increasingly monumental, freer, and more expressive, sometimes floating, sometimes blazing (even at art college, her teacher István Szőnyi had an intuition that Keserü was in fact painting signs[16]). In relation to an earlier *Message* painting, Tandori wrote: "They are not necessarily 'signs' in this image in the ordinary sense of the word," the figures "are not floating, are not fixed, and do not assume a position (since they do not move); they are not morphological, nor are they descriptive. ... This is the picture of what is not found, of incomprehensible outcomes—and these concrete, finite 'diagrams' convey no more exactitude than the scribbled figure eights, the patches of light and shade, the slightly disrupted planes, etc. The message cannot be grasped—thus it can be understood as reality."[17]

Tandori captures a peculiar paradox: The incomprehensibility of the message is precisely what makes it comprehensible as reality. What makes the sign into a "live body" is precisely the fact that it has no meaning. In addition, the images are no more than fragments. Though more monumental than all the earlier *Message* paintings, they are nevertheless fragments of an enormous whole that cannot be perceived by the eye nor fathomed by the mind. Keserü's patterns, designs, and sequences are all fragments of this ocean-sized, undulating whole; they are, of course, entire in themselves, at once both closed and open—in other words, self-powered.

Once again, I quote the words of Ilona Keserü, an artist who continues to work with inimitable intensity, even at the age of ninety: "The self-powered painting has no desire to impart any content, story, or theory that can be expressed in words. Approaching such paintings requires nothing more than to observe without preconceptions, and to spend time looking."[18]

Keserü's large-scale exhibitions embrace an oeuvre that spans decades, thereby creating space for visitors to observe her images without preconceptions. It is up to us to devote sufficient time to allow Keserü's self-powered paintings to reveal themselves to our gaze.

1. The text was written for the Ilona Keserü exhibition *Mind [All]*, Q Contemporary, Budapest, March 30—1 July 2023, curated by Mónika Zsikla; an earlier version was published in *Balkon online*: Dávid Fehér, "Az áramlás alakzatai. Keserü Ilona: Mind," *Balkon online*, July 8, 2023, http://balkon.art/home/az-aramlas-alakzatwi-keseru-ilona-mind/ (accessed in September 2024).
2. This is a reference to the title of Ilona Keserü's 2008 exhibition at MODEM in Debrecen, *Forest of Images—The Works of Ilona Keserü Ilona 1982–2008*, curated by Katalin Aknai.
3. Ilona Keserü Ilona, "The Rooms of the Exhibition," trans. Judy Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Approach Tangle Stream. An Investigation of Causes and Effects in Ilona Keserü Ilona's Oeuvre*, ed. Vera Baksa-Soós, exh. cat. Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (Budapest, 2004), pp. 21–67, esp. p. 57.
4. András Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával" (1988), in *Hatvanas évek. Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben*, ed. Ildikó Nagy, exh. cat. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest (Budapest, 1991), pp. 139–50, esp. p. 148.
5. Ilona Keserü Ilona, "The Rooms of the Exhibition 2004," ibid., p. 23.
6. Katalin Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba". Keserü Ilona életművének vizsgálata a hatvanas évek*, Ph.D. diss. (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2014), pp. 55–56.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), originally published in Paris in 1988.
8. Péter Nádas, "Signs of her own: Neutral vision in the paintings of Ilona Keserü," trans. Judy Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü: Approach, Tangle, Stream*, pp. 15–20, esp. p. 16, translation slightly altered.
9. Aknai, *"Állandóan visszajárok a múltamba,"* p. 72.
10. Ilona Keserü Ilona, "Autonomous Painting," trans. Judith Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Works 1982–2008*, ed. Katalin Aknai, exh. cat. MODEM, Debrecen, 2008, pp. 56–58., esp. p. 58, translation altered.
11. Nádas, "Signs of her own," p. 15, translation slightly altered.
12. Dezső Tandori, "Variations on the works of Ilona Keserü I," trans. Judith Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Works 1959–1982*, ed. Ilona Keserü, published by the artist (Budapest: Kisterem Galéria, 2002), pp. 6–18, esp. p. 8, translation altered.
13. Keserü, "Autonomous Painting," p. 58.
14. Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," pp. 147–48.
15. Keserü, "The Rooms of the Exhibition 2004," p. 49.
16. See Zwickl, "Beszélgetés Keserü Ilonával," pp. 140–41.
17. Dezső Tandori, "Variations on the Works of Ilona Keserü II," trans. Judy Szöllősy, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Works 1959–1982,* ed. Ilona Keserü, published by the artist (Budapest: Kisterem Galéria, 2002), pp. 20–30, esp. p. 26, translation slightly altered.
18. Keserü, "Autonomous Painting," p. 58, translation slightly altered.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

● Katalin Aknai is an art historian and critic. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Research Centre for the Humanities and a curator of the Psychiatric Art Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (since 2015). She is also an assistant professor at the Institute of History of Art, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), and a lecturer at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, both in Budapest. Her fields of research and interest include the postwar avant-garde in Central Europe, modern and contemporary art, and art criticism. In 2015, she defended her Ph.D., titled *"I Keep Going Back to My Past"—Ilona Keserü's Oeuvre from the Perspective of the 1960s*, at ELTE, Budapest.

● Susanne Altmann is an independent art historian, researcher, and curator based in Dresden, Germany. Alongside various curatorial and publishing activities, her historical research concentrates on art production in the former socialist regions of Europe before and after 1989, examining the development of a canon and modes of reception for nonconformist avant-gardes, with a focus on women artists. Recent projects include the exhibition *The Medea Insurrection: Women Artists Behind the Iron Curtain* (Albertinum, Dresden State Art Collections, 2018, and the Wende Museum, Los Angeles, 2020); the exhibition *Pants Wear Skirts: The Erfurt Women Artists' Group 1984–1994* (co-curator, neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin, 2021); and a literary transcription of British artist Monica Ross's text-based work *Valentine* (2024). Altmann's book *When Technology Was Female* (2024) was commissioned and produced by If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, Amsterdam. Since 2010, Altmann has been teaching contemporary and German Art History as part of the Erasmus/DAAD program at the Academy of Fine Arts, Dresden.

● David Crowley teaches at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. He is a historian and curator with an interest in Eastern Europe under communist rule. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Cold War Modern* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008–9 (co-curated with Jane Pavitt); *Sounding the Body Electric: Experimental Art and Music in Eastern Europe* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2012, and Calvert 22, London, 2013; and *Notes from the Underground: Music and Alternative Art in Eastern Europe, 1968–1994* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2017, and Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2018 (both co-curated with Daniel Muzyczuk). In 2023, he curated *Henryk Stażewski: Late Style* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

● Dávid Fehér is Director of the Central European Research Institute for Art History (KEMKI) of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, curator of twentieth-century and contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, and an assistant professor at the Institute of Art History, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest. He defended his Ph.D. dissertation on the art of László Lakner at Eötvös Loránd University in 2018. His field of research is Central and Eastern European Art History after 1960, with a special focus on the reception of Pop Art and Photorealism, as well as contemporary painting. His major curatorial projects include *Imre Bak: Timely Timelessness: Layers of an Oeuvre / 1967–2015* (Paks Gallery, 2016), *Sean Scully: Passenger—A Retrospective* (Museum of Fine Arts—Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2020–21; Benaki Museum, Athens, 2021–22; MSU, Zagreb, 2022–23), *Henri Matisse: The Colour of Ideas* (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2022, with Aurélie Verdier), *László Lakner: Alter Ego* (MODEM, Debrecen, 2022), and *László Lakner: Infinitum* (Muzeum Umění Olomouc, 2024, with Barbora Kundračíková).

● Flavia Frigeri is an art historian, lecturer, and Chanel Curator for the Collection at the National Portrait Gallery, London, where she is leading a project intended to redress the gender imbalance in the collection through acquisitions and site-specific commissions. She recently guest curated the group exhibition *Beyond Form: Lines of Abstraction, 1950–1970* at Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK, and is now working on a retrospective of avant-garde French-Portuguese artist Maria Helena Vieira da Silva for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy. From 2016 to 2020 she was a Teaching Fellow in the History of Art Department, University College London, and a member of faculty at Sotheby's Institute, London. Previously, she was a curator for international art at Tate Modern, where she co-curated *The World Goes Pop* (2015), and was responsible for *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs* (2014), *Paul Klee: Making Visible* (2013), and *Ruins in Reverse* (2013). She is the author of *Pop Art* and *Women Artists*, both in the Thames & Hudson's Art Essentials series, and co-editor of the volume of collected essays *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era: Multiple Modernisms* (Routledge, 2021). She is a trustee of the Association for Art History (AHH).

● Agata Jakubowska is a Professor of Art History at the University of Warsaw and the author and editor of numerous publications on women's art. She recently published *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revisioning Peripheral Critical Practices* (ed. with Magdalena Radomska, Routledge, 2022), a monograph on Polish sculptor

Maria Pinińska-Bereś, titled *Art and Emancipation of Women in Socialist Poland: The Case of Maria Pinińska-Bereś* (in Polish, Warsaw University Press, 2022), and the *IKONOTHEKA* issue titled *Feminist Art Historiographies in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (33/2023, co-edited with Andrea Giunta). Currently, Jakubowska is researching the transnational history of all-women exhibitions (funded by the Polish National Science Center). Within the framework of this project, she is preparing a book, *Real and Imagined Communities in All-Women Exhibitions*. She is a member of the editorial team of Avant-Garde Critical Studies (Brill) and of the international TEAM (Teaching, E-learning, Agency, Mentoring) initiative led by AWARE (Archives of Women Artists Research & Exhibitions). She is a research consultant for the exhibition *Ilona Keserü: Flow* at Muzeum Susch and co-editor of the accompanying monograph.

● Judit Radák is an associate professor at the Hungarian Dance Academy. Since early 2023, she has been working in the Photography Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts—Central European Art History Research Institute (KEMKI). Her primary areas of expertise include the work of Vajda Lajos and the Rottenbiller Street art colony, as well as the art of Ilona Keserü. She regularly publishes in professional journals and lectures at conferences. Between 2009 and 2021, she taught art history and visual analysis at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. Over her twenty years of teaching, she has also taught at Metropolitan University, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, and the Art History Institute of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). In 2013, she completed her doctoral dissertation, *Vajda Lajos Pepita Füzetei,* at the Art History Department of ELTE in Budapest. In 2003, she defended her master's thesis on the stage designs of Ilona Keserü.

● Klara Kemp-Welch is a Reader in 20th-Century Modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She studied at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies and University College London, and specializes in modern and contemporary art from Eastern Europe. Her publications include: *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (IB Tauris, 2014), *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (MIT Press, 2019), and *A Reader in East-Central European Modernism 1918–1956* (co-edited with Beata Hock and Jonathan Owen, Courtauld Books Online, 2019). She is currently writing the monograph titled *Free Movement? Documenting Migration and Mobility in Eastern Europe*.

● Emma Vidovszky, daughter of Ilona Keserü, is a freelance translator and interpreter working mainly in the fields of theater and drama. She graduated from Goldsmiths College, London, in 2001 with a degree in Drama and Theatre Arts. Since 2016, and the publication of Keserü's *Catalogue Raisonné, Volume I*, Vidovszky has been closely involved with the artist's oeuvre and assisting with English language texts. As of spring 2023, she has been actively assisting Keserü with the preparation and organization of exhibitions and correspondence. She is the mother of two and lives with her family in Szentendre, Hungary.

● Mónika Zsikla is an art historian and curator. She studied Art History and Aesthetics at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and continued her education in the Aesthetics Program of the Doctoral School of Philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, where she received her Ph.D. degree in 2024 with a thesis on the theories of monochrome painting. Between 2007 and 2015, Zsikla worked as artistic director at Kisterem Gallery in Budapest, and from 2017 to 2020 was curator at the Budapest Gallery. In the years 2020 to 2024, she served as the curatorial director of Q Contemporary, Budapest. Since 2017, Zsikla has been a lecturer at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. Over the past decade, she has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions of Hungarian and international contemporary art. Zsikla's recent curatorial projects include: *Zsófia Keresztes—After Dreams: I Dare to Defy The Damage* (Hungarian Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022), *Ilona Keserü: All* (Q Contemporary, 2023), *Dóra Maurer: The Thematisation of Structure* (Vaszary Gallery, Balatonfüred, 2023–24), *László Fehér: Capturing Memory* (Q Contemporary, 2023), *Mediating Time and Charm* (Q Contemporary, 2023), *The Image of Colour, the Mystery of Image* (MODEM, Debrecen, 2024). She is also the curator of the exhibition *Ilona Keserü: Flow* at Muzeum Susch and co-editor of the monograph accompanying the exhibition.

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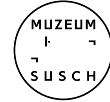

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Front: Ilona Keserü during the exhibition at Csók István Gallery, Székesfehérvár, 1978, © Ilona Keserü, photo: Zsuzsa Fábri
Back: Ilona Keserü, *Colour-Space (Happening at New Year's Eve) (Szín–Tér [szilveszteri akció])*, 1977 (see p. 167)

This volume is the first international monograph dedicated to Hungarian artist Ilona Keserü (b. 1933, Pécs), and features essays by renowned scholars and curators. Keserü is one of the most significant women abstract artists of the postwar period. Her distinctive approach combines references to Hungarian folk culture and modern European art. The artist's organic abstract style developed after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. In the second half of the 1960s, Ilona Keserü began experimenting more intensively with different materials and techniques. It was then that motifs alluding to her identity as a woman were given increasing emphasis in her art—independently of the emerging second-wave feminism. Keserü's sensual abstractions verge on figuration. Color is another area of examination for her. The use of bright and vibrant colors that is inextricably linked to her name has always been the result of scientific and artistic experiments.

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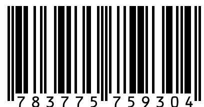

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