

**Exhibition Title:** Echo In Delirium

**Artist:** Éva Szombat

**Curator:** Péter Bencze

**Venue:** Longtermhandstand, Budapest

**Duration:** 18 Dec 2024 – 28 Feb 2025

**Photo:** Áron Weber

**Tags:** @evaszombat @longtermhandstand @everybodyneedsart

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**Text:** Adam Mazur

### **Nostalgia Factory**

Éva Szombat is interested in three things in photography: beauty, desire and memory. To a photography critic, this connection may seem obvious. After all, we all desire beauty and want to keep it for longer, if not forever. However, Szombat presents this photographic triad in a controversial way. Beauty borders on pornography and kitsch, approaching camp. Desire is non-normative, and pansexual energy pulsates in objects, fragments and bodies, whose mutual relations the artist carefully observes. Memory concerns people and relationships, but also oscillates around material culture, quite low-ranking and not very sophisticated. Szombat immerses herself in everyday life to enchant it for her own carefully staged photographs. While working on her subsequent cycles, she transubstantiates what is ordinary into colourful and wonderful. This is also the case in the *Echo in Delirium* series, in which the artist looks at the nostalgia for the transformative aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the colour photos are more realistic, almost documentary in their representation of the social world. Others lean towards magical realism, rainbow colours, shiny surfaces and textures full of glitter. It is balancing on the edge of seemingly incompatible modes of presenting the world in photography that distinguishes Éva Szombat's work. To put it simply, what is important for the artist – perhaps the most important – is the fun, pleasure, and perhaps even *jouissance* that comes from performing, looking and photographing. The game with various codes and aesthetics also refers to the topic itself, permeates it, and highlights a past chapter in the history of analog photography. The last chapter of which was the mass use of cheap automatic cameras and light-sensitive materials that were not very realistic in their color reproduction. Szombat immerses herself in the world of declining analogue but she does not do it with reverence, like Zoe Leonard

in the famous *Analogue* series. Recalling the past, a recurring fashion echoing the declining years of Hungarian 'goulash communism' (*gulyáskommunizmus*), is an opportunity for Szombat to create her own theatre full of actors – from Cicciolina to Schwarzenegger – and accessories associated with the era (tape recorders, posters, cosmetics, furniture...). There is exaggeration and artificiality in *Echo in Delirium*, but also a seductive charm. Underneath the layer of glitz, one can feel romanticism turning into nostalgia, typically Hungarian, because it touches on something ambivalent, painful, unhealed, like a wound left by unresolved communism. This is a political reading, but worth emphasising, because politics in Szombat's work is a constant element, like the fascination with femininity, the body, sexuality and emancipation. The artist is immersed in the tradition of Hungarian psychoanalysis, whose patron is Sándor Ferenczi. On the one hand, psychoanalysis can refer to all objects with sexual overtones, but also to the principle of repetition itself. After all, *Echo in Delirium* is about the impossibility of returning to childhood, to that paradise, an idealised phase of development that we try to find and feel, even if it is only a substitute. The dream could be considered dangerous, a pipe dream similar to the romanticisation of communism, which is why Szombat does not reproduce, does not pretend, does not falsify that world, but leaves clear traces of the present, pointing to an artificially produced staging. Szombat looks into the camera's viewfinder, but she stages, processes and works through Hungarian dreams about communism and capitalism with a human face. On the other hand, we can go in a more personal direction, returning to old dreams, youthful outbursts, desires, emotions and goods that defined young Éva Szombat. In this context, it is a series, indeed, about the passing of time, full of vanity iconography, a kind of Grand Guignol of political transformation and personal maturation. On the photographic scene, forgotten and long-unused objects come to life again, like zombies. Theatricalisation moves the viewer away from the objects and allows them to take a better look at them. As with each repetition, we feel a different taste, smell and nothing is the same as it was. Of course, one can refer *Echo in Delirium* to literature. Marcel Proust himself comes to mind with his reminiscences and madeleines. A much more interesting context is Hungarian literature, whose obsession with memory, the experience of what is irrevocably gone and dwelling on the past, personal defeats and community failures is well known. To contemporary classics such as Péter Nádas or Péter Esterházy, whose fictions are immersed in personal experiences of the past, we can add Sándor Márai, known for his diaries. It is possible to recall something from each of the mentioned writers but perhaps this quote from Nádas' *A Book of Memories* will best highlight the common thread connecting the literary tradition with the Szombat series: 'Experiences related to my past, but the past is itself but a distant allusion to my insignificant

desolation, hovering as rootlessly as any lived moment in what I might call the present: only memories of tastes and smells of a world to which I no longer belong, one I might call my abandoned homeland, which I left to no purpose because nothing bound me to the one I found myself in, either; I was a stranger there, too (...)' Another, less obvious association is Miklós Szentkuthy and his obsession with 'catalog novels'. Szentkuthy's theatrical gestures surprisingly match the staging of Szombat's. Of course, the juxtaposition of the classics of literary modernism with the post-post-modernist vision of the photographer is as risky as it is cognitively interesting. However, there is something captivating about it. If Szentkuthy pays homage to 'Prae' – what came before – then in the attempts to repeat, Szombat is definitely 'Post'. After all, don't Szombat's photos, books and exhibitions have something perversely pious about them? *Echo in Delirium* is like a child's prayer to desired objects, repeated silently over and over again. Individual exhibitions resemble shrines, and the collected objects resemble fetishes and relics. Yes, Szentkuthy is like Bataille, not serious enough, and his pious attitude to reality is laced with deep sarcasm. Szombat emphasises the components of laughter, colour and magic. Hungarian literature is dominated by men, who also dominate local photography. Szombat who wants to and unintentionally has to fight against this patriarchal domination, pushes herself to find her own language of expression, to express emotions that have not been encountered before, or even been suppressed. The difference between Éva Szombat and all these patriarchs is in their view and vision of things. It's a gender difference, it's the female gaze. In *Echo in Delirium*, not only the past is interesting, but also the future. What will be the nostalgia of the future? How will we think about this book and the fashion of the 1980s and 1990s in ten, twenty and a hundred years? How will we and subsequent generations return to this moment and this repetition? Looking at subsequent photos from *Echo in Delirium* by Éva Szombat, I think about the adventures of Fancsikó and Pinta described by Péter Esterházy. These images are also carefully 'strung on a string', connected by the memory of the artist's childhood and youth, and yet separate and autonomous in their own way. Similarly to Esterházy, who recalls the past, Szombat's staged pictures are like guests who "arrive on the backs of passing moments".

Adam Mazur