

# The New York Times

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## Art & Design



Karoly Halasz in a detail from his “Private Broadcast No. 1-4” (1974-75). Credit Courtesy of the artist, Elizabeth Dee New York, and acb Gallery, Budapest

### From Hungary, the Secret Language of a Silenced People

In 1972 the Hungarian artist Tamas Szentjoby placed a chair outside the Intercontinental Hotel in Budapest, bound his mouth with a leather belt, and took a seat. About 20 minutes later the police arrived, as was to be expected in this Eastern bloc country. Mr. Szentjoby called this brief performance piece “Sit Out/Be Forbidden,” in homage to the sit-ins being staged by protesters in the United States and, specifically, to Bobby Seale, the Black Panther who a few years earlier had been shackled and gagged after making comments to the judge during his trial on charges of inciting violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention.

This one-man demonstration was relatively tame by Western political standards, as well as by those of the performance art of the day (1972 was the date of Vito Acconci’s onanistic “Seedbed,” and the year before Chris Burden had engaged a friend to shoot him in the arm). But for an artist working behind the Iron Curtain, in a state that classified artworks as “supported,” “tolerated” or “prohibited,” it was an act of overt defiance.

For Mr. Szentjoby and others in his circle, making art was largely about testing the limits of that middle category, “tolerated” — knowing just how far you could go without being interrogated, imprisoned or deported (as Mr. Szentjoby eventually was). As seen in the resonant exhibition “With the Eyes of Others: Hungarian Artists of the Sixties and Seventies,” at the Elizabeth Dee gallery in Harlem, this was a special skill practiced not just by performance artists, but also by Conceptualists and abstract painters.

This revelatory show, organized with wry commentary by the Budapest-born guest curator, author and cultural consultant Andras Szanto, in collaboration with three Budapest galleries (acb, Kisterem and Vintage), would not look out of place at the Museum of Modern Art. It says to scholars and curators that the European avant-garde of the 1960s and ’70s isn’t yet an exhausted field, especially where Eastern Europe is concerned. And to artists in this country, it delivers a somewhat less reassuring message: Take a close look at these strategies for flying just under the radar of a repressive regime — you, too, might need them someday.

The exhibition’s artists, most of them making their New York debuts here, model resourcefulness as well as resistance. They did what they could to keep up with New York, Paris and Cologne, devouring magazine pictures and reports of had-to-be-there Western art events, such as the landmark 1968 edition of “Documenta.” The wistful mood is especially evident in the black-and-white photographs that chronicle performance-based works by Karoly Halasz, who painted cardboard boxes with the names of cutting-edge galleries, such as Leo Castelli and Margo Leavin, and later paid tribute to Robert Smithson with a modest re-creation of “Spiral Jetty” on the shores of the Danube River.

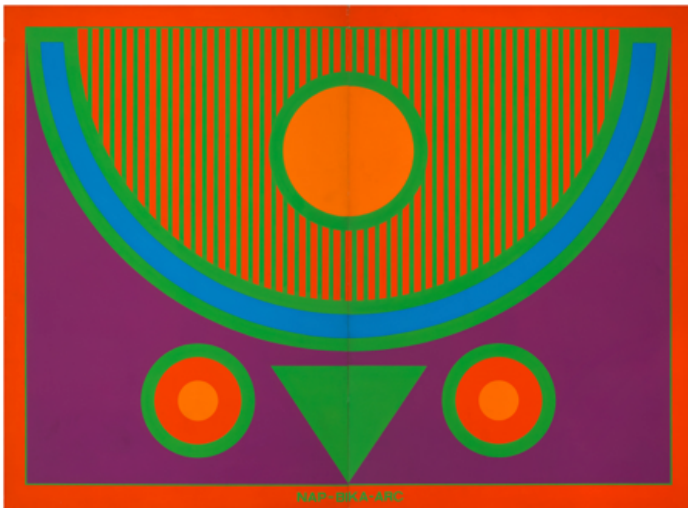
Such fleeting, event-driven creations were fashionable, in the spirit of Happenings and Fluxus gatherings abroad. For the Hungarians, they were also strategic, as Mr. Szanto stresses in a section of the show titled “Snapchat 1970” that’s devoted to blink-and-you’ll-miss-them gestures of artistic and political solidarity. (One is a document showing close-ups of handshakes between artists, at a small-town gathering organized by the artist Laszlo Beke).

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There was no market to speak of, so little incentive to make salable objects. The pop-up show and the living room gallery were not cute exceptions, as they are in New York today, but rather the pillars of the art scene. In a catalog interview with Nora Winkler, Mr. Szentjohy recalls: “We were forbidden from congregating in public, but house parties were allowed, so there were at least two or three of them a week. The house party was the true art form of the period.”

This would not seem to be a viable climate for painting. Yet it endured, and even thrived, in clubby networks of artists who made geometric abstraction their safe space. The exhibition at Dee includes a commanding room of colorful, hard-edge compositions by Imre Bak, Sandor Pinczehelyi and others, works that could go head-to-head with contemporaneous Frank Stellas or Jo Baers. Among the standouts are Mr. Bak’s magisterial “SUN-OX-FACE,” with its sweeping arc motif evoking the wingspan of a giant bird, and a more mathematically inclined wall piece by Dora Maurer in which a simple framing device is repeatedly and systematically interrupted.



“SUN-OX-FACE” (1976), by Imre Bak. Credit Courtesy of the artist, Elizabeth Dee, New York, and acb Gallery, Budapest

To get the most out of this show and its covert rebellions, you’ll want to immerse yourself in the catalog (or at least the wall texts). Context is key when dealing with an art world that operated through clandestine gatherings and secret handshakes. For instance, the painted clay block that makes up Mr. Szentjohy’s “Czechoslovak Radio,” of 1968, demands to be seen in light of the invasion of Hungary’s neighbor Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army that year; it also helps to know that Hungarians referred to government snitches as “bricks.”

The black humor exhibited by many of these artists, however, needs no translation. In a photo series titled “Private Broadcast,” Mr. Halasz stripped down and crawled into a box made to look like a television set — mugging goofily for the camera, and turning the medium of state news programs into a personal space. Elsewhere, Endre Tot developed a series of rituals lampooning bureaucracy and propaganda, which he called “Very Special Gladnesses.” In one he is reading Lenin; in another, he’s picking his nose. The small provocations of these Hungarians remind artists working here and now, with all the advantages of democratic expression, vast social networks and a global art market, that comedy costs nothing and can mean everything.

By KAREN ROSENBERG