

Endre Tót “SEMMI SEM SEMMI” at Christine König Galerie, Vienna

27.09.2022

READING TIME 4'

SHARE



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The works comprised in the show were realized between the early 1970s and the 2010s, after Tóth gave up abstract expressionist and Informel—painting in 1970, only to return to the painterly gesture in total secrecy in the 1980s and to reveal this fact in the Summer of 2021. During these five decades, the Hungarian artist elaborated and unfolded thematic conceptual series in a variety of (new) media such as artist books, telegrams, postcards, typewriting, postal and rubber stamps, video, posters, graffiti, banners or actions. The pieces on view in the exhibition investigate the three fundamental concepts he conceived by 1971, termed Zer0, Joy and Rain, that were elaborated as conceptual survival strategies using derision and humour against the grim Socialist everyday life. In the light of this year's traumatic geopolitical events, the war in Ukraine raging at our borders, and the still prevailing East-West dichotomy that shapes our existence, Endre Tóth's life—balancing between Hungary and West Germany since 1979—and works remain sharply relevant, contemporary, therefore offering a visual, conceptual antidote to our anxious times.

The concept and motif of zero first made its appearance in the artist's mail art activity, a form of artistic communication that conveyed perfectly his idea-based art, while also constituting the only means to initiate correspondence as early as 1971 with the most prominent figures of the international avant-garde from behind the iron curtain. For Tót, the Zero sign, which embodied the mathematical concept of nothing, primarily symbolised the absurdity of communication, but also the concepts of absence and presence, while the philosophical and political aspects of the character "0" certainly reflected an ontological approach of the condition of both citizens and artists under state Socialism.

dangerous grounds considering how the freedom of speech was curbed in the socialist regime. Tôt's works, however, communicated by not communicating, by saying nothing, and by picturing absence, as expressed in the *Nothing*, *Absent Painting* and *Blackout Painting* series—in direct connection with the Zer0 concept.

The second group of artworks from Endre Tóth's early conceptual period are his *Rain* pieces. The raining pattern, created with an economy of visual means by repeatedly hitting the "/" sign on the typewriter, is always accompanied by text, a fertile ground for the intellectual playfulness characteristic of Endre Tóth's approach, which at times manifested in the form of banal tautology, and at other times as (self-)ironic artistic self-expression or humorous political references. Found pictures—postcards, reproductions of well-known paintings, or images from magazines—comprised the basis of a significant portion of the *Rain* works, in which the artist inserted texts with references to the image or the shape of the rain, in clear connection with visual poetry.

Made in 1971, Endre Tóth's first *Joy* piece which was a single sentence in English and Hungarian on a postcard-sized cardboard sheet: "I am glad that I could have this sentence printed." In the light of the authoritarian control exerted by the socialist regime over any form of publishing, printing and circulating texts, Tóth's sentence is an ironic expression of the optimism demanded by the state from its citizens. Tóth himself writes the following: "My *Joy*s were the reflections of the totalitarian state of the seventies. I responded with the absurd euphoria of *Joy*s to censorship, isolation, suppression sensed in every field of life, though this suppression worked with the subtlest means, hardly visible." The artist's recognition of the fact that he cannot be held accountable by the authorities for expressing his joy gave rise to further *Joy* pieces, the development, universalisation of the topic as well as the Tóth's gradually unfolding actionism, especially the Gladness Demonstrations and the series *Very Special Gladnesses*, associating image and text.

at Christine König Galerie, Vienna

until October 8, 2022

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