

Loránd Hegyi: From Informel to Holography

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The outlook and the value system of Hungarian art history would fundamentally change if there was systematic scientific research made into the progressive endeavours of the 1960s. Art critics would again be acquainted with a number of forgotten oeuvres and also would be greatly surprised when exploring the previously unknown, early achievements of many artists. Due appreciation, and abstract expressionism, as well as to the peculiar, Hungarian “sur-naturalism”, micro-realism and magical realism, from which individual artists steered away in extremely diverse directions. The phenomenon of “Szürenon” may also be newly highlighted: it was an artistic program, quite characteristic of the early sixties, conceived by Attila Csáji and his young colleagues. It attempted to reconcile the surrealist and the non-objective traditions.

Surrealism, which after 1957 was again available to Hungarians via publications and albums, meant a significant starting-point for Attila Csáji: it represented a possibility to go beyond the mechanical reproduction of visible reality and also to manifest subconscious notions, intuitions and associations. It was influenced by both international surrealist art and the activities of surrealist artists in Hungary. It was quite natural, because during the 1950s, dogmatic cultural policy caused all forms of realism to be discredited. In the eyes of the young generation of artists in their 1960s, realism was an anachronistic and conservative phenomenon, which remained on the mere surface of things and kept on preserving meaningless conventions, and which was unable to take part in the spiritual life of the time, thus, it was regarded outdated. The avantgarde, first of all, the surrealist and non-objective traditions, which had been shut away from the public for such a long time, represented an art which conveyed a deeper emotional and atmospherical content and a more complex and more abstract meaning. It was an art that also expressed the the contradictory and ambiguous nature of things, one which revealed the mysteries of individual existence and personal visions. Young artist were attracted by surrealism, with its freedom of associations, and were also attracted by non-objective art, with its autonomy of pictorial assemblage and its sovereign system of visual forms.

Attila Csáji took interest in both fields. He was concerned with rich forms of notions emerging from the subconscious, with the re-interpretation of real objects, with the depths of associations projected into natural forms and with capturing the hidden ego that manifest itself in conjectures, dreams and spontaneous gestures. The surrealist transformation of nature and the cosmos and the transcendental notions, were all aimed at expanding the notion of reality.

Attila Csáji found within reality not only a palpable and perceptible form, but a spiritual cosmos as well, which has been expanded into infinity by impressions, conjectures and associations, and which has been transsubstantiated by emotions. It is for him, a world full of possibilities of intellectual activities for a relative personality. He was searching for artistic forms in which his vision could be manifested. And because, as an artist, he is of a fundamentally rational character, right from the start he attempted to create a synthesis of intuition and systematisation. He firmly believes that the spiritual universe, which comprises of infinite possibilities and of which you may only be slightly aware, can only be expressed in an artistic, that is, sensuous and suggestive way, in rationally built art works. Because, amongst the possibilities offered by reason, a vast domain of conjectures and associations emerges. Thus, Csáji did not adopt surrealism's psychic automatism, which was not an exclusive element of Hungarian surrealist endeavours either. Although he

connected the rational build-up of the pictorial system with the revelation of subconscious notions, he still retained the element of intellectual control throughout his work. He has always consciously controlled the process of building up the composition. Side by side in his activities were the exploration of the characteristic structure of the autonomous pictorial form and the projection of subconscious notions.

This creative program led in 1964, to the birth of his “Szürenon” series. Organic forms appear on the small picture plane, which has been produced by painting, scratching and erasing the acquired and enamelled picture surface. The peculiar, half abstracted organic forms, resemble certain motifs from nature and floral as viewed under a microscope, yet in reality, they are patches of an informal nature. Rather than by the individual details of forms, nature is evoked by warm yellowish-greenish-red brownish colours and by the irrationally mysterious golden light. The presence of the light and the strong contrasting effect of light shade, endow the amorphous forms of the plane in the “Szürenon” series with depth and create a spatial appearance. The intricate organic forms appear in an imaginary space and are suggestive of depth and distance.

It is as if a fantastic and astonishing world of an underground zigzagging cave was revealed by the sudden flash of a light, and as if, after the light had gone out, the imagination continued drawing the forms which in reality, you had rather felt than seen.

Attila Csáji handling of light makes the amorphous patches concrete, that is, they are transformed into forms of three-dimensional expansion, and at the same time, it makes these forms elusive and undefinable, causing them to become mysterious and visionary. His method of painting, although it retains an almost naturalistic plasticity in certain details, does not approach microrealism, it rather points in the direction of organic abstract formations, which occur in informal art.

The “Szürenon” series still shows traces of narration, with a poetized vision of nature conceived as a theme, and with a pantheistic representation of nature. At that time, Attila Csáji wrote poems as well, which expressed the same mystic personification of the universe. And as early as the 1960s, there is light in his art, illuminating the “hidden face of nature”: a light that reveals the invisible and concealed essentials. It is light that embraces the intellect and the organic world in a single unity, that is, in his art, light becomes a mystic power which is able to weld together the infinite cosmos and the endless realm of human spirit. Besides being a visual representation of the universe's infinity, light in his pictures is a visual metaphor of personal existence and of the self-revealing intellect. The infinite macrocosm is rendered perceptible by this mystic light, in the same way as the truth of the individual existence uncovers itself in a light that originates from the depths of the personality. Light is the emanation of the spirit. As Csáji's poetic lines read:

*“Reality is evoked by its transient image
and the reality of this image is light
light is tangibly unconceivable
and allows you to sense the unconceivable
the light which is our life
...flows from an infinitely inward space
from the depths within us
this mystic light which flows
from the depths of the infinitely inward space”*

that is, from the ego, shines in the pictorial space of Attila Csáji 's works made during this time. The “Szürenon” series manifests the seldom meeting of the poetic and the visual, ways of expression. During the following years, the search for an autonomous pictorial system, pushes all types of narration into the background.

As early as 1964-65, Csáji makes a series, in which flowing calligraphic signs appear in organized, horizontal lines. These flowing forms are gestures which are similar to each other, but naturally, each is differently recorded. On the one hand, Csáji attempted to reconcile spontaneous improvisation with the previously planned visual system, and on the other hand, he attempted to control automatism. Because, if each flowing act repeats the same gesture, it means that the once spontaneous and motoric gesture-painting comes under the control of the conscious will.

Results of the above experiment were applied in the “Sign-Screen” series made between 1967 and 1970. In individual pieces there are sculpturesque forms moulded by a palette knife and arranged in horizontal rows. Certain “informal” formations stand out from the pictorial plane, as in a relief. These forms record the hand movement as it has moulded the soft material. They are fixed gestures, which are articulated by a sidelight and not by colour.

The gestures in the “Sign-Screen” series appear as some type of natural phenomenon: you can feel the movement, the painterly gestures and the action /action-painting/: however, at the same time, the created sculpturesque surface is not personal, it is object-like, objective, like an object of nature. The facture which is created by personal gestures, becomes self-sufficient, a “remnant”, or an “object”. Thus, the objective pictorial structure covers the personal message.

The “Sign-Screen” series with its sculpturesque surfaces, was the first work of Attila Csáji, where light was not a mere element represented or suggested by painterly means, but an active constituent in the creation of the picture. The strong sidelight enhances the sculpturesque quality of the art work: the lit details become more emphatic, the shadows become darker and convex forms are more concretely defined. At this time he began experimenting by moving the source of light, which produced constantly varying pictorial surfaces.

This use of light led to the idea of applying photo-sensitive colours. In the beginning he experimented with silver, since the metallic surfaces reinforce reflections of light. In the “Sign-Screen” series he frequently uses red or blue with silver, because against a silver surface lit by a strong sidelight, sculpturesque forms of warm red and blue, shine more intensely. The pictorial surface becomes a relief which, when moving the source of light, offers newer and newer visual experiences.

Also in the late 60s, Attila Csáji made series entitled “Messages”, which was based on the union of gesture-painting and systematic structure. In these works emphasis is given to the emotional and atmospherical suggestive force of colour. Part of Attila Csáji's artistic nature throughout his career, is the need to be more directly self-revealing, which entails also a strive to enhance the emotional-atmospherical voltage of his paintings. The “Messages” series is closely related to Hungarian Lyrical Abstraction's emotional trend, while the “Sign-Screen” series manifests the exploration of the pictorial structure and a more disciplined personal “vocabulary”. At this time, Hungarian “hard edge” art had been powerfully developing, its central element was the strictly impersonal building of forms. Attila Csáji however, has never associated himself with any trend: he has always kept his personal mode of expression and his strive for a synthesis. His art has retained lyricism, but has become stronger and stronger in its analytical approach.

For a short time, due to the sculpturesque moulding of the pictorial surfaces, Attila Csáji's colour-scheme is reduced to either silver or black as the predominant colours. The sculpturesque forms, as they are built in the surfaces of the “Black-picture” series, dating from 1971, develop the relief-like surface-modelling as shown in earlier works, in the direction of an almost sculptural nature. Various trivial objects and fragments of objects are placed on the surface, in frequently symmetrical, calm and balanced compositions. Everyday objects, materials and rubbish become indefinable under the effect of the silky black colour / or under the effect of complete colourlessness, or lightlessness / We see sombre, mysterious, quasi-sacred objects, like an altarpiece or belonging of an unknown culture. In some black painting the mysterious shine of regions painted in light-reflecting colour, stand

against non-reflecting surfaces and seem to float in space, suggestive of infinity. In other paintings, the sculptural surfaces appear as objects, like a memorial tablet dating from historical times, one which can no longer be deciphered. Yet, there are other paintings which show a black, light-less, infinite and incomprehensibly illusory space, where the shimmering light of shining objects, as if moved by an unknown power, float in the cosmos. In the picture entitled “Cosmos Rubbish” /1973/ there is an unfamiliar, sharp and aggressive object emerging from the centre. It is a threatening and provocative element, suggestive of the possible existence of life beyond our known world.

The “Black Pictures” manifested a notion of the unknown infinite space and showed the questionable nature of familiar relationships. They also expressed the eventuality of viewpoints and the relativity of modes of interpretation and approach. Yet, Attila Csáji was in search of new certainties which often have been found in old forms of expression, as manifested in artistic tradition. A characteristic example of this is the Kassák series which he made between 1971 and 1974. Besides rendering homage to the legendary figure of Hungarian avant-garde, it is a subjective re-interpretation of Kassák's “Pictorial Architecture”. Attila Csáji from geometric and organic abstract forms, made collages, which at times were remotely reminiscent of “Pictorial Architectures” of Kassák's Vienna period, or of the looser geometry of his later works. They were new attempts in combining a strict mechanical order with a lively and mobile system that reached beyond mechanisation. Although via a different system of forms, the “Kassák” series collages, mark the return to Csáji's familiar, fundamental issues. The mysterious and provocative surface of the “Black Picture” could exist in accordance with the strictly organised, rational compositions of both geometric and organic forms, in the “Kassák” series.

As unyielding and self-consistent as he was in following his own ways, Csáji never wanted to reject the influence of a given moment? Neither when he founded the group “SZÜRENON”, nor when he took part in preparing György Galántai's exhibitions in the Chapel of Balatonboglár, nor later in the early 70s, when, with some interesting works, he was involved with the break-through of Hungarian conceptual art. It was in conceptual works where Csáji's political, ideological and sociological interest could best manifest itself. It means that conceptualism for him, was not primarily a metalinguistic experiment, it was not the expression of tautological models and definitions, but the field where particular historical, social and political questions may be asked. A good example of this is the “Paving Stone” series he made between 1971 and 1973, in which this symbolic motif, with its multitude of diverse meanings, provided always newer definitions in always new contexts. In the work entitled “The Paving Stone's Tomb-Stone”, the object has become a political symbol, the weapon of the proletariat and the building stone of revolutionary barricades, that is the paving stone, is locked in a plastic, foiled box, labelled “Public Catering Company” and put on a catafalque. Thus, instead of being a weapon, it becomes a commodity.

The work made in 1975 entitled “House: Central Europe in the second part of the 20th Century”, is thought-provoking. It is a conceptual photo / silkscreen, in which an actual building becomes the allegory of Central European history, of cultural history and of identity confusion: One part of the building preserves its original late-19th century brick-panelled facades, with its original window-frames, eaves and ornaments around the windows. But the other side of the house has been “modernised”, that is, stripped down by the new owner. This side of the building is bleak, since the ornaments of the original facades have gone, but the building itself, with its original proportions, remains. The two different parts of the dissected house are mingled in the middle, over the gate, in an awkward and uncertain way. This meeting of the old and the pseudo-new, with its uncertainty and unsolved forms, with the radical dissection of a single building, is a single and compact symbol of a historical situation, the break of historical continuity, the impasse in the relationship of past and present, the attempt to simply and cruelly rid of the past, which is doomed to failure, and also of the lack of introspection. The two parts of the house are inherited by brothers, both sons of the same father. The inevitable alienation of the brothers due to their separate ways becomes a parable in

Attila Csáji's work. It is a visual metaphor of a serious historical and cultural, identity.

In 1975 Attila Csáji spent several months in Vence southern France, supported by a grant from the Károlyi Foundation. The collages he made there continue the structural principles of the Kassák-series, using different motives. At that time he composed his works out of planar forms which he had previously painted in grey China ink. Some forms are merely decorative elements, while others become, spatial forms that are indicated by tonal values. These elements transform plane into a three-dimensional space, while the sharp, clear contours return these forms into two-dimensional forms. Here Csáji is concerned with making the surface “polysemantic”, as was the case with his sculptural surfaces lit by strong sidelight. His forms here are more graceful, his lines are softer, and elegantly articulated by the Baroque-like curve of the contours. This is, no doubt, an influence of the Provence environment of Southern France.

Coming back to Hungary, Attila Csáji becomes more and more engaged with new possibilities of using light. From 1977 on, he participated in the program of laser research at the Central research Institute for Physics, Budapest, and attempted to apply the laser light in fine art. Although it is an aesthetic interpretation of a totally new technical medium, it represents for him a re-interpretation of his earlier painterly problems in a new medium, that is, the survey of the relationship between chance events, spontaneous movements and strict, pre-conceived systems.

As he wrote in 1982 “A single picture disc is able to record a multitude of rhythmic and composed visual information. The laser light here plays the same part as the pick-up does in the case of records: following the fixed track it projects the fixed optical information.” Laser light for him is no more than a technological instrument, such as the moving source of light, which ensures the widest possibilities of reading their “fixed optical information”. Attila Csáji in these works created a visual qualities and new effects. But it is very important that Attila Csáji in these works created a visual world which could only be produced by laser. It means that he did not only use new techniques in reconstructing a previously conceived visual world, but also preserves the spiritual nature and directions of his earlier art works. Thus, he creates a totally different and new visual system.

In the first laser animation film made in Hungary in 1982-83, Csáji re-worded the questions he had put forward some 15 years before as a painter. The film was the visual expression of a microscopic world and of vague forms seen from immeasurable distances, that are the experience and the interaction between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Again, as was 15 years before, his basic experience is the mystery of light: light which explains the infinite, dark space, and which helps us to create notions and conjectures: images which have never existed and never been seen. Research into the use of laser in the field of fine arts, led Csáji to the hologram. It seems that, in his later phase of production, he was successful in repeating the unification of the activities of the paths of the inventor artist, the informal painter, the conceptual artist, the researcher of technical mediums, the past avantgarde constructors and those who produced never and newer mediums, /For example, Tatlin, Moholy-Nagy / Csáji's holograms are far reachingly intellectual and if you wish, you may conceive from them, visually conceptual programs. However, in his laser hologram installations the sensuous experience of the primary vision connects with the theoretical, philosophical content.

The hologram entitled “Message to Joseph Kosuth” is a characteristically contextual work. Kosuth's work entitled “One and Three chairs” /1965/, which is considered to be one of the key works of conceptual art, was basically an examination of these relationships to each other: the concrete, individual object, its image as is created by recording the object, and its definition. Kosuth attempted to make art radically immaterial and notional. Attila Csáji his “Message” to Joseph Kosuth in 1984, during post modernism, after the flourish of conceptualism was over. He adds a fourth to the three stations, a hologram which is a totally illusory presentation. In this way, besides the tautological definition, he puts forward the sceptical statement that “everything is but an

illusion”, which rounds off the work. The four stations are significant both in their interrelationships, and from a historical point of view: conceptualism is present here as an experiment of modern art, as a question or a reference. And the hologram has a double role to play in the program: illusion is before your eyes as you walk in front of the small plate, yet then it suddenly disappears, and you must ponder over the question of the avantgarde: Is there a possibility of a recreated world coming into being, or is this only an utopia? Or is it a heroic dream radically identifying art and life?

Attila Csáji's artworks seem to be individually independent of each other or at least are loosely connected and are made of separate groups of art works. Throughout his paintings he takes a thought, even if he utilises different forms of structures. Within the last years, in his vast technical experiments, he creates a new unity, in which not only does he connect the different worlds of medium experience with the possibilities of communication, but also provides a less visible, survey of time. He is always able to find new context for the recurring questions of his artistic career, and simultaneously he makes one aware of the power and completing force of history, together with its ever new interpretations. With his individual and indefinably diverse ways, he has made a significant contribution to the last 25 years of Hungarian art.