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Unwanted by Both the Political Left and Right: Interwar Europe's Hungarian Migrating Artists

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Abstract

A little known group of Hungarian artists who were students at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest in 1927-1930, joined by a few artists from outside the Academy, were modernists. They explored the Soviet Russian avant-garde and abstraction, and therefore were rejected by the mainstream, right-wing official art in interwar Hungary. However, the strictly principled left-wing *Munka* (Work) Circle of Lajos Kassák was not hospitable to them, either. Members of "The Young Progressives" group left Hungary in or by 1930. The increasingly classicist Hungarian avant-garde did not tolerate bias; thus the idiosyncratic poet and artist Tamkó-Sirató had to leave Hungary, too and develop his *Dimensionism* in Paris.

Résumé

Parmi les jeunes artistes hongrois qui étudièrent à l'Académie des Beaux-Arts de Budapest entre 1927 et 1930, un petit groupe rejoignit le modernisme, auquel se rallièrent aussi quelques artistes extérieurs à l'Académie. Ils découvrirent l'avant-garde russe et la peinture abstraite, et furent donc rejetés par l'art officiel de droite de la Hongrie de l'entre-deux-guerres. Le milieu d'avant-garde socialiste *Munka* (Travail) de Lajos Kassák, dont les principes étaient très stricts, ne leur fut pourtant pas plus accueillant. Les membres du groupe « Les jeunes progressifs » quittèrent donc la Hongrie vers 1930. L'avant-garde hongroise, de plus en plus classicisante, ne tolérait aucun écart. Ainsi un poète et artiste aussi singulier que Tamkó-Sirató dû également quitter le pays pour Paris, où il développa le *Dimensionisme*.

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Why migrating from Hungary?

Although many artists of the avant-garde traveled and relocated for shorter or longer periods of time, such biographical details have not come down on the same note in history. For example, Picasso's moving from Barcelona to Paris and settling there, or the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg's frequent—indeed, almost incessant—travels between various cities and resorts of Europe are never referred to as migration. The term is reserved to moves, which are politically motivated and can be seen as exile. Migrants are artists who relocated because they had to flee their native country or the country of their residence in order to save their life, or have the freedom they needed for creative work.

The appearance of nine new states on the map of Europe in the wake of World War I¹ as the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires ceased to exist forced many artists, as well as other large groups of the population, to relocate. Besides, the Great War had deepened the rift between those who were eager to retaliate for their defeat and those who had been anti-war all along. The progressive artists in Central Europe,² who constituted the avant-gardes, were internationalist and attached their hopes to the concept of a new, postwar world of supranational fraternity. With the scathing experience of the War behind them, the avant-gardes of the 1920s were more bitterly anti-establishment than the pre-war generations. The shock of the Great War haunted Europe for decades and played a major role in shaping the political outlook and the views on art and culture of the generation that experienced the war period, whether or not they had served in the trenches.

Most of the left wing avant-gardes believed that a new egalitarian society was in the making modeled on post-revolutionary communist Russia. However, these expectations did not come true.

¹ Finland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

² Regarding the interwar era Germany can be counted among the Central European countries, not only because of its geographic position, but also because Berlin became the hub of a great number of Eastern and Central European artists, the "Wahlberliner" in Peter Gay's term, who chose to live in Berlin.

The fledgling German democracy, run by Social Democrats, was not becoming communist, and the possible leaders of such a development were murdered under murky circumstances in January 1919; the 1919 Bavarian Soviet Republic as well as the Hungarian Commune in the same year were crashed, and by the mid-1920s it was clear that no communist world revolution would happen in Berlin, or elsewhere.

The temporary or longtime relocations of artists must be examined in this postwar framework. In Hungary, similarly to other newly minted countries a new national cultural narrative was being constructed composed of local folk art and memories or invented bits of national mythology. While rightwing, conservative agents of the mainstream culture were busy re-writing the past and reinventing a national myth, progressives anticipated a future of cultural and scientific development. Being in minority and in opposition in their own state under political pressure drove many to migrate into one or another cosmopolitan metropolis, first of all Berlin or Paris. Not always correctly, they saw the international spirit in these cities as sign of an imminent new age of a collective, international society.³

From among the great number of Hungarian artists and intellectuals who emigrated from Hungary in the early 1920s⁴ and throughout the interwar period I would like to highlight a little-known and short lived group because of their unique position in the right wing proto-fascist country Hungary had turned into after August 1919: that they were rejected both by the officialdom and the avant-garde. After the defeat of the short-lived communist republic the country's new leader Admiral Horthy sent out troops to find

³ For a detailed discussion of the internationalist avant-garde's failure to understand the actual reality, see Éva Forgács, "Internationalists Spread Thin. The Hungarian Aspect 1920-1922," in Hubert van den Berg, Lydia Gluchowska eds., *Internationality and Internationalism in the European Avant-Garde in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Leeuven: Peeters, 2013), 145-164, especially p. 147: "George Grosz recalls in his Autobiography, that 'Foreigners who visited us at that time were easily fooled by the apparent light-hearted, whirring fun on the surface (...), the so-called freedom and the flowering of the arts. (...) But that was really nothing more than froth. Right under that short-lived, lively surface of the shimmering swamp was fratricide and general discord, and regiments were formed for the final reckoning.'

⁴ On the greatest migration of modern Hungarian history, see Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945* (Pieterlen, Switzerland: Peter Lang Verlag, 2009).

“revolutionaries” in hiding: everyone who could be even vaguely suspected of having cooperated with the Commune had good reason to flee for his life. The fledgling avant-gardes most of whom were socialist or communist emigrated as soon as they could and split into various factions, each vigilant to save their intellectual integrity.

The 1926 general amnesty made some of the exiles return and take up activities in Hungary, even in the midst of political censorship. This was the case of the leading figure of the Hungarian avant-garde, poet, writer, painter, editor and publisher Lajos Kassák (1887- 1967), who carved a special niche for himself in the Hungarian cultural scene, and his person as well as the community he organized had become an institution of progressive art and writing upon his return to Budapest. According to his autobiography as well as the memoirs of his friends and collaborators, Kassák was a leader of strong convictions and firm principles. Educated in the socialist workers’ movement in Hungary before and during the Great War, he was not only a passionate poet calling out those who caused the terrible suffering, but also got to understand the strategy of a political-artistic movement where unity is of the highest importance. He had seen his group split in Vienna and learned that dissent and differing views had to be suppressed—the more so in a hostile environment where censors and political opponents could easily take advantage of the inner rifts of a group. Seeing the rise of a new generation of left-wing artists, Kassák was both welcoming and guarded towards them.

The Young Progressive Painters

The young forward-looking artists emerged in Hungary in late 1920s, when Horthy’s regime was consolidating and Kassák attempted to resume his avant-garde activities in Budapest. They were around twenty years of age, radically innovative in art, and socialist-leaning idealists with no political experience. They saw various iterations of artistic modernism as a strong argument for a better future both in culture and the society. Most of

them attended the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest between 1927-1930, and were joined by a few others from outside the Academy. The painters who founded a common platform were Dezső Korniss (1908-1984), György Kepes (1906-2001), Sándor Trauner, (1906-1993), Lajos Vajda (1908-1941), Ernő Schubert (1903-1960), Béla Hegedűs (1910-1940), and Béla Veszelszky (1905-1977). They were soon labeled the “Young Progressives,” as they distinguished themselves advocating cubism, Russian constructivism, French surrealism, and early cinema (Fig. 1). As students they studied to paint in post-impressionist style, which they found stuffy and unexciting. They were interested in creating a new blend of the latest modernist directions that they labeled “constructive surrealism,” which materialized in painting as well as photomontages, where constructivist compositions could be paired with surrealist imagery. While the geometric order of the constructivist framework visualized their universal utopias, the photographic details of surrealist works referred to the social realities they experienced: suffering, violence, poverty and inequality—all of which appeared absurd in the light of their ideas of a better future.



Figure 1. The “Progressive Artists” group, Budapest, 1929: Unknown photographer. Seated: Béla Veszelszky, György Kepes, Eva Balla, Sándor Trauner; stands: Dezső Korniss. The woman on the left is not identified.

Since very few documents are available from the existence of the group, the program of “constructive surrealism,” developed during their student years, is also projected back to this era from their later statements. Vajda wrote in a letter to his wife in 1936: “I am experimenting with positioning various objects from different environments in one single picture plane (constructive surrealist schematic).”⁵ In the mid-1930s he cooperated with Korniss in this spirit.

At the same time a new chapter started in the Hungarian avant-garde with Kassák’s arrival back from his Vienna exile in 1926. He almost immediately launched a new avant-garde periodical *Dokumentum* (Document), only to realize that he could not continue where he had left it in 1919: interest in the avant-garde was gone, and there were hardly any artists or audiences that wanted to get involved in oppositional art. Trying to adapt with the least possible compromise, Kassák re-styled his mode of communication and launched his new journal *Munka* (work) in 1928. Getting more acquainted with the new realities in Hungary he understood that a new voice and a new demographic were needed for a progressive movement. As the name ‘Work’ indicates, Kassák replaced his previous radically modernist program by one that aimed at everyday life and focused, instead of oppositional liberals and literati, on young, socialist skilled workers. This was a tradition he had brought from the pre-war Social Democratic Party, which, again, proved to be his resource.

Reaching out to young workers entailed many changes in his former avant-garde agenda: clear language, cleaned of expressionist and modernist style, and generally understandable topics of interest to his target audience. This entailed providing space, both in print and actual activities to such popular items as sport and leisure. This was a re-interpretation of the avant-garde, turning it into the political and cultural workshop and

forum of the young workers, who were, other than this, not represented on the cultural forums of Hungary. In a section for correspondence readers could share ideas and express massive social discontent and criticism, however not generally, but concerning concrete experiences. One of the most important innovative features of *Munka* was publication of a new kind of photography that Kassák labeled “socio-photo.” This became a movement, and *Munka* turned into a new platform for excellent photographers of strong social consciousness documenting poverty and oppression in Hungary. In spite of the new, politically more rigorous and more populist voice of the journal, which adapted a near-classicist style, such authors as critic Ernő Kállai and artist László Moholy-Nagy, committed to modernism, also published in *Munka*, along with other previous, avant-garde collaborators of Kassák. The *Munka Circle* held regular meetings and organized a recital choir. The choir recited poetry, to a strong vocal and political effect, tangibly, as well as symbolically, demonstrating the power of collective action. The Young Progressives started to attend the meetings of the *Munka Circle* and cooperated with it in several ways. Vajda, for example, was member of the recital choir, while the others participated in various events and activities of the Circle. Most of them published drawings in various issues of the journal.

The Hungarian officialdom kept a vigilant eye not only on Kassák and his group, but also on the Academy of Fine Arts’ spirit and teaching, in particular the young art students and their friends. Their initial public appearance happened in March 1928, when Trauner and Schubert had a small exhibition in the back room of the Budapest bookshop called “Mentor.” This location was Kassák’s headquarters, known to the authorities as the hotbed of socialist ideas. This small show was followed by a more comprehensive group exhibition of the fine arts students in the Budapest Múcsarnok (Hall of Arts) in May 1928. This event was a critical success, except for the Young Progressives, whose paintings raised the eyebrows

⁵ Lajos Vajda, Letter to his wife Júlia, Szentendre, September 3, 1936, published in Iván, Dévényi ed., *Vajda Lajos Emlékkönyv* (Lajos Vajda memorial book) (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972), 12. Author’s translation.

of State Secretary Gyula Kornis (no relation to the painter), who found the modernist abstract works scandalously unacceptable for the mainstream, government-sponsored Christian-conservative neo-classicist direction. He sent out a State Control Committee to the Academy of Fine Arts to take a thorough look at the students' works.⁶ The investigations of this Committee culminated in yet another scandal, as they found many more abstract and surrealist works and photo collages on the studio walls than what had already upset them at the exhibition. Moreover, the students painted cubistic, geometric, pre-tachist works, that the Committee found not only aesthetically but, more importantly, politically subversive. The photomontages shocked them, and called the young artists an "anarchist, bolshevik gang."⁷ That rebellious spirit had to be exorcised from the Academy, therefore not only were the progressive students dismissed, but also their teachers: established painters holding the honorable title 'Professor' István Csók and János Vaszary were, in an unprecedented way, fired for not having disciplined their students. With that act the political regime indicated that no bias from the officially supported figurative right-wing art was tolerated, and choosing a different style was seen as political dissent.

The scandal of their dismissal from the Academy brought the Young Progressives to the attention of the artists and critics who continued to advocate the marginally still existing avant-garde art. Critic and curator Miklós Rózsa (1873-1945) invited most of them to participate at the group exhibition of KÚT (Képzőművészek Új Társasága, or New Association of Artists) at the Nemzeti Szalon (National Salon) in 1929.⁸ KÚT was a platform of modernism, if not of the avant-garde. Its members were progressive, but not radical. Rózsa was a great—perhaps, at the time, the greatest—authority in matters of art in interwar Hungary. He

had played an important role in creating the art scene of Budapest at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He had been a journalist, banker, and, most of all, art critic and organizer of exhibitions,⁹ respected enough to be able to call the attention of the art world to the young painters by exhibiting them.

Following their appearance at the KÚT show Kassák also invited them to attend the meetings of his newly organized *Munka Circle*. The invitation was preceded by a highly positive review of the KÚT exhibition by Kassák himself, in which he wrote:

The young artists of KÚT, Sándor Trauner, Ernő Schubert, György Kepes, Dezső Korniss, Béla Hegedüs and Lajos Vajda are young only in the number of their years, but they are they past adolescence in their work, too. Their restrained colors and simplified forms communicate profound human lyricism to those who understand the formal language of painting. (...) We in the *Munka Circle* register the emergence of the six new artists with pleasure.¹⁰

It was inevitable that the Young Progressives and the new iteration of the Hungarian avant-garde find each other and make an attempt to cooperate. There was hardly any other intellectual home for the emerging artists than Kassák's group around *Munka*.

As mentioned, Kassák was a rigorous leader and kept iron discipline among his supporters. He would have welcomed the Young Progressives indeed, had they accepted his ideas, rule, and authority in art as well as politics. Having adjusted to the new Hungarian political and artistic scene Kassák was determined to survive by pushing but not crossing the boundaries of censorship. He wanted to keep the spirit of the avant-garde going by creating cultural space for it under the vigilant eyes of the censors; and still, within certain limits, gaming the system. The last thing he wanted was

⁶ Quoted from Dezső Kornis's unpublished Autobiography, in Lóránd Hegyi, *Dezső Kornis* (Budapest: Corvina, 1982), 16.

⁷ For more details, see L. Hegyi, "Korniss Dezső első alkotói korszaka 1923-1933" (Dezső Korniss's First Creative Period 1923- 1933), *Ars Hungarica* (1976/1): 101-102.

⁸ István Vas, *Nehéz szerelem* (Hard love) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1972), 602; quoted by Hegyi, *Dezső Kornis*, 172, N.30.

⁹ *Art Magazine Online*, http://www.artmagazin.hu/artmagazin_hirek/uj_szinben_rozsa_miklos_es_m369veszonarckep-gy369itemenye_19321943.204.html

¹⁰ Lajos Kassák "A KUT Fialtaljai," *Munka* (February 12, 1930): 382. As Emese Révész pointed out (http://www.revart.eoldal.hu/cikkek/kepzo_muveszeti-foiskola-tortenete/csok-istvan-muveszpedagogiaja.html), Kassák published a reproduction of each member of the Young Progressives, except for Vajda.

politically charged aesthetic radicalism within his own group that could have led to the banning of his activities and Circle by the authorities – he had already ample experience of the process from 1916 when his first journal was banned.

He had an authoritarian style of leadership and wanted more unconditional loyalty and ideological commitment, from the Young Progressives, than they could, or were willing to muster. Kassák needed straightforward activism in the *Munka Circle*, and austere pathos: he did not approve the Progressives' artistic modernism, which, he thought, disregarded the particular aesthetic preferences attributed to the working classes and would be a potential danger to the whole *Circle*. In the late 1920s Kassák found photography the adequate modern medium of art for the working classes, and he disapproved that the Young Progressives created paintings, and mostly abstract ones at that, rather than more directly connecting to a wider audience through photography. Although the Young Progressives were leftwing and socialist, they did not entirely fit into the *Circle* politically and aesthetically: they were more independent, intellectually and artistically not as disciplined and as ideological as Kassák required. Their free experimental spirit would have challenged the other members of the group, should Kassák have tolerated it. Kassák forged an agenda and kept to it, while the young ones looked in every possible direction. Vajda, for example, created works on paper with Cyrillic writing on them, in a nod to the Soviet-Russian avant-garde, which he had exhibited in the KÚT exhibition. (Fig.2) This, in the Hungarian political context, was stepping over the red line of absolute ban on everything communist. Vajda was leftwing but not a communist: he was intrigued by the Russians, and expressed it in a few works.

In March 1930 a large-scale avant-garde exhibition titled *New Progressive Artists* opened in Budapest's Tamás Gallery, one of the few venues of modernist art, where several shows of KÚT also took place. Besides the six artists of the Young Progressives' abstract and surrealist works, the other

participants were social realists, that is, figurative, politically more disciplined, and committed to the socialist mantra 'art for the people.' This time Kassák was strongly critical, and excluded the young artists from the *Munka Circle* in unmistakable terms.¹¹



Figure 2. Lajos Vajda (1908-1941), *Film*, 1928. Pencil and watercolor on paper. Private Collection.
Vajda meant to evoke a Russian avant-garde painting, but his spelling of the word Film is according to Serbian orthography.

Trajectories of the Group's Members

Since they failed to find an artistic and intellectual home and remained in artistic and political isolation, the group of the Progressives dissolved in 1930. As their friend and contemporary, poet István Vas wrote in his memoirs, "They started to understand that the total lack of understanding on behalf of the public stood in the way of their further artistic development."¹² The members of the Young Progressives, with the exception of Schubert, left Hungary in, or by 1930. Some forever, some temporarily; but each of them entered a new physical and semantic environment.

¹¹ This was mentioned in a lot of personal communication by many members of the Young Progressives, but Kassák did not leave a paper trail of this move. See also Hegyi, *Kornis*, 16.

¹² István Vas, *Nehéz szerelem* (Hard love) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1972), 602; quoted by Hegyi, *Dezső Kornis*, 172, N.30.

Trauner relocated in Paris already in 1929, where he became the assistant of set designer Lazare Meerson, working on such films as *À nous la liberté* (1932) and *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935). In 1937, he became a chief set designer, and worked in the majority of Marcel Carné's films. Besides he worked with Billy Wilder, Joseph Losey, and was recipient of Academy Award for best Production Design. He had a retrospective of his paintings in the Hungarian National Gallery in 1981.

Vajda spent four years in Paris, from 1930 to 1934, making photo-collages and paintings. He lived very modestly, almost without any income. He studied the Paris museums, medieval cathedrals and besides keeping in touch with his friend Trauner, got acquainted with other Hungarian émigrés in Paris. He was the most receptive to the constructive idiom of the Russian avant-garde. He knew the 1925 *Europa Almanach* edited by Paul Westheim and Karl Einstein, published in Potsdam, and hand-copied Malevich's and El Lissitzky's articles in the volume.¹³ He tried his hand in constructivist compositions as well, which was only an episode in his career. His collages reflect both his vision of the world and the new art forms, and his lack of money for paint and canvas. When he returned to Hungary in 1934, he spent most of his time working in the small town Szentendre, a few miles north of Budapest and developed a unique oeuvre that defies stylistic categorization. He drew and painted visionary images with precise lines that did not, however, amount to a realistic style. Many of his works remained sketches on paper that he had planned to paint in oil on canvas, but he lacked the money to execute this plan. His untimely death at the age of thirty-three of tuberculosis was precipitated by the forced labor service he was obliged to as a Jew.

Kepes, who collaborated with Kassák in the *Munka Circle*, and began to search for means by which he could contribute to the alleviation of social injustice, especially (as he later recalled) the inhumane conditions of the Hungarian peasantry,

settled in Berlin in 1930, where he worked as a publication, exhibition and stage designer. Around this time, he designed the dust jacket for Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim's famous book, *Film als Kunst* (Film as Art),¹⁴ one of the first published books on film theory. In Berlin, he was also invited to join the design studio of László Moholy-Nagy. When, in 1936, Moholy relocated his design studio to London, Kepes joined him there as well. When Moholy-Nagy became director of the Institute of Design (or New Bauhaus) in Chicago, he invited Kepes to teach a class on light and color. Kepes worked there from 1937 to 1943. He then taught at Brooklyn College, published *Language of Vision* in 1944, and in 1947 he accepted an invitation from the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT to initiate a program there in visual design, a division that later became the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Kepes edited a series of anthologies on the scientific, psychological, and aesthetic nature of vision and motion. A permanent exhibition opened in Eger, Hungary, in 2012 of Kepes's paintings, photos, and light-based works in a museum named after him, the György Kepes Cultural and Art Institute.

Veszelszky went to Vienna in 1930, and moved to Berlin in 1932. In 1933 he returned to Hungary, was an art teacher at Eger, and belonged to an esoteric circle of artists and intellectuals.¹⁵ He developed an increasingly dot-based style in painting, which was often mentioned in relation to Abstract Expressionism, but it was entirely independent from all directions in painting. He was not driven by color theory and the ambition to render luminosity as the pointillists: the loose system of dots, of which he constructed his pictures, originated from his gnostic spirituality, according to which the point is the basic building block of all higher spiritual reality.¹⁶ He supported himself from day jobs, participated in collective exhibitions, and was recognized as a painter only in 1964, after an exhibition with another artist in a

¹³ These manuscripts were exhibited in the Hungarian National Gallery's Vajda retrospective in 2006. The notes are in a private collection in Budapest.

¹⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film als Kunst* (Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt, 1932).

¹⁵ He belonged to the Hungarian gnostic circle led by Ferenc Kepes, who happened to be his friend György Kepes's uncle.

¹⁶ For detailed discussion, see Gábor András, *Béla Veszelszky* (Budapest: Új Művészet Könyvek, 1992), 8-9.

private Budapest apartment. Now his works are in leading Hungarian museums.

Schubert remained in Hungary, became member of the Socialist Artists' group in the early 1930s, and participated in group exhibitions. From the mid-1930s he developed interest in furniture and textile design, and organized a carpet-weaving workshop. In the wake of World War II he joined the Communist Party. From 1948 to 1953 he was director of the Hungarian Academy of Decorative Arts, where he taught until his death.

Little is known about Hegedüs's short life and career. An art critic, who signed his review with his initials only, lampooned the painting he showed in the KÚT exhibition.¹⁷ The author N.N. described Hegedüs's surrealist collage as ridiculous for applications of wooden rods, a fork, a tin spoon, some newspaper, fragments of photos, nailed or glued to the canvas, and found it outrageous that there was a price tag next to the picture. Such response to modernist artworks was typical in the mainstream Budapest press. The description brings to mind Russian avant-garde works of the 1910s as well as works of Paris Cubism.

Another Emigré: Károly Tamkó-Sirató

Kassák's *Munka Circle* ended up being the only organized platform of oppositional art, so that there was simply no room for any other trend that would vigorously confront the reactionary mainstream art establishment in an organized—or in any—form. A glaring example to the outcast status of someone outside Kassák's circle is the solitary figure of the poet and visual artist Károly Tamkó-Sirató (1905-1980), who, strongly influenced by Francis Picabia, wrote picture poems and attempted to represent a technically informed Dada direction in Hungary. He coined the term 'Planism' to these word-images in one picture

¹⁷ N. N., "A 88-as kép a KÚT kiállításán," (Painting No. 88 at the KÚT exhibition) *Magyarság* (January 26, 1930): 11.

plane. He came up with yet another term: he accidentally found the ancient Slavic word 'glogao' that means 'speak,' and since he knew he was using a new way of speaking, he named his new art Glogoism. When he wanted to publish his poems in a literary journal in 1926—*Magyar Írás* (Hungarian writing), the most progressive journal of the time—the editor told him: "This cannot be published. Everyone will think that we are crazy," whereupon Tamkó-Sirató quipped: "You are crazy! Do you think that now, after Dadaism, these poems would be taken for foolish? Europe is full of the wildest ideas in art!" But the editor riposted: "That is Europe. We are, however, in Hungary."¹⁸

When the poet finally found a publisher, he, in spite of giving green light to his book, commented on his work: "Sir, this is subversive and anti-social! It is even communist propaganda!"¹⁹ The reviews were even harsher. A daily tabloid went as far as asking, "Where is the prosecutor? Why does he not confiscate it? Right away! Immediately! At once! [...] This is rotten! Nauseating!"²⁰ Another daily, the *Budapesti Hírlap* (Budapest News), as Tamkó-Sirató recalls, "not only claimed that I was insane, but accused me of igniting a revolt against social order, of insulting religion, and of every possible vice."²¹ Seeing the utterly hostile reception even from progressive corners, he left Hungary for Paris in 1930. He was the most articulate, and most aware of the re-semanticization of his works. "My planist poems looked and sounded totally different in French," he wrote. "As if a foundation, the similar poems by Apollinaire and Picabia had been unconsciously associated with them," so that they appeared to be part of an ever-growing organic process of culture, whereas in Hungary they had been detached and lonely. Not even I was able to see them as part of anything."²²

In Paris, 1936 he launched the *Dimensionist Manifesto*, in which he urged artists and audiences

¹⁸ Károly Tamkó-Sirató, "A Dimenzionista Manifesztum története" (History of the Dimensionist Manifesto), Typewritten manuscript in the archives of the Hungarian Research Institute of Art History, MKI, file MDK-C-22/1, 1966.

¹⁹ Quoted by Júlia Szabó, "Tamkó-Sirató Károly," in *Magyar Művészet 1919-1945* (Hungarian art, 1919-1945) (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985).

²⁰ *Nyolc Órai Újság* (8 o'clock News), Clipping in Tamkó-Sirató, "A Dimenzionista Manifesztum története,"¹⁷.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Károly Tamkó-Sirató, *Dimensionist Manifesto* (Paris, 1936).

to come to terms with the new concepts of space and time—the new dimensions—and the new relations they open up, like the creation of kinetic and even intangible art works. The Manifesto was signed, and thus supported, by Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, Arp, Duchamp, altogether thirty-eight artists, with Antonio Pedro from Lisbon among them.

Politics of Art in Interwar Hungary

The group of the Young Progressives found themselves trapped between the mainstream pious, neo-catholic, neo-classicist style, and the Lajos Kassák-led socialist, progressive avant-garde, which was increasingly adopting a sociological approach and developed its own version of a new classicism, and was increasingly intolerant toward avant-garde styles. The Young Progressives' forced emigration from Hungary testifies to the impossibility of nuanced discourse and a multifaceted art life, whereas the Young Progressives, as well as the idiosyncratic Tamkó-Sirató represented a great variety of artistic styles and languages. As they were rejected by both the official culture and its opposition, a rich fabric of alternative art was thrown out. While abroad, they adopted new styles and genres, and went beyond the limits of even the most progressive concepts of art in Hungary, where it appears that only Kassák could upkeep his increasingly disciplined avant-garde movement, while others did not have the time or the cultural space to develop alternative trends. This tells about the ossified state of the cultural blocks in Hungary during the interwar era. Those artists who returned to Hungary in the 1930s remained isolated and their oeuvres have yet to be fully integrated into the narrative of Hungarian modernism.