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PARAPHRASE AS AN ACT OF ART: SOME ASPECTS IN THE WORK OF THE ŁÓDŹ KALISKA AND THE SUBSTITUTE THIRSTERS ARTIST COLLECTIVES

The Substitute Thirsters (Hejettes Szomlyazók) were a group of artists active between 1984 and 1992, founded by István Elek (Kada), Balázs Fekete, Attila Nagy, Péter Kardos (who distanced himself from the group in 1985), and Tibor Várnagy, who knew each other from an art workshop.¹ Three more artists joined later on: Balázs Beöthy (1985), Attila Danka (1987) and Rolland Pereszlényi (1989). The name – with spelling mistakes referencing the cult of ‘genius dilettantes’ in the eighties – is of biblical origin: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:6), and may also be a reflection on the circumstantial bureaucracy of the socialist system, as well as on the traditions of ‘substitution’ dominant in the Eastern European Neo-avant-garde.²

In the summer of 2017, two complementary exhibitions opened, providing a comprehensive presentation of the activity of the group throughout the eight years of its existence. With a periodization based on these two exhibitions, the first, ‘underground’ period of their activity can be dated between 1984 and 1987 (presented at the exhibition *Rügyfakadás / Budburst* at the New Budapest Gallery, from 31 May until 3 September 2017), and their second period, showing signs of

gradual institutionalization between 1987 and 1992 (*A kopár szék sarja / Sparse Alkali Flats* at the Ludwig Museum between 14 July and 10 September 2017). Not only did these exhibitions feature some reconstructions, they also unearthed a number of works believed to be missing or forever lost, shedding new light on the ‘alternative’ art of the eighties.

The Substitute Thirsters deserve special attention owing not only to their uniqueness amongst the numerous groups active during the late Kádár-era,³ but also to the diversity of their artistic approaches (painting, graphic art, installation, living art, literature, self-published samizdat⁴ journals and artistic books, music, film), the collective nature of their practice, as well as their instinctive congruence with the idiosyncrasies of the period’s local and international art worlds and shifting status in sync with the change of regime (from underground to ‘overground’).

Their relationship with the Polish artist group Łódź Kaliska (founders: Marek Janiak, Adam Rzepecki, Andrzej Świetlik, Andrzej Wielogórski, and Andrzej Kwietniewski as a ‘resting member’ since 2007) is particularly worth highlighting from this network. This short paper underlines some aspects of the cooperation

methods between the two groups and their relationship with paraphrase as a genre. The Polish artist group's members⁵ are practically the only artists in the region whose activities – except for, perhaps, some of Milan Knížák's art show a number of similarities with the Substitute Thirsters.

Tibor Várnagy took a key role in establishing the connection. Várnagy who was the head of the Liget Gallery, one of the centres of experimental art of the eighties, between 1983 and 2022 met Józef Robakowski in Budapest in 1986, as a participant in the 2nd International Portfolio exhibition curated by John P. Jacob at Liget Gallery. Várnagy remembers the encounter:

I showed him our *Világnézettségi Magazin* (Worldviewership Magazine), which immediately brought a smile on his face, spurring him to tell us about a similar Polish samizdat published by the Łódź Kaliska group under the title *Tango*. He invited me to participate in the First International Videoclip Festival in Łódź, organized by him in January of 1987. I set off on a harsh winter day, arriving in Poland to find the country in a state of emergency, with a 10/11 pm curfew in place. Those were the days of the infamous Jaruzelski era. It was an adventurous trip, at times a bit frightening, but generally high-spirited, and peppered with house parties, giving me a chance to meet the members of Łódź Kaliska and many other Polish colleagues. We exchanged publications with Łódź Kaliska. The difference between their *Tango* and our magazine was that while ours was primarily based on graphic reproduction techniques, theirs – partly due to their involvement in film and photography – relied far more heavily on photographic means. Like us, they used a mimeograph for printing the text, and also made use of screen printing, stamp printing and sometimes lino printing as well. They had started publishing *Tango* a few years earlier than we launched our *Világnézettségi Magazin*,

but both periodicals had their last issues printed before 1987. Another similarity between the two groups was that like us, they were also keen on making parodies, paraphrases and persiflage. Moreover, both groups were eager to involve colleagues in producing their publications, performances and actions. Artists from outside their group (among others, Jolanta Ciesielska, Zbigniew Libera, Zofia Łuczko, Jacek Kryszkowski, Zygmunt Rytka) were featured in *Tango* and in their actions, just like in our *Világnézettségi Magazin*.⁶

The daredevils of the Jaruzelski-era named their group after the Łódź train station in 1979. The first time they visited Hungary was in 1989, two years after being invited by Tibor Várnagy.⁷ A few days before their opening (*Nie Pierdol* □ *Ten Years of Łódź Kaliska*, in the scope of which they made a paraphrase of Goya's *Third of May 1808* in collaboration with members of the Substitute Thirsters), they participated in one of the openings of the exhibition *Fractions* (at which, incidentally, the Beöthy-Várnagy duo exhibited the work *Polack Wenger*, made in 1987 for the *Węgierska Sztuka Młodych* exhibition in Warsaw, reminiscent of the works of Oldenburg or even Szajna) and a collective action painting event.⁸

In turn, the Substitute Thirsters were invited to Łódź in December and gave an impromptu concert at the legendary artist-run space, the Wschodnia Gallery.⁹ Wearing dressing gowns, the men played music on found, modified or recycled objects (a dustbin, lid, pot, plastic pipe): they interpreted banal pop hits and various songs, including a Mozart paraphrase rehearsed with composer Gábor Litván, pounding the ad-hoc instruments with beef shin bones, which seemed more like a musical piece of absurd theatre, diffusing the strict and serious boundaries of performance as a genre, and according to some recollections, thus ironically commenting on the untenable conditions that characterized Poland in the eighties. Łódź Kaliska visited Hungary on several other occasions,¹⁰ and in 1999 they even

made a paraphrase of Mihály Zichy's monumental romantic painting *The Triumph of the Genius of Destruction* in the artist's birth place at the Zala Museum.

Łódź Kaliska operated at Strych (Attic), one of the places that were established against the Avant-garde/Neo-avant-garde traditions that had often become dogmatic by the end of the seventies. These places, like Wschodnia Gallery, Józef Robakowski's Exchange Gallery, usually operated in the apartments of the artist-organizers. Strych was one of the centres of the Polish new wave *Kultura Zrzuty* (Pitch-In Culture), of which Łódź Kaliska was an active participant between 1982 and 1988, and the location where the *Tango* samizdat was published. In the nineties, the 'revitalization' of the street where Strych was located is also linked to the group, more specifically to the activities of Marek Janiak and Andrzej Kwietniewski. The most important 'art club' of Łódź was opened here. The Łódź Kaliska pub, one of the city's must-see attractions, has postmodern interior design solutions, and is decorated with the group's artwork. It essentially functions as the Łódź Kaliska Museum, and its realization, in sync with the group's activities, carries many contradictions bordering on self-irony and memorialization.

Their initial period of the Polish group was spent in the underground scene, similarly to the Substitute Thirsters. They were also an open community, and the kinship between their samizdat *Tango* and the *Világnézettségi Magazin* (in A4 and A3 format, mixed media, published monthly then irregularly in 100 copies) is as indubitable as the similarity in the subversive and insolent spirit of both communities, incessantly mocking the bureaucratic socialist institutions. Nevertheless, their use of media was different: from the beginning, Łódź Kaliska's primary interest lay in technical media, that is, photography and film. From 1980/81, it turned to Dada-based gestures, happenings, communicating through manifestos as the Substitute Thirsters did, through the two manifestos created during their existence. The film academy of Łódź certainly played a role in this, as this was where the revival of Polish cinema

began, not to mention the presence of video art (Józef Robakowski): these were the roots of the activity of Łódź Kaliska. The Substitute Thirsters as a community used photography less frequently, they tended to use graphic media and painting as their point of departure, and installation and action art as their means of expression. Their film made in 1990 (*The Private Life of the Substitute Thirsters*) has been lost, but many videos of the group's actions survived, including the reconstruction of the original action painting on the Eastern side of the former Berlin Wall (1990).

Łódź Kaliska's Dadaist, or more precisely, Duchampist basic stance is more consistent than in the case of the Substitute Thirsters, which was not dominated by a specific approach or artistic interest. Łódź Kaliska made direct references to Duchamp's works throughout their activity (such as *The Bride Stripped Bare* at Liget Gallery, a direct reference to *The Large Glass* in 1999). The two groups also had different ideas about collective work: for Łódź Kaliska it was important to name the originators and creators of each piece, documenting each work by Łódź Kaliska both as co-authored and individual creations. In terms of their interest in paraphrases, however, the two groups are similar. At the same time, from 1986, the Substitute Thirsters turned to historical painting and the national theme with more frequency, whereas Łódź Kaliska only began to study traditional Polish patriotism and Catholicism, Polish historicism, the cultural history of specific national events or figures after the regime change, around the time of its institutionalization, and still finds endless inspiration in these.

This was evidenced by their latest exhibition entitled *Prophets' Parade*, which was presented by the New Budapest Gallery in 2016. The pixelization of Jan Styka's allegorical-historical painting *Polonia*, commemorating the 'May Constitution' of 1791, and the presentation of a wall preventing viewership is part of their project dealing with the cult of Adam Mickiewicz, the author of *Pan Tadeusz*, one of the 'three bards' of Polish romantic literature (along with Krasiński and Słowacki). Mickiewicz was born and grew up





1. Substitute Thirsters and Łódź Kaliska together, *Fractions/Frakciók*, Stúdió Gallery, 1989. Photographer: István Halas

Courtesy of Tibor Várnagy

2. Substitute Thirsters and Łódź Kaliska together, *Fractions/Frakciók*, Stúdió Gallery, 1989. Photographer: István Halas

Courtesy of Tibor Várnagy

3. Łódź Kaliska re-creating Mihály Zichy's *The Triumph of the Genius of Destruction* at Zala Museum, 1999. Photographer: Marek Grygiel

Courtesy of Tibor Várnagy

4. Substitute Thirsters / Hejettes Szomlyazók, Galeria Wschodnia, Łódź, 1989. Photographer: Boleslaw J. Kapuściński

Courtesy of Tibor Várnagy



5. Substitute Thirsters / Hejettes Szomlyazók and their work *The Condemned Cell*, Stúdió Gallery, 1986. Photographer: Tibor Várnagy
 Courtesy of Tibor Várnagy

in the Lithuanian territory of the Polish-Lithuanian state under Russian rule. Thus the work, evoking the perception of history by the painting, also reflects on the aspects of national canons marked on the axes of language and geography and the culture connected to Poland, which actually did not exist on the map and was divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia. In 1999, the paraphrase of Jan Matejko's painting (1878) commemorating the victory over the Teutonic Knights of the united Polish-Lithuanian army, which also included various peoples, the *Battle of Grinwald* (1410), was created with the participation of the public, effectively drawing attention to the myths of the heroic battle/historical glory. *Polonia* was originally in Lwów (today Lviv, Ukraine), then, in accordance with the Potsdam Conference (1945),

which annexed Galicia to the Soviet Union in the east and 'enriched' Poland with parts of Germany in the west, it was taken to the 'reclaimed' Wrocław, to the basement of the museum. Thus, the fate of the picture also reflects on post-war Polish history.¹¹ The foreground of their interest is therefore the questioning of the canon of romantic-historical painting and literature, as well as the cult of genius that accompanies it, i.e. the objectified and symbolic forms of the transformation and interpretation of historical events into a heroic national past. In the eighties, Łódź Kaliska used photography as a tool, making classical genre pictures with the contribution of their friends, drawing on outstanding works from the world history of fine art. Such were the appropriation of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* or Goya's

Third of May 1808, which put great European revolutions and paradigm shifts in art into quotation marks and reflected on the devolving of such 'iconic' sights.

The Substitute Thirsters' oil paintings (initially their collective work was dominated by this technique, until it was replaced by paper-based works and installation after 1986) and their collectively edited samizdat publication (1984-85) reflect this approach the best. Kada (István Elek) shared literary inclinations that had an important role in wording the slogans of the magazine, most of which he had previously realized in the form of posters, and he was also actively engaged in tasks around the 'production' of the publication. Evocative of the lyrics of some pop hit, the title of the painting *I Take Your Blackbirds into My Heart* (1984), for instance, is characterized by the mixing of different cultural contents or layers. In this case, the work of Gyula Konkoly from 1968, *A Rose Speaks More* can be considered an antecedent, also marking the place of Pop Art among the antecedents integrated into the program of the Substitute Thirsters, but we can mention the works produced during the collaboration of János Vető and Lóránt Méhes, i.e. Zuzu-Vető, in the early eighties. Substitute Thirsters' painting *The Summer Of My Youth* employs a wealth of artistic and cultural references constructed like a montage. Its axioms were based on powerful visual content with graffiti-like catchy and often lyrical linguistic solutions, which ignores orthography altogether (see for example the lack of punctuation in the text written for their exhibition *Second Wave* at the Bercsényi College in 1985). This includes the juxtaposition of (hoax) news inspired by the language of the period's press, art brut, figures resembling children's drawings. Such solutions appear on their co-authored paintings and the 'journal-paraphrase' pages of the *Világnézettségi Magazin*¹² (printed using a DIY silk screen made of a window frame and some fabric stretched across it) almost in the spirit of Cut'n'Mix, based on linguistic and cultural code-switching.¹³

The Substitute Thirsters 'period of great installations' took place in this context, entailed

by a switch to paper-based pictures, forcing the artists to use recycled, easily accessible, 'poor' materials and a 'penniless aesthetic.'¹⁴ In 1987 they were invited to East Berlin for a group exhibition with East German artists. Their paraphrase of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altar*, or rather its sculptural 'analysis,' was made for this occasion. The contradictions of the last years of socialism are well illustrated by the fact that in 1986 their exhibition in Komárom was banned and in 1987 they were forced by a police intervention to shut down Plato's Cave operated together with the Swapseriesgroup, but in the same year they received a government invitation to participate in the exhibition in Germany.¹⁵ In 1988, they made their piece *Döbling* for the annual exhibition of the Studio of Young Artists, and ended up winning the Studio Award with this total environment, which emphasized the narrative quality of the group's works more than anything before.¹⁶ The found objects (lamps, temperature charts, signs) taken from the building of the Döbling asylum before its reconstruction, (the home of Count István Széchenyi in the last years of his life in the mid-nineteenth century) actually display the environment of the story being narrated (the last days of Széchenyi). Other paraphrases include a since destroyed textile object paraphrasing *Picnic in May* by Pál Szinyei-Merse, as well as a paraphrase of El Greco's *The Penitent Magdalene* (1991) made for an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, which was eventually left out of that selection by the curator. This work features the strongest fusion between the narrative intent, so typical of the Substitute Thirsters' practice, and the performative element, also present in all of their projects: the collage-like piece is transformed into a stage design or meditational tool once chairs are placed in front of it.

However, this was all preceded by the creation of *The Condemned Cell* in 1986. With this project, the paraphrases and quotations that had formerly used the media of painting and graphic art were transferred into three-dimensional space. Two members of the Substitute Thirsters (Balázs Fekete, Tibor Várnagy) were admitted to the Studio of Young Artists, and

under their authorship the group managed to exhibit at the yearly Studio exhibition that would pave the way for an institutional breakthrough. Their choice of **Munkácsy** was at once a critical gesture and homage. On the one hand, the officially promoted taste had set forth examples of Hungarian historical painting (and the events these artworks recalled) as ideals of good, honourable, socialist ethics to comply with, and Munkácsy was chosen by the very aesthetic of socialist realism as a standard for Hungarian artists. On the other hand, when the Substitute Thirsters made the paraphrase of *The Condemned Cell* out of ‘poor materials,’ they actually just acted on the inspiration they got out of the genius loci (the venue of the Studio ’86 exhibition was the Historical Museum at the Buda Castle in the vicinity of the Hungarian National Gallery, where nineteenth century Hungarian historical paintings are kept among other things). The original painting also used the ‘privy’ device of doublespeak: it preserves the tragic memory of the fallen revolution and independence war of 1848/49, just like the award-winning painting by Viktor Madarász, *The Mourning of László Hunyadi* (also paraphrased by the group), or *Péter Zrínyi and Kristóf Frangepán in Prison at Wiener Neustadt* (also paraphrased by the group). *The Condemned Cell* – and the entire cycle *My homeland, My homeland...* – reminds the spectator of national tragedies, fallen and retroactively manipulated revolutions (1711 – Rákóczi War of Independence, 1848, 1918 – Aster Revolution, 1919 – Hungarian Soviet Republic, 1956...).

Through the various techniques applied and figures made of rusty scrap metal found at the waste disposal site just outside Kisörspuszta, the Substitute Thirsters also put historical tragedies within quotation marks, metaphorically referring to the shoddy, ‘ramshackle’ nature of Hungarian reality that had already emerged during that period as a result of the slackening of the economy; private repair services, dismantled components built into holiday homes, ramshackle insulations made of materials from who knows where, crop up among the associations raised by the installation. The use of materials in *The Condemned Cell* led Thomas Wulffen to the conclusion with regard to the installation made for Bethanien¹⁷ – which elevated the group’s activity into the forefront of

the international scene together with Wulffen’s article in *Kunstforum* – that it should be regarded as an example of the ‘penniless aesthetic’ characterizing Eastern European art, what is more, as an anarchistic, extravagant one at that.

In terms of the operation of the two artist collectives, many other aspects could be raised, like the formulation of gender issues (see Tibor Várnagy’s *Ass print*, which was first published in *Világnézettségi Magazin*, and Adam Rzepecki’s *Project Pole Father Memorial*, 1981), the defining context of the new wave in their operation, or about their conceptual art heritage. This short text attempted to raise some aspects regarding paraphrase as a metalanguage and its meaning in socialist Central Europe in the work of two groups that present clear similarities in their artistic approach.

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The article is a complemented and modified version of my two previously written texts, using the translations made by Dániel Sipos and Kata Balázs: Kata Balázs, “A valóság barátságos ellenfelei. Megjegyzések a Hejettes Szomlyazók történetéhez / Friendly Opponents of Reality. Notes to the History of the Substitute Thirsters,” in *Hejettes Szomlyazók: Borgyíngó*, ed. Hejettes Szomlyazók (Budapest: acbResearchLab, 2018), 14-105 and “Prófétaparádé. Łódź Kaliska térben és időben,” *Tranzitblog.hu* published electronically 13.11.2016, accessed 29.07.2022, <http://tranzitblog.hu/profetaaparade/>. All translations by Kata Balázs.

Notes

- ¹The establishment of the Lajos Vajda Studio and its heyday in the eighties also support the decisiveness of autodidacticism in the era.
- ² Substitution due to economic circumstances (e.g. using ‘poor materials’) is a phenomenon well-described in József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek. A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Budapest: Typotex, 2006), 132–54.
- ³ The Kádár era or regime is the common name for the years between 1956 and 1988 in Hungary. It is named after János Kádár (1912–1989) who was the leader of the Hungarian People’s Republic from his installment by the Soviet Union during the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight and his retirement in 1988, subsequently followed by the regime change. Kádár was responsible for the execution of the revolution’s prime minister, Imre Nagy and his fellows as well as the merciless retaliation after the suppression of the revolution. From the early sixties, the Kádár system transformed into a ‘soft dictatorship’ under the motto ‘who is not against us is with us’ opposed to the motto of Mátyás Rákosi’s fifties Stalinist dictatorship (‘who is not with us is against us’).
- ⁴ Samizdat is grassroots self-publishing that comprises secretly copied (often created, translated, edited) and distributed literature banned by the state. Samizdat is created in order to avoid censorship and provide access to information free from political propaganda. It is mostly used while referring to underground self-publishing activities in the former Eastern Bloc.
- ⁵ <http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/LodzKaliskaFO.htm>, accessed 25.07.2022.
- ⁶ Tibor Várnagy. “Part 1 (1968–1989).” Interviewed by Kata Balázs. *Review of Hungarian Photography*, no. 2 (2021): 29. Translated by Zsófia Gregor. Originally published as Kata Balázs, “Beszélgetés Várnagy Tibor képzőművésszel I. 1968–1989,” *Balkon*, no. 3 (2019).
- ⁷ <http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/hszvszk.html>, accessed 25.07.2022.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ⁹ It happened during the martial law period that alternative art life flourished in Poland, confined into apartments, and at several artist-run spaces. In Łódź the avant-garde collection established by Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski became the foundation of this tradition.
- ¹⁰ *Lofasznamurze/Lófaszafalon*, Liget Gallery, 1999; *New pop*, Liget Gallery, 2004, *Vesszenek a férfiak* (Down with Men), King St. Stephen Museum, Székesfehérvár, 2010; *Profétaparádé/ Prophets’ Parade*, New Budapest Gallery, 2016.
- ¹¹ The conditions of the *Prophets’ Parade* exhibition include the fact that at the same time the *Wild West. The History of Avant-garde Wrocław* exhibition was on view at the Ludwig Museum. It outlined the local cultural structure operating during the harshest deficit economy. By explaining the history of the Wrocław collective Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (Orange Alternative), conceived as an ‘extension’ of LUXUS or Solidarity, the exhibition enriched political gestures with artistic elements, and presented the activities of various art punk and new wave groups that helped to clarify the historical and cultural background of the eighties.
- ¹² For the detailed chronology of *Világnézettségi Magazin*, see Andrea Tarczali, “Világnézettségi Magazin (Tanulmány és dokumentáció),” (2002), Manuscript.
- ¹³ Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 170.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Wulffen, “Stellvertretende Dürstende. Künstlerhaus Bethanien 18.5–28.5.1989,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 102 (1989): 323–24.
- ¹⁵ In the history of Łódź Kaliska, we find examples of clashes with the authorities after the regime change. In 1998, they were arrested in Florence, when they took illegal photographs for a paraphrase of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* in the Uffizi. In 2004, as part of their New Pop series, which uses magazine aesthetics, they replaced the Polish national heraldic symbol, the crowned eagle with a naked female figure, causing a media scandal.
- ¹⁶ My attention was recalled on this aspect by Balázs Beöthy. Public reading as a performative activity closely linked to storytelling spans across the activity of the Substitute Thirsters, from the texts read at their Kondor-evening at Plato’s Cave through the *Women’s Matinee* reading that accompanied the *Perpetual Calendar* (1987) to the readings at the series of openings that declared the dissension developing nationwide and within the group (*Fractions*, 1989; the exhibition was rearranged by teams of two formed within the group each week, with a new opening each time).
- ¹⁷ Wulffen, “Stellvertretende Dürstende.”

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