

Why Hungarian Geometric Painting Is in Rebirth

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Abstract—the paper addresses the powerful appearance and return of geometry in painting. There are connections between philosophical waves, such as the strengthening of rationality at the expense of the romantic self, the phenomena of world economy in the wake of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the rise of digital technology, and the rise of geometric art. Some examples raise associations in the realm of the theories of shaping and following art, the feeling of order and mess, and the history of Hungarian regional art. This paper is the shortened version of a lecture.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, I have noticed a handful of artists in their thirties and forties that exhibit geometric paintings and objects in Hungarian galleries, exhibition halls, and even in public places. Then, one or two years ago, I had no idea that a tsunami of geometry would follow so soon.

It seems that the public presence of this generation is ever more intense. The Pollock Foundation granted three Hungarian awards this year, all of whom are connected with geometry: Judit Horváth Lóczi, Árpád Forgó, and János Saxon Szász. I grew curious why this should happen.

II. BASIC CONCEPTS OF CONCRETE AND GEOMETRIC ART

In order to understand concrete geometry, let us go back to the twenties and thirties. In 1927, scientists in Copenhagen collectively declared that matter is secondary to the Arrangement of that matter.

An artist painting geometry, who is romantically infatuated with reason and hard science, perhaps opts for the primacy of arrangement for this reason. How can one emphasize the enthusiasm for the systems governing reality?

Perhaps by discarding or disabling all manifestations of the subject and all those elements of reality that disturb the “system.” The Concrete Manifesto, Ad Reinhardt’s twelve rules, as well as János Fajó’s book on Planar Painting all list the modes how this can be executed.

The term “concrete,” emerging in the 1930s, demanded its radical differentiation from the concept of the “abstract” because concrete art does not sublimate, does not create metaphors, and does not overwrite reality. (Fig. 1)

Ad Reinhardt’s twelve rules constitute an absurd denial: “No texture,” his 1957 manifesto begins – only to continue with a string of “nos.” [1]

III. PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Today it is far from self-evident that art should be the subjective expression of the artist. Let us first turn to the cyclic fight between the dichotomy of the romantic and the rational.

Among others, Maarten Doorman wrote about this issue in his book on Romantic Order in 2016.

The Cyclic Fight in the Dichotomy of the Romantic and the Rational Fig. 2

“If the epithelium alone holds the I together, then there is no point in talking of any kind of ‘internal’ identity”.[2]

“The pragmatic approach that has apparently become exclusive by the 21st century holds that what was called identity for centuries is nothing else than a function of various contexts” [3].

But why is this interesting for us when discussing painting?

Let me cite András Wolsky: *“When discourses concern themselves with my art, I think I am more interested in events outside and independent of me. While feeling for, finding, presenting, and vindicating my own personal truths may promise tiny momentary joys, searching for a more general truth still fills me with greater excitement.”* [4]

IV. RELATING TO ORDER

The relation of an artist to order and disorder may depend on their disposition. Bacon’s studio, for instance, does not exactly reflect order as we are accustomed to it.

Imre Bak, on the other hand, thrives under quite different circumstances.

Also from Sándor Sólymos’s lecture on Chaos and Order, we may understand that it is the interpretative mind that decides how far a given situation, period, or reality is chaotic, and what kind of order they might prefer in its place.

In simplified terms, this is what I usually call a dispositional characteristic.

For the dichotomy of reason and subjectivity, I have compiled a summary table addressing the differences in understanding and explaining potential progress and describing the world. Fig. 3

The two pathways are presented in their relation to the degree of consciousness, the assessment of order, the theme of art, and the divergent creative processes. Fig. 4

V. NON-CONCRETE GEOMETRY – EMOTIONAL GEOMETRY

Let’s look at other manifestations of geometry. There are artists who are not disciplined enough to observe the system of prescriptions set down in manifestoes, and yet they are not so far from them altogether.

They introduce something that may lead to emerging metaphors in contemplation. Rothko, for instance, was

concerned that “*his paintings should not merely be facades or beautiful ornaments without human or intellectual nourishment*” [5] Fig. 5.

Sometimes they apply the valours of geometry and gesture simultaneously, as István Nádler did in an earlier period. Fig. 6

VI. HUNGARIAN GEOMETRY

My time frame today does not allow me to delve more deeply into the history of Hungarian geometry, but the main trends should be noted.

The first three pillars were the activist and constructivist movement, the groups descending from the European School as well as the groups organised by Ernő Kállai; and lastly, the Neo-Avantgarde initiatives of the Zugló Circles and the Iparterv generation in the 1960s.

The students of Tibor Csiky, Dóra Maurer, and János Fajó may be identified as the fourth generation including „MADI” artists, while the fifth consists of the new-Geometric, Concrete artists discussed today.

The influence of Hungarians living abroad is extraordinary in this area, including Moholy-Nagy, István Beöthy, Victor Vasarely, Nicolas Schöffer, as well as Vera Molnár, Anna Mark and the artists who repatriated around the time of the Fall of Communism: Dóra Maurer, Tibor Gáyor, Tamás Konok, Katalin Hetey, Attila Kovács, and others.

VII. DOGMATISM

“*What more can one say about Constructivist Concrete art? Is there a future, or only the dogmas remain, filling all nooks and crannies?*” as András Szöllösi Nagy puts it in Tamás Boros’s book. [6] If this dilemma is real, how come geometric painting emerges again, without any trace of outdated archaism? What makes this resurrection possible and even necessary?

VIII. WHY?

What argument can be brought up in its favour and against the accusation of outdatedness? John Yau raises aspects of a misplaced justification of contemporary tendencies, inclusive of art history; “*knowing that all that he observes is a manifestations of the cyclical nature of art, not a continuation of a historical process.*” [7]. Yau here refers to Greenberg’s theory of constant development, which he claims was not only limiting but also highly harmful.

IX. 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

I think the belief in reason and technical development has strengthened again because digital technology has been changing our world spectacularly. This belief had already been fundamental to the philosophy of geometric art; after a temporary decrease, it has now revived.

Favourable international trends, Hungarian achievements

According to Hyperallergic, an American portal of culture and art established by art critic John Yau in 2009, Vera Molnar’s New York exhibition warranted a top twelve place last year. We can also mention here the foreign exhibitions and auction achievements in the wake of the popularization of Hungarian Neo-Avantgarde.

X. DOMESTIC OPPORTUNITIES

Discussing opportunities within Hungary, the OSAS cultural workshop affiliated with the Vasarely Museum must be mentioned. Its outstanding international projects have promoted the fifth generation of geometric artists. Meanwhile, the artists’ colony of the Rómer Museum in Győr has for the last three or four years been devoted to concrete art, thus assisting this emergent team.

In the domestic realm, János Fajó was also a faithful adherent of the Concrete Manifesto and wrote his own programme in the form of an educational textbook. “*Four legs good, two legs bad.*” Similar to such simplifications of Orwell’s Animal Farm, he enumerates right and wrong modes of creation. [8] The artists of the fifth generation do not necessarily follow these dogmas, but each of them disagrees with only one or two ideas, leading to their distinctive differences.

XI. LIGHT-HEARTEDNESS, LACK OF PATHOS

“*In the artistic languages of the twentieth-century avantgarde, geometry – lines, surfaces, and extension in its purest form – was a destination, a point of arrival. The artists of the present are interested in the flexibility and fluctuating meanings of geometrynot geometry as an unchangeable end result.*” [9] Fig. 7 Pia Jardi, an Austrian art historian and curator of The Poetics of the Concrete, wrote to vindicate the current renaissance of concrete art. What does this mean? Should we pick it up, dust it off, and play with it?

XII. THE “5TH GENERATION”

Please allow me to introduce a few major artists from the aforementioned new generation. First, Árpád Forgó, who uses fully artificial and sterile materials in creating humane and organic sculptures Fig. 8. István Halmi Horváth is a real hard-edge artist, who may well develop a single formal thought for several years as a series of artworks. He considers seemingly translucent layers and organically constructed geometry as his major innovations Fig. 9. We might as well call Judit Horváth Lóczy’s works a kind of Pop Geometry, for she uses decorative surfaces very common in everyday life. She creates objects, mixing the real three dimensions with the painted illusion of space Fig. 10. Katja Pál lives in Slovenia and follows pathways similar to the artists residing in Hungary Fig. 11. For Bertalan Varga, geometry is not an antithesis of organicity. For him, geometric structures hint at a “frozen” or derived, more elementary organicity Fig. 12.

XIII. WHY IS HUNGARIAN GEOMETRIC PAINTING REBORN?

Where does this rebirth come from? Can we answer this question from the above? One basic factor is the current Fourth Industrial Revolution, the strengthening of rationality at the expense of the Romantic ego. The sponsorship of collectors, galleries, and museums adds to the favourable phenomenon encouraging geometric painters in Hungary. Counterbalancing visual smog, pure geometry is truly refreshing. It is not so much in rebirth as in a continuous existence, with the recent reception of, and the demand for, geometric painting constantly on the grow.

FIGURES



Fig. 1 Concrete Art Manifesto (Theo van Doesburg, April 1930)

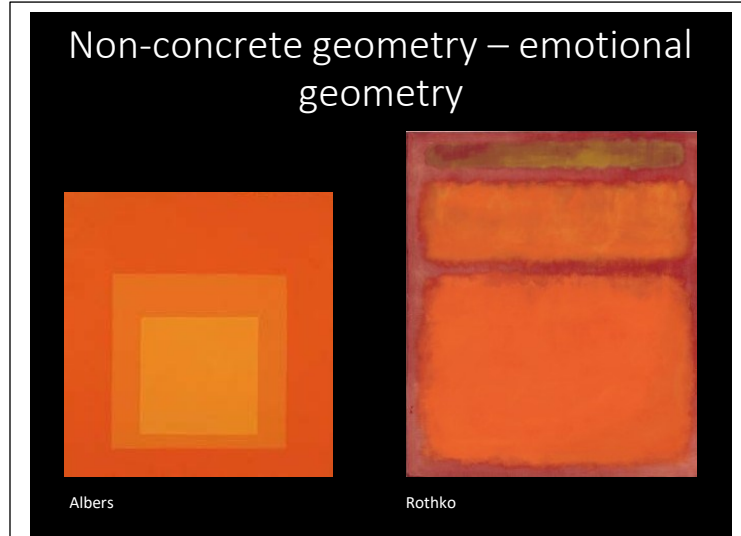


Fig. 5 Rothko, for instance, was concerned that “his paintings should not merely be facades or beautiful ornaments without human or intellectual nourishment.

Fichte	Horkheimer and Adorno
	Heidegger
Ferrara	Milosz

Fig. 2 Fight in the Dichotomy of the Romantic and the Rational

	← REASON →	→ SUBJECT-EMOTION →
Assessment of scientific and technological development	Reason is an expression of the unstoppable development of science and technology and humanity's increasing control over nature, which, under the guise of present-day “cultural industry,” are steadily trimming the autonomy and authenticity of the existence of the subject. Compare Horkheimer and Adorno in <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> (1944)	The unspoken, the unknown, and the unknowable also increase along with our knowledge: however deep our learning should penetrate, we are digging under our own feet. Compare Ferrara, the postmodern resurrection of the subject. The appropriation of one's own identity as formulated in psychoanalytic concepts.
Description of the world	Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–1985): unordered empirical experiences are translated and fixed into systematic structures. What cannot be resolved on the level of everyday facts can be solved on the structural plane of fiction.	The world is not a system progressing or regressing towards perfection or dissolution but the statistical field of the gravitation of hit-and-miss processes: chaos models, sediment metaphors... deconstructions

Fig. 3 Dichotomy of the Romantic and the Rational

	REASON	SUBJECT-EMOTION
Conscious – unconscious	Romantic belief in the power of reason and system, fear of the notion of a chaotic, imperspicuous world	“prime feeling of a losing [...], solution, of the Soul in the Infinite, of a liberation from all material heaviness” (Spengler, 1945 [1923])
Order or chaos	The prerequisite of a system free of all contradiction deconstructs the image or idea.	The prerequisite of an image or idea free of all contradiction deconstructs the system.
Theme of art	Perspicuous systems	Imperspicuous systems
Process of creation	The technique of painting should be mechanical, traces of personality should be eliminated	The state of inspiration enables the artist to reach the source of their creative power. Leaving of personal traces, active process of creation.

Fig 4. Two pathways are presented in their relation to the degree of consciousness, the assessment of order, the theme of art, and the divergent creative processes

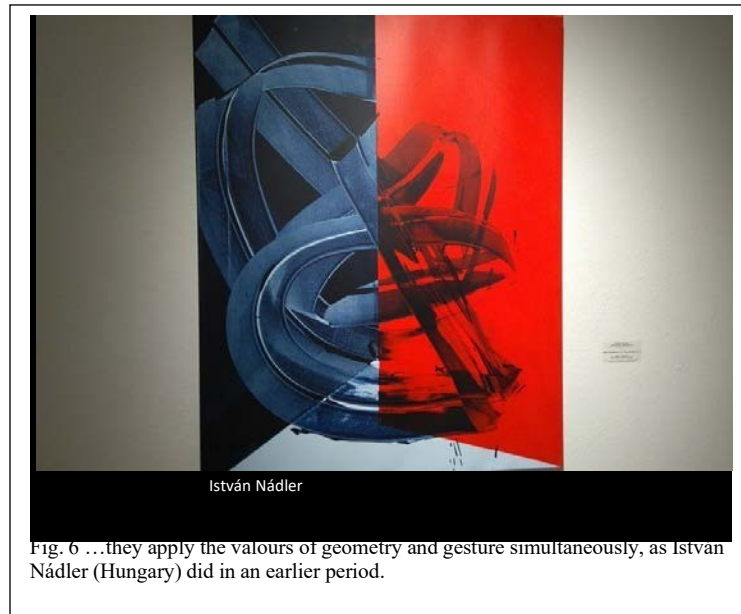


Fig. 6 ...they apply the valours of geometry and gesture simultaneously, as Istvan Nádler (Hungary) did in an earlier period.



Fig 7. The artists of the present are interested in the flexibility and fluctuating meanings of geometry, not geometry as an unchangeable end result.

The "5th Generation": Árpád Forgó



Fig. 8 Árpád Forgó (H), who uses fully artificial and sterile materials in creating humane and organic sculptures.

The "5th Generation": Katja Pál



Fig. 11 Katja Pál lives in Slovenia and follows path-ways similar to the artists residing in Hungary.

The "5th Generation": István Halmi Horváth



Fig. 9 István Halmi Horváth is a real hard-edge artist, who may well develop a single formal thought for several years as a series of artworks.

The "5th Generation": Bertalan Varga



Fig. 12 For Bertalan Varga, geometry is not an antithesis of organicity. For him, geometric structures hint at a "frozen" or derived, more elementary organicity.

The "5th Generation": Judit Horváth Lóczi

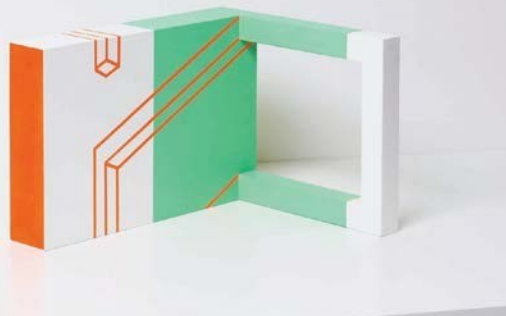


Fig. 10 Judit Horváth Lóczi creates objects, mixing the real three dimensions with the painted illusion of space.

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