

The Kassák Museum: the museum of the Hungarian avant-garde

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Abstract

The Kassák Museum is the only site in Hungary which devotes its research to the historical avant-garde. It defines itself as the contemporary museum of the Hungarian avant-garde, and as such, has a broad-based approach to the subject, from the points of view of several academic fields and contemporary art. The Museum addresses the contradictions and tensions that arise when researching and presenting the avant-garde in a museum setting. It simultaneously applies both historical and contemporary viewpoints in presenting its theme. Exhibitions based on historical research also involve the work of contemporary artists, just as the work of contemporary artists exhibited in the Museum reflects on Kassák's *oeuvre* and issues of historical modernism and the avant-garde. The Museum examines the issues of the Hungarian avant-garde from an international perspective and through interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: *East-Central Europe, Hungarian Avant-Garde, Kassák, museology, Periodical Studies*

The Kassák Museum defines itself as the contemporary museum of the Hungarian avant-garde. Applying an approach that is both contemporary and historical, it works with art historians who take a contemporary view of historical artworks and documentation, and with contemporary artists. Of definitive consequence for the Museum is its position on the increasingly globalized contemporary culture market. The Museum's own history also partially defines its present identity, position and opportunities, and is a source of cultural capital for activity involving systematic (self-)interpretation¹.

The Kassák Museum was originally a memorial museum devoted to exhibiting the works of a single artist, a category which has several instances in

¹The theoretical aspects of this article are based partly on Edit Sasvári's writing on museum theory (Sasvári, Csatlós 2011; Sasvári 2012).

Hungary. Formally, its status is unchanged and it operates as a branch of the larger Petőfi Museum of Literature. Its present situation, however, is analogous to the place in Hungarian literature occupied by Lajos Kassák (Nové Zámky [Érsekújvár], 1887 – Budapest, 1967) (Ferenczi 1987; Cavaglià 1988; Takács 1990; Kassák 1994; Verdone 1995; Benson, Forgács 2002; Ruspanti 2010; Kálmán C. 2012; Ruspanti 2015). Although Kassák's work can only be understood via the history of aestheticizing modernism which was centred on the journal *Nyugat* (West) (1908-1941) and still pervades the contemporary Hungarian literary canon, he stood distinctly apart from this movement. Similarly, despite being classed among the – usually isolated – exhibition spaces devoted to the oeuvres of major figures of Hungarian art, the Kassák Museum has from its inception followed a somewhat different route.

1. The Kassák Museum from 1976 to 2011: its genesis, position in the cultural policy of the Kádár era, and its role in placing Lajos Kassák within art history

So what makes it different? Since its foundation in 1976, the Museum has been more than a house of commemoration and a static collection. It has always endeavoured to be a dynamic, “living” museum that actively involves its visitors. Its strategy springs from the fact that Kassák was an idiosyncratic figure of Hungarian art and was wellknown in the sphere of international modernism. This in itself provides enormous symbolic capital, opening up opportunities far beyond the scope of a local museum presenting the role of a national “great”. Kassák has been a “convertible” artist on the international art scene since the 1960s. Both his personality and oeuvre have been bound up in current issues of the Hungarian and international history of modern art.

Situated in a slightly peripheral district of Budapest, in the former house of the Zichy family in the centre of Óbuda, the Kassák Museum opened on 26 November 1976. Its initial collection consisted of works placed on deposit under a contract signed with his widow in July 1975. The early history of the Museum splits into the periods of tenure of its first two directors: Dr Ferenc Csaplár, literary historian (1976-2007) and Andrási Gábor, art historian (2007-2010). Csaplár aimed above all to curate the bequest and present it via exhibitions, and he also wrote on Kassák's oeuvre for an academic audience. He was largely responsible for the preservation of Kassák's memory. It was thanks to him that from the late 1970s onwards, Kassák had a place in the Hungarian artistic canon as an artist as well as a writer. Csaplár made great efforts to promote the appreciation of Kassák, and succeeded in bringing Kassák within the scope of “late Kádár-era culture”. Csaplár's successor, Andrási Gábor (2007-2010), was in charge of the Museum for only three years. He made great efforts during this time to promote research on Kassák and draw up a critical approach to Kassák's oeuvre. He arranged two conferences (Workshop, 2010; Workshop, 2011, Petőfi Literary Museum) that opened

up the Kassák oeuvre to new interpretations and involvement in a wider discourse. Furthermore, by presenting his contemporary (Hungarian) successors, particularly those connected to constructivism, he brought the Museum into the international artistic environment.

The governing concepts behind the Museum in these two periods, therefore, involved different approaches to interpreting Kassák. For Csaplár, the chief consideration was Kassák's place in the artistic canon. The fact that Hungarian art historiography today treats Kassák as a great figure is primarily due to his efforts. His message was above all the centrality of art in Kassák's work. Since Kassák's art was framed in a universal language and bore validity in an international context, he realized that gaining acceptance of this message could not be a purely Hungarian affair. Andrási modulated this venerating and respectful view of Kassák and attempted to present a flesh-and-blood person in all his greatness, fallibility and problems.

In the first decades of its operations, the Museum stood in a complex relationship with the changing appreciation of the artist. The understanding and appraisal of Kassák took a contradictory course both during his life and after he died. In the 1950s and 1960s, he stood on the periphery of Hungarian art, itself a peripheral area in European eyes. Only in the broadening art history perspective of the 1970s did he move to centre stage and acquire the status in which this little museum presents him today. The causes of these tortuous developments lay in the complex cultural politics of the time. When the museum was founded, Kassák's art and avant-garde activities did not fit into the art canon of the Kádár system. Although the state socialist system denied Kassák any recognition as an abstract artist, it awarded him the highest state honour, the Kossuth Prize, for his literary work. This contradiction also showed up with regard to Kassák the person. The early Kádár-era interpretation of Kassák was constrained by the Soviet-style socialist realism of the Stalinist 1950s. This persisted after 1956 and only started to relax in the late 1960s. Even when the idea of a dedicated museum arose, probably at the prompting of Kassák's widow, in 1974, there was a dispute at the highest political levels whether such a thing could be allowed to exist in Hungary. What makes the emergence of the idea of a memorial museum for Kassák significant and worthy of research is the decision to grant publicity to an artist who had been in dispute with the cultural authorities for decades. Founding the museum was an act characteristic of the Kádár regime, an attempt to domesticate the intellectual legacy of a figure who was undeniably left-wing but had spent most of his life outside – and highly critical of – political parties, particularly the various incarnations of the Communist Party.

2. The new concept for the Museum, 2011

In 2011, a new, three-strong team took over operation of the Kassák Museum. We drew up a new strategy, taking stock of the Museum's previous

history, appraising the opportunities for contemporary interpretation of his legacy and rethinking the communication of the museum communication². The key challenge facing us was the convoluted history of Kassák appreciation, which had culminated in an idealized image of a great master of “iron will” and “determined consistency”, a “constant innovator” who maintained a sovereign position in several different art forms. Looking over the past work of the Museum, the team realized the need to map out a new way forward. If the conception of Kassák was to remain purely on the level of respect and appreciation, his legacy would soon petrify and lose its power. There could be no question of stimulating interest in the artist as a person by spreading Kassák anecdotes or making banal revelations. Instead, while preserving the appreciation and understanding of Kassák’s greatness, the Museum staff sought new means of critical analysis.

We identified two avenues towards this. One involved the review and re-evaluation of Kassák’s person and history. An artistic career as long and diverse as Kassák’s is full of challenges and problematic situations that cannot be approached through aesthetics alone, and have to be understood through complex and sometimes confused combinations of aesthetic, ideological, historical and human elements, all carrying tremendous potential for critical analysis. The other promising approach was to link an examination and re-interpretation of Kassák’s work and programme of modernism with a critical analysis of the concept and history of universal modernism, all from the perspective of the early decades of the 21st century³.

Our starting point in 2011 was that Kassák is the chief and internationally-recognized representative of modernism in Hungary. This was the basis for making the Museum a focus point for all kinds of modernism research in Hungary. For Kassák-centred research to be comprehensive, it could not possibly dispense with modernism in the wider sense, viewed from today’s perspective. We now look back on modernism as a closed period, part of twentieth-century cultural history. As such, it demands to be redefined as a contemporary problem and requires a change of attitude among its researchers. This prompted us to broaden the scope of the Museum’s Kassák-related research and exhibitions to cover questions of historical modernism.

There is no independent centre dedicated to the history of modernism in Hungary, and as yet, no monograph devoted to the subject. The possibility thus presented itself of setting up such a research centre or workshop in the Kassák Museum. This could be the key to the Museum’s positioning within Hungary and abroad, producing results that could be channelled into those

² Edit Sasvári, art historian (Director), Judit Csatlós, museologist and cultural anthropologist, and Katalin Szőke (PR).

³ See, for example: Sasvári, Zólyom, Schulcz 2011.

of other centres of modernism research. This first question to address in this regard concerned the appropriate framework for discussing Central European avant-garde art: national, regional or global?

The new Museum staff also re-examined the question of its relations with the public. For museum-goers, the Museum had hitherto been a small local venue on the geographic periphery. Reinforcing this “local interest” assignation was the Museum’s policy of presenting a somewhat narrow segment of art and satisfying the tastes of a small niche. Typical of the strategy for cultural organizations in the Kádár era, the Museum had previously only had one employee, the director, who held exclusive control over its operations. An important aim of the new conception was for the Museum to break out of this confinement and open up to a broad section of the art community and the general public. This involved building up contacts and media relations, through a four-point strategy:

1. Draw up a museum strategy which assigns a central role to the archives, re-interpreted in a way previously almost unknown in Hungarian museum practice.
2. Make the Museum attractive by mobilizing social contacts that could be linked to Kassák’s artistic endeavours, drawing attention to things that can be seen there and nowhere else.
3. Take a new look at issues in the Kassák oeuvre and update them according to contemporary criteria.
4. Strengthen museum communication.

2.1 The archives as a museum strategy issue

Presenting a critical view of avant-garde art is a problematic endeavour in a museum environment. The avant-garde was full of subversive undercurrents and created an unregulated sphere of operation in a regulated society, in direct conflict with museum principles. The complexities involved in the museum presentation of the art-work/not-art-work question are illustrative in this respect. Since Kassák was a pioneer of a way of thinking – still alive today – that envisaged art activity as extending beyond the boundaries of aesthetics, these issues have particular weight when applying to him. In the early decades of the Museum, Kassák was presented in the traditional way, via his art works. We faced the question of whether artistic activity is really what is most interesting about Kassák in the 2010s. Other aspects of his oeuvre may be much more relevant to today’s concerns. He edited journals, was active in the community, organized movements, nurtured international contacts, and made his mark through his character and personal conduct. But how can we present these? Perhaps not through hanging abstract paintings in a museum.

The means of conveying the significance of these aspects lie in the documents held in the museum archives. In general, museums treat archives separately, as background material, rarely looking on them as sources of exhibition items. For anything related to Kassák, this attitude was reinforced by history and museum policy, particularly given the unwarranted rejection of avant-garde art by the Kádár regime. That is why the documents of the historical avant-garde in the broad sense have been judged of no value to museums and are mostly to be found today in private collections. The programme of the Kassák Museum today therefore affords an elevated place to the systematic presentation of Hungarian and foreign private collections of avant-garde material.

Instead of being warehouses of old documents, we now look on archives as dynamic systems with their own history. This is particularly true of historical avant-garde archives, which often have an idiosyncratic structure deriving from the self-archiving nature of avant-garde artists' activity. They reveal the story of the artists and the collecting criteria of institutions that later took possession of them. It is true that Lajos Kassák was less concerned with the systematic preservation of his own legacy than were other major historical avant-garde artists. As regards preservation of correspondence, he cannot be compared to André Breton, whose archives have been published on paper and are now accessible by internet (Goutier 2009; Association Atelier André Breton). He did not cut out and stick into enormous albums articles by and about himself over a period of several decades, as did Carlo Carrà (Archivio del '900) and F.T. Marinetti (Giroud 2004). Neither did he convert his own archives into an all-arts avant-garde art work, as did Kurt Schwitters, who kept a diary that resembled the art works of Merz (Nantke, Wulff 2014), and Fortunato Depero, who founded his own museum (Belli 2004) and thereby posed serious memorial-policy problems for today's researchers of Italian Futurism (Berghaus 1996). Kassák thus lacked any systematic self-documentation obsession, which frequent removals and domestic poverty would have frustrated in any case. Nonetheless, the Kassák Museum's archives of several thousand letters, analects, manuscripts and publications have much to say about the history of the Hungarian avant-garde and twentieth century Hungarian culture in general. Besides the documents themselves, the phases by which the archive collection has expanded are informative about the Hungarian avant-garde and its reception, because the changes in the Museum's collection policy reflect the changing interpretation of the avant-garde legacy. The history of the collection provides information on the emergence of the Hungarian avant-garde and how it operated and was received over the years. It maps the course of Kassák's activities as an editor and permits inferences on how Kassák and the Hungarian intellectual community kept in touch with international developments – or indeed lost touch with them – and on their internal intellectual disputes. The archives give an insight into changes in Hungarian publication and exhibition policy and the story of twentieth century Hungarian censorship (Kassák was silenced by every regime from the 1910s onwards, except for the “consolidated” Kádár period). The

archive thus gives plenty of scope for a researcher. A much more problematic issue is how to present archive materials in an exhibition.

2.2 Exhibitions: historical investigation and contemporary analysis of the avant-garde

The wider public also gets an insight into the multifaceted world of the Kassák Museum archives through exhibitions on historical and contemporary themes. These convey a recent shift in attitude by art historians, who no longer confine themselves to the internal, immanent logic of aesthetic laws when interpreting art – especially modern art. This makes things much more complex and demands a consideration of the broad social context. To develop new ways of interpreting twentieth century art, we have to unpick the contextual fabric of what is now a closed period. Connecting the criteria of research and collection is a promising avenue for this wide-ranging and multifaceted work. The Kassák Museum thus sees the primary task of its historical and contemporary exhibitions as the exploration of contexts.

The main thread that runs through the Museum's historical exhibitions (including its permanent exhibition) is a type of document with special significance in several respects, the avant-garde journal. The avant-garde artists themselves looked on journals as their medium of communication and primary means of self-archiving. Avant-garde journals also preserve traces of the context in which the artists worked, because as well as providing space for the artists to present their wide-ranging artistic activities, they were a channel of information to other journals and the reading public. Furthermore, they built up into valuable records of the main areas of avant-garde artistic activity and were a medium of crossover among different (artistic and non-artistic) areas. In tune with periodical-studies research and other recent exhibitions on the historical avant-garde, the Museum's exhibitions examine the avant-garde journal as a complex, hybrid phenomenon in which social, political, artistic and economic questions and constraints intersected (Brooker, Thacker 2009; Dobó 2014). The complex of issues accessible via the avant-garde journals thus forms the basis for presenting the activities of Kassák – who edited journals over a period of several decades – in the Museum's permanent exhibition.

The Museum also links these considerations to the significance of private collections. This has resulted in an ongoing series of exhibitions of avant-garde periodicals and documents based on privately-owned material. These temporary exhibitions examine the art-work/non-art-work interface of avant-garde publications and analyse the idiosyncratic structure of private collections. Two collections already featured in the exhibition series, those of Ferenc Kiss (Budapest) and Marinko Sudac (Zagreb) share an interesting contrast with state institutions, whose collection strategy is typically constrained by the prevailing artistic canon (Sudac, Branko 2012). Their collection criteria, based on individual initiatives, renders them capable of narrating a specific moment of history. Historical exhibitions,

however, are not the only beneficiaries of the Museum's research into archives and the historical context. It also has importance for work with contemporary artists.

The Kassák Museum primarily exhibits innovative and critical-minded contemporary artists whose work reflects on social issues or the work of Kassák himself or the legacy of the historical avant-garde or certain of its procedures. It is not uncommon for these artists – many of whom have international successes behind them – to draw on the Museum's archive or research into the historical avant-garde. Some have built their exhibitions on research touching on the historical avant-garde or even conceived the exhibition itself as research. Viewing artistic activity as research can itself be seen as a re-interpretation of avant-garde technique; it is reminiscent, for example, of the surrealists' Bureau de recherches surréalistes (Bureau of Surrealist Research). A good example of rethinking the historical avant-garde through contemporary art is Tamás Kaszás's 2014 exhibition. Using historical research, he foregrounded the tensions between the avant-garde artists' utopian ideas and the realization of these ideas. Entitled *Mégsem olyan mély az árok, mint ahogy a mérnök kiszámította* (The trench is not in fact as deep as the engineer calculated), the exhibition explored Kassák's writing on commercial art and his work in advertising. A reconstruction of the ideology conveyed by Kassák's "advertising kiosks", the models of advertising kiosks produced later, and Kaszás's own re-worked installations combined to present a subtle, critical interpretation of the legacy of the historical avant-garde. Other contemporary artists have, like Kaszás, drawn on research into the historical avant-garde, and contemporary artists also work on the Museum's historical exhibitions. One of the first such collaborations was with the artists' group Technika Schweiz (Gergely László, Péter Rákosi and Katarina Šević) in the exhibition *Design Tett / Design Act*⁴ (1 October 2013 – 9 March 2014). Through historical examples, *Design Tett* sought answers to the question of how graphic and typographic designs take on meaning, how they are capable of transmitting standpoints and ideas critical of society, and how they promote change. The involvement of contemporary artists directly served the purpose of the exhibition, which was to promote an understanding of the communication techniques and visual designs of today's movements and voluntary organizations. The Museum also invited a contemporary artist – Klára Rudas – to collaborate in the preparation for its latest exhibition, which is open until November 2015. It opened on the hundredth anniversary of the first issue of the journal *A Tett* (The Act), and is called *Jelzés a világra: háború ∩ avantgárd ∩ Kassák / Signal to the World: War ∩ avant-garde ∩ Kassák*. The exhibition employs infographics to display historical material. The use of infographics is now widespread in museum exhibitions, mostly in a spectacular, decorative or illustrative role. Rudas takes infographics further than this in the exhibition, imbuing the technology

⁴As part of the project "Digital Manuscripts to Europeana" (DM2E). Project leader: Gábor Palkó.

with an interpretative function and elevating it to equal rank with – by virtue of its ability to visualize – the curatorial concept. It displays the complex interrelations among the exhibited documents, evoking the techniques used by the avant-garde artists in a setting – the museum – completely different from their original environment.

2.3 *Research: exploration, interpretation, publication*

Exploring historical contexts, analysing them by contemporary academic criteria and publishing the results are the essential elements of research pursued in the Kassák Museum. The Museum integrates research groups, organizes workshops and conferences, publishes books and gets involved in the work of digital philology. Its research is based on interdisciplinary collaboration and international contacts. Interdisciplinarity and the international perspective, besides being basic requirements of academic work today, are essential by virtue of the subject of research itself. That is because avant-garde artists strove to break down the boundaries between artistic modes of expression, and wanted to conquer new areas for art. They did so through an extremely dense network that crossed national boundaries and grew out of the effective communication between artists. Consequently, it is not sufficient to research the subject *purely* in terms of art history or *purely* in terms of literary history. In its research programme *Kassák Lajos avantgárd lapjai interdiszciplináris megközelítésben (1915-1928)* (Lajos Kassák's avant-garde journals through an interdisciplinary approach), the museum goes beyond both of these areas to consider aspects of general history, intellectual history and periodical studies in pursuit of a full understanding of the subject. The Museum's other research group concentrates on art of the 1960s, with a similar approach. A study of the dynamics of cultural politics, art and society in Soviet Bloc countries in the years following the Second World War demand the consideration of many points of view and a perspective that goes beyond the boundaries of any one country, in a similar way to the study of avant-garde journals.

National artistic frameworks are too restricted for an understanding of the Hungarian avant-garde. This realization has led the Museum to organize international workshops and conferences, involving the countries of the region in particular. The largest of these, which took place in autumn 2015, was the conference *Local Contexts / International Networks – Avant-Garde Magazines in Central Europe (1910-1935)*, involving researchers from the Visegrad countries. Another forum of the interdisciplinary interpretation of the avant-garde is a series of lectures related to current exhibitions and research, given by prominent figures in different academic areas. These are positioned at the level of general interest, providing inspiration for avant-garde researchers and opening up the issues to other enquirers. The Kassák Museum also runs research seminars that involve students in preparatory

research for the Museum's exhibitions. The Museum publishes its research in both traditional paper-based forms and web interfaces: the Museum website and the linked *Online Avant-Garde Database* portal (<<http://avantgardedb.org/>>). It is also involved in the Digiphil project of the Petőfi Museum of Literature, which publishes critical editions, through the digitization with critical notes of the first Hungarian avant-garde journal *A Tett*. This is the first stage in the academic publication of Hungarian avant-garde journals, which are extremely difficult to access. The Museum wants to do more than channel its avant-garde research into academic discourse and endeavours to make it accessible even outside the academic community.

2.4 Contacts: accessibility, image, education

The Kassák Museum regards itself as an heir of the Enlightenment museums that sought to arouse the interest of society as a whole. As such, it identifies its mission as being to operate a museum that is informative and open to education and the participation of visitors. In the early 2010s, in order to reach as broad a section of society as possible, it repositioned itself as a cultural market product capable of transmitting a clear and attractive message to the public. The essence of this message is that the Kassák Museum is the contemporary museum of the Hungarian avant-garde. The Museum's image has an important role in transmitting the message. The visuality created by Imre Lepsényi on the Museum's websites and permanent exhibitions refers to the historical avant-garde without actually copying it. Proof of the effectiveness of Lepsényi's – decidedly contemporary – design came in the form of the highly prestigious Red Dot and Good Design awards, conferred on the Museum in 2012⁵. The other important means of making the Museum's work more effective is education. Museum education activities are directed at children of all ages, from nursery up to secondary school level. The Museum uses the methods which the avant-garde artists developed for art education. Activities for children are based on the recognition and use of basic forms and colours, and various materials and techniques, echoing the avant-garde artists who realized the importance of visual education. Secondary school students are presented with tasks involving cultural strategies present both in the historical avant-garde and everyday life today. Students reflect on their own media-infused world and analyse it from a suitable historical distance. That is what makes the Kassák Museum the research centre and showroom of the Hungarian avant-garde, a place which, just like Kassák himself, sees the importance of openly addressing contemporary artistic and social issues.

⁵ Red dot: <<http://www.kassakmuzeum.hu/en/index.php?p=kiallitas&cid=34>> (09/2015); Good Design: <http://www.kassakmuzeum.hu/en/index.php?p=good_design> (09/2015).

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