

*The summer evening has begun to fold
the world in its mysterious embrace...*

James Joyce: *Ulysses*, cap. 13

*Painting is not impossible. Only the old conception
of painting is impossible: impossible to justify.*

Peter Osborne

In fine art's history of origin, shadows play a pivotal part. In Greek legend, a hero tries to retain his departing lover's image by tracing out her shadow. In the course of time, his example has become one of the most extensively discussed subjects not only in art history, but also in the theory and philosophical thought concerning art history. These efforts were given new impetus with the invention of photography, itself occupying an important place among the technical devices used for making records of people and events. The different levels of representation, along with the meaning of their application, already formed a central problem of painting; however, since the invention of photography artists and critics alike enriched the problematic of representation both by surveying the connection between these two artistic media and by drawing theoretical conclusions on the subject.

In the ranks of the artists who analyse shadows and the connection between photography and painting, Éva Köves occupies a special place. Although nowadays it is not fashionable to group artists according to the medium they use, defining them either as a „painter” or as a „photographer”, not even in cases when the artist concerned does indeed work in a single genre, in Éva Köves's case, however, the consideration of this aspect still seems justified. Without intending to settle the question once and for all, it appears that a survey of the possible answers might serve with some lessons regarding Éva Köves's artistic strategies.

If we were to make an attempt to summarise Éva Köves's artistic programme, then we would have an easy task, as far as the formal aspects of her art are concerned. Most of the time she agglutinates black-and-white photographs on a larger canvas, then paints the resulting surface in such a way that the photographs and the painting fade into one another. She never tries to conceal the dividing line between the two different genres, or to produce the illusion of their unity: in numerous cases, the more observant viewers are able to determine the size of the photographs used. Yet, what we witness here is not the application of the familiar device of picture-in-a-picture, as the inside picture (i.e. the photo) does not form a separate representational unit from the viewpoint of the final image (i.e. the painting). Regardless of all this, a certain homogenising effect is achieved within the pictures by the overpaint, generally attributed to the photographs, most notably the black-and-white photographs. Köves's paintings provide, therefore, further illustrations of the – far from problem-free – relationship between the two media.

On the one hand, the paint, or the painting, effaces the photos, in a way dominating them; on the other hand, however, it literally complements them. The photos of scaffoldings capture the momentary position of the shadows, and the painter continues the work by further meditating on them, repainting them, occasionally complementing and extending the structures. These complements do not invariably use the logic dictated by the photograph, which the artist uses as a starting point; instead, they sometimes start to live their own lives. Of course, the reference is occasionally left off the picture space, in other words, the object throwing the shadow is not even depicted in the picture. (The source of light is not worth mentioning; it is invariably to be found outside the picture frame.)

Light, shadow and darkness: these are not merely the familiar, and almost commonplace, components of our everyday lives, but also the basic units of photography. It is hardly a coincidence that in his crucially important article discussing indexes, Rosalind Krauss mentions Duchamp's painting entitled *Tu M'*, which constitutes an inventory of the artist's ready-mades in the form of an index.¹ The division of signs as indexes, icons and symbols is ascribed to C.S. Peirce, who actually identified in photography the mixture of the indexical and the iconic characteristics.² The indexical

nature of photography, along with its effect on the crisis of oculacentrism, is discussed by Martin Jay, who was prompted, among others, by Krauss.³ In the 1980s and 1990s, several artists using photographic methods in their art questioned the connection between photography and the indexical sign: a connection earlier assumed to be given and following a linear logic; Éva Köves's pictures fall in this category. The shadow itself is one of the most common indexical signs; the fact that Éva Köves uses this very element, that she emphasises it and elaborates on it in her works, only helps further outlining the true subject of her pictures. And as to the visual representation Éva Köves provides of the shadow of an object evidently not present at the moment of taking the photograph, this can be interpreted as the indexical sign of human and artistic imagination.

The phenomenon, whereby Köves mixes the indexical picture – the photograph – with painting, a genre not regarded to be of a typically indexical character, on the one hand results that the comparison of the two pictures of different quality becomes unavoidable; and on the other hand it forces us to contemplate about the nature of representation. Also (and in view of the current situation of art this latter aspect is just as fundamental as the earlier one), it tries to survey the possible future of a historical medium, painting, by studying it in the reflection of a much later medium, photography. The appearance of ready made was a similarly important milestone in the history of painting after which event painting could never again be the same as it had been before:

„...all painting worthy of the name will have to legitimate itself conceptually as *art* over, above and beyond the continuity of its relation to the history of its craft by incorporating a consciousness of the crisis of that history into its modes of signification, into its strategic deployment of *craft*. All painting that aspires to art must be postconceptual”.⁴

It is not just photographs that Éva Köves relies on in her attempt to make valid statements about this medium by re-thinking the current position of painting. The monochrome character of her work, the black-and-white photos and the use of black and white paint, only serves to underline the essence of the problem, by virtue of its apparent dryness, which is almost the anti-thesis of the sensuality historically associated with painting: almost a form of „anti-painting”. Similarly, we see it as a further elaboration on the above problem that Köves has lately started to construct so-called „painting installations” from her pictures. Naturally, these have to do with the current dominance of the genre of installation, but at the same time they serve to illustrate another fundamental problem of photography, as to what we should regard to be the basic unit of photography: the single pictures or the series. By using all these elements, Éva Köves tries to solve the fundamental problem of post-conceptual painting, which is „how to avoid the reinstitution of a traditional notion of the aesthetic object”.⁵

Even through the themes of her pictures, Köves reinterprets the historical notion of painting. Similarly to her contemporaries, she has a strong urge to incorporate in her art the micro-environment of her surroundings (the scaffoldings) and the motifs of personal experiences and journeys (landscapes featuring the sea and the mountains), in such a way that she allows the personal element to dominate, rather than attempting to move in the direction of general(isation). And although this personalness seems to be contradicted by the fact that we cannot see living creatures in her pictures, nor any reference to them, this is only a superficial contradiction.

*„(...) Far away in the west the sun was setting
and the last glow of all too fleeting day
lingered lovingly on sea and strand,
on the proud promontory of dear old Howth
guarding as ever the waters of the bay,
on the weedgrown rocks along Sandymount shore
and, last but not least, on the quiet church
whence there streamed forth at times upon the stillness
the voice of prayer to her who is
in her pure radiance a beacon
ever to the storm-tossed heart of man,
Mary, star of the sea.”*

James Joyce: Ulysses, cap. 13

1. See Rosalind E. Krauss: *Notes on the Index: Part 1 and 2*, pp. 196-220, in: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1985. If we have mentioned Duchamp's name – quite rightly so –, then we cannot avoid mentioning Gerhard Richter, either. Richter's painting, and also the connection of his work with photography, is analyzed by Peter Osborne: *Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives, October 62* (Fall 1992), pp. 102-113. In conversation, Köves herself confirmed the connection between her art and Richter's. The reason why this comment is relegated to footnote is that I do not wish to legitimize Köves's art with the help of the famous predecessor, all the more so as Köves's paintings are sovereign and deserve the appraisal within their own right.
2. Symbols are based on the conventional connection between sign and signed, while icons are based on the visual similarity and indexes on a causal relationship. In the case of photographs, or of the Duchamp painting, this means that there is a causal relationship between the object, person or shadow depicted and their actual existence.
3. Martin Jay: *Photo-unrealism: The Contribution of the Camera to the Crisis of Oculacentrism*, pp. 344-360, in: ed. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings: *Vision and Textuality*, MacMillan, London, 1995.
4. Peter Osborne, op.cit., p. 111. (original italics).
5. Peter Osborne: *Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting*, pp. 58-79, in: *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, London, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991.