

## Preface to the exhibition of Éva Köves

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Walls, scaffolding, plastic sheets, a glass on a table, a view reflected in a window – sometimes whole, sometimes shattered and reassembled, in phases of kaleidoscopic motion. In and out, above and below, both the structure and the layer stretched upon it dissolve into one another, as illusion and 'reality' either switch places or merge deceptively. A puzzle meets the eye. And while the viewer looks for a solution, an explanation, trying to find the right point of view by shifting places, s/he moves along with the changing view and follows the steps of the process which created it. As the meaning of each picture fragment is deciphered by the intellect, and the totality is put together from the individual fragments, the viewer creates his/her own version of the work.

Éva Köves does not paint colourful, impressionistic works that are easily accessible. Quite the opposite: anyone desiring to see, and share with the artist in the experience, to understand and internalise the composition, must work intellectually to this end. Though the works are withdrawn – like the artist who created them – they are open to interpretation, decipherable. The externalised space shows through, or is filtered through the self-sustaining world formed by each work, similarly to the photograph hidden behind the layer of paint. This external world is rather restricted in terms of its subject matter: landscapes, structural parts (of the Eiffel tower, or scaffolding on construction sites), partly covered, and windows, room interiors, still lifes, sections of open corridors, window-pane reflections. No people are present, not a single figure can be detected in all the paintings, but apart from the landscapes, all the pictures are strewn with human imprints, with the marks of the world inhabited and created by man, yet nothing is really personal: no telltale signs revealing woman, child, elderly or youth.

In this day and age, when a significant proportion of artists narrow down the numerous problems, experiences, theories and new discoveries and relate them back to themselves, primarily to the body or even just a part of the body in particular, in this current of contemporary art, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Éva Köves represents someone swimming against the tide. Her work picks up on different traditions from the work of her colleagues; to be more precise, it is tied to a form of understanding and attitude that was developed much earlier. She stands far from the momentary fluctuations of fashion, and the 'up-to-date' requirements that come and go by the year. She keeps a distance, and this is one of her strengths.

If we search to uncover her own sources, the elements upon which Éva Köves consciously builds her work, we have to reach back to a trend of the 20's, the movements we may summarily, and a bit sketchily refer to as constructivist tendencies. But among these, it is not the early contrareliefs and mixed material works of Tatlin that we should immediately think of, but much rather the proud abstract paintings of El Lissitzky that are the enlarged projections of the shifted architectural designs he imagined that we can consider as distant predecessors. Here is perhaps the first occurrence of the thought that a geometrical work of art can – and must – be observed from many directions, and that to find the 'meaning' of such a work, the viewer must pace around it, since it does not have a single definitive point of view. In the same way, there are not one, but simultaneously many valid ways of looking at Éva Köves's most recent compositions assembled from multiple parts. Transparency also becomes important with El Lissitzky, and then – with several steps and interventions – is crystallised in the compositions of Éva Köves dating to 1995 and '96 (e.g., in the *Shadows of Budapest*). In her case, the use of transparency can be observed in the interplay between dimmer, rough surfaces that suggestively make themselves felt, and those from behind which they emerge, a series of barely matte surfaces, logically thought through and carefully wrought in a graded scale of light over darker grey. Éva Köves goes a step further in her development of the conceptual approach of her predecessors. She begins to study a contemporary of El Lissitzky: Moholy-Nagy. "The persona of Moholy-Nagy was of great importance to me, even of a formative significance, and right in the beginning, in 1995-96. I sensed something in him that

found its way into my painting. I actually began by studying his photograms first, and the photographs came only later. His pictures – paintings – came only after that; I really only became interested in them later", says Köves. So instead of his paintings, the artist took the photograms of her antecedent as her point of reference, for which – whether preconceived or not – there are two possible reasons. The first is that in his photograms, Moholy-Nagy was trying, similarly to El Lissitzky in one or two of his graphic design works, to abolish central perspective, together with all the conventions that dictated that a work of art must have a determined direction, an upper and lower plane. This approach becomes a prevailing, definitive motif in the works of Éva Köves only five or six years later. On the other hand, the saturation of light and the richness of shades are present in her works practically right from the start. The true magic of Moholy-Nagy's photograms lies in the intensity achieved by the almost endless variations of light and dark (brown or black and white) shades. If circumstances allowed, Moholy-Nagy removed, or partly covered the objects he placed upon the light-sensitive plate, to modulate the flow of light. Eighty years later, Éva Köves again concealed, though this time with layers of paint, the elements from which her paintings are really constructed. In the same way as Moholy-Nagy, Éva Köves uses a 'cache' (cover) in her compositions. With Moholy-Nagy, as has been shown by prominent photo experts, the soft, faint layers filtering through one another form a geometric composition, whose construction is often analogous to the way the paintings are structured. In the instance of Moholy-Nagy, therefore, although the photogram and painting are stylistically analogous, due to the two distinctly separable techniques of preparation, painting and photography are not symbiotic: the first takes canvas as its base, the latter paper, not to even begin to mention all their many other differences. In contrast, the photo and the painted picture are united in a single artwork by Éva Köves: the layer of pigment is applied directly to the photo, which has first been mounted on the canvas by the artist. In this way, Éva Köves has instrumented a radical change in the base, the 'support' (carrier), of the painting, and with it, a break from the past also in terms of the process of production, which must now take place in two steps. She first prepares the grossly enlarged photograph, which then takes the place of the primed canvas of others painters: it disappears in part or almost completely under the layers of paint continuously applied to it, as if sucked up by the painted surface. Yet in spite of its being 'imbibed', it still dictates the fate of the composition. However self-contradictory the notion may seem to be, the painting is conceived upon the photograph: that photograph which despite all the artistic and photographic creativity involved, has been brought into being by the lens of a camera.

The triple-play with the multiple transfer of photograph, canvas and painting only becomes obvious to those who know the secret of this procedure. Others will see only a clearly and harmoniously composed painting, whose carrier they leave as freely unobserved and unquestioned, as if the painting had been done directly upon canvas, just as any other painting. And now we arrive at a decisive question: to what degree does the photo-base define the work as a whole? Would it be any different, had the artist painted on the prepared canvas rather than the photograph? Or would the photo stand on its own as an artwork in itself, without having been painted on? To put it in a different way, would it be possible to virtually slice the two layers apart, separating them from one another cleanly, akin to the way a crumbling, damaged picture is stretched on a new canvas? The answer can only come from the artist, or more precisely, from the artworks, perhaps along the lines of an experiment to follow. But at present we can only take into account what is existing: the picture painted over a photo, which – if we disregard its base – can in classical terms be considered a panel painting, made with paints and brush, as is to be expected – though here we might also mention that the artist does not use a palette.

Naturally, Éva Köves is not the first, and by far not the only painter in Hungary to use photographs. As Katalin Szóke has set forth, the photograph has played an important role in Hungarian art since 1976. 1976 is the date of the exhibition called *Exposure*, which may be considered the opening of a new period. The 'artistic use of photography' can be associated with a virtually infinite number of artists, from Gyula Pauer, through András Baranyay, Dóra Maurer, György Jovánovics, Péter Gémes and numerous others, to finally realise that only the result, the aesthetic impression, can lay the framework, in any given moment at least, of who should be listed here, and who can be left out.

At any rate, photography becomes an organic part of the history of Hungarian painting, especially if we include photo-montage, and those of Lajos Vajda, Dezső Korniss, Endre Bálint and others flash before our eyes; perhaps also the photographs of Béla Kondor, with their peculiar structures, or even László Lakner's painting of a transcribing carton, where he magnifies a small photo stuck onto a carton in a painterly fashion, etc. It seems that even within the circle mentioned above, and among her contemporaries, Éva Köves differs from them all, not only in technique, but also in her conceptual approach.

Éva Köves loves to photograph, and has been using the camera for quite some time; far longer than she has been using them as a base on her canvases. Still, according to our hypothesis, the photograph has never been a goal in itself to her, but always a transitional stage. The photograph exists in order to gradually disappear, just as in its strictly considered form, reality and the outside world dissolves. A fragment, a detail of a landscape or a room, a nylon curtain is all that remains, something we could look upon as a work of the imagination, since it is certainly not a concrete reproduction of a concrete scene, but rather some kind of a dream or view of the imagination which is still alive within it. Éva Köves seeks out the reference points, the depictable elements, to represent this image. It is for this very reason that we sometimes feel that we might arrive to the core of this vision if we were to gradually unpeel the fine layers covering and filtering through one another. The structures and scaffoldings visible behind, beside and above the shadows would then appear more emphasised, while now they are practically homogeneous with their projected images.

This strange play of illusion and abstraction began with the maps that Éva began transforming in 1994. She extracted a part of the relief map, and having painted it onto a glass pane, she replaced it onto the original, thus questioning its reality value in its entirety: which map is the real one, after all: the part, or the whole? The transparency itself, if not emphatically, but simply through the use of the glass pane, became a part of the painting. Subsequently – even without the glass – the effect of transparency was to become one of the most important components of the paintings. The interplay between the part and the whole is one of the recurrent problems in her recent large-scale compositions. The map as a point of departure is of definitive significance in the art of Éva Köves. The use, the painterly transformation and thus the reinterpretation of the old maps (and later postcards) offer a key to the understanding of her later paintings over photos. The map already played a key role in the conceptual approach of 17th century artists. As Svetlana Alpers points out: "The cartographers and the publishers of maps were called the transcribers of the world, and their maps and atlases were called the written world. To my knowledge, this expression has never been used to describe a painting, even though it may justifiably have been used. The aim of Dutch painters was to preserve as great a storehouse of the knowledge and information about the world on a given surface as possible. In the same way as the mapmakers, these painters realised works that were put together from many parts, and that could not be internalised from a single point of view". This is one of the principles of Éva Köves' method of composition: building around numerous viewpoints. According to Alpers' analysis, the artists of the time "regarded this not as a window modelled upon Italian art, but as a surface similar in a way to a map, that opened an assembled world to the public eye".

The assembled world, which can best be observed from above, e.g., if the composition of many parts is placed on the floor; and the window, through which we can, so to say, glance into the picture, signified by a pane of glass placed over the canvas in the art of Éva Köves, are both equally and concurrently important. The old maps often rendered something visible that would otherwise be invisible, in Alpers' interpretation, taking on the role of the microscope. "They spoke of the map in the same way they mentioned the magnifying glass, as a kind of glass that brought objects closer to the eyes. For an artist involved in both fields, such as Jacques de Gheyn, the map meant the same as a drawing of a fly, which was merely the other side of the same coin".

The glass pane that had earlier lain humbly upon the map, well-covered in paint and fitted organically into the impression made by the whole now makes increasing claims in its own right in

Köves' art. In the series of 1995 entitled *Shadows of Budapest*, the window grows significantly in size and takes up a diagonal within the frame dictated by the picture, as if it had 'slipped' by accident, and in it, through the window – as if with the aid of a magnifying glass or a microscope – a new, small world hardly connected to its environment comes to light. At first glance, it seems to be transparent, but this is, in fact, merely an illusion. On closer inspection, it is seen to convert the shadows falling outside itself from dark to light, from positive to negative. In the meanwhile, fractions of the untransformed photograph – barely touched with paint – surface here and there as a counterpoint. At the same time, it is always possible to make the crossing between the shadows or their negatives, and the photograph, 'that faithful copy of reality', remains eternal. Köves appropriates the world with these structures – the walls, windows and street fragments equally – as Katalin Néray elucidates. The photograph becomes really important to her, in fact, from this point of time – from 1995. This is the period in which she gradually finds her own thematic field. She first used maps and postcards as the available and ready-made raw material and interpreted them. From 1995, however, she herself selects and creates her own raw material: the photograph. The chosen sites, to list them merely schematically are: romantic views and typical details of the big city, more sparingly the house (the corridor), the room – and the window that mediates between them, the external and internal world. The landscapes – for instance, *Budapest-Venice (Clouds)* – deal with the topos of a beautiful, undisturbed line of hills, statuesque clouds or the play on the surface of water. The pictures of the big city 'depict' popularly known subjects like the Eiffel Tower, or the Western Train Station (also built by Eiffel) in Budapest. Later, however, the sites become fragmented and less easily recognisable: a segment of scaffolding on a construction site, a turn in a stairwell, an iron railing, a grated gate or a bridge railing could be here or there, and it is after all of no consequence whether it is attached to the Eiffel Tower, the Western Train Station, the Chain Bridge or the Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest: the fragment lives in and of itself, and represents the whole "pars pro toto".

The subject matter is thus greatly reduced, but an even greater reduction becomes apparent in the line of tools used by the painter. First and foremost, in the field of colours: greys of darker and lighter hues become nearly exclusive, with various versions of a reflexive blue in innumerable shades as in the photographs, or even more strikingly in the photograms. Her palette is enriched by the exclusion of most colours generally used: red, yellow and green. Thus the 'grisaille' is left as the predominant colour-scale, up and until the Pantheon inspires her during her exhibition of 1998 at the Hungarian Academy in Rome, and her stay in the city which followed. The Pantheon's true colours could not be rendered in greytone, which is why she took up browns. (The installation planned for the Museum of King Stephen in Székesfehérvár dealt with the Pantheon.)

The preferred mode of expression, however, remains the 'grisaille' to this day. It was used effectively in the past as well: on the outer panels of the altar wings in the Netherlands, where painting imitated sculpture, the grisaille emphasised a likeness to the moulded surface. Hieronymus Bosch, Breughel and many others used the technique as well. To mention one of the many possible Hungarian examples, the colour-scheme of the paintings of Lili Ország play off against the same grisaille, with a richness of shading similar to that of Éva Köves, though with a completely different inherent content. Whereas the grisaille reduces the use of colour by definition, it does not give way to monochrome, since it contains a countless variety of shades and not single unmixed colour. Reductionism, most thoroughly analysed by Lóránd Hegyi, is most typical of the era preceding Éva Köves' activity (from the 1950s through the '80s), especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

When she began to paint, Éva Köves could rely upon this artistic school of thought (Reductionism) as an already existing base, a typical tendency upon which numerous artists could be supported. For her, it was a given, and thus, she could begin building upon it and exploring, revealing it further. What she retained of it signified one of the basic principles of her art: whenever possible, a composition must be built upon a single principle, which must be carried through logically, while all other principles must be sacrificed. By this means, she excluded from her compositions

contingency, unfinished processes, and all sorts of eclectic solutions. A work of art created by Éva Köves may rest upon either this or that principle, but more than one principle may not come to bear upon a single piece.

For Éva Köves, it is perhaps the structure of the work that is most important. It could not be said that she makes a great effort, or struggles with it – quite to the contrary: her works seem to find their formal arrangement of their own volition. She develops the greater unity from her already finished paintings, and this unity could even be termed a 'retable' in the fashion of the old altars. A retable is made up of paintings placed in rows side by side, or one above the other. Based on the ceremonial rites of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Éva Köves' assembled paintings could be seen as an iconostasis: a unity which incorporates many parts. In principle, these parts (the individual pictures) could be arranged on the wall in any order, but in fact, their order has been strictly projected in drafts penciled in advance by the artist. For this reason, their connections and interrelationships cannot be changed later on, for they are just as structurally and intellectually ordered as each individual painting within itself.

Hence, Éva Köves not only renders space palpable in her works, but truly steps inside space, building her pictures around us, occupying the exhibition space, in its entirety or in part. This solution can be traced back to the early rewritten maps, in which she fitted a smaller painted map into the original, thereby creating a new surface within the surface, or to be more precise, the 'picture within a picture'. The same effect is achieved in the case of the *Shadows of Budapest*, where the space taken up by the glass pane fits into the larger space surrounding it.

The desire to be able to fill three-dimensional spaces with two-dimensional surfaces was born quite soon. The installation of 1993 in the Ludwig Museum put a vast group of paintings on show, but her later installations (*Shadows of Budapest* 1996, 1997, *Water* 1997, *Landscape* 1997, *Budapest-Venice* 1997, *Shadows of Paris* 1998, *Shadows of Rome* 1998, 1999) were much more interesting: the individual paintings were indivisibly connected, the elements were continuous while also contrasting with one another, and each carried the tension within itself, whatever its size, or the height at which it was placed. This tension changed into progression, movement in the overwhelming installation exhibited at the Venice Biennial of 1997, the *Venice Veil*. The sheet magnified to a monumental size implied the unified quintessence of all the sheets hung out to dry in Italy. It drew the viewer into the pavilion before the decision to enter had been made, at a glance from outside. The work (wall painting, acrylic and photograph), imposing even in its dimensions (450x350 cm), in a sense ushered the visitor into the interior space, where an installation compiled from numerous parts, and composed of a single concept, could be seen. The pictures formed a single series, whose individual parts carried no meaning independently, but only collectively. They rounded the walls, lifting and sinking, as if to follow the paces, and movements, of the visitor.

New installations came of the new experiences. The new experiences were first and foremost related to Paris: the photographs taken there show details of the Eiffel Tower, the movable iron railing on the pavement outside the Centre Pompidou and the crammed cityscape stretching to infinity. From these photos was based the installation of 1998, the *Shadows of Paris*, with the shifted formations that can be viewed from various angles. The installation proffers a bit of a feeling of having been photographed from a plane circling over Paris, out of angles made necessary by the flight. The *Shadows of Paris* were followed by the *Shadows of Rome* in 1999, with the typical Roman cobblestones portrayed in hues of typically Roman fatigued terracotta reds.

The thematic content of the last year and a half has revolved not so much around the easily recognisable beauty of the well-known metropolises, but rather, relate to the less spectacular street pictures of Budapest, as well as interiors and landscapes. The incredibly fine grisaille tones have made way to more emphatic, sculptural forms, and more pronounced contrast between light and dark, while plastic sheets enveloping scaffolded buildings have taken the place of the "Venice Veil". One supposes that among artists, the changing hues and strange, transparent beauty of these

sheets were observed only by Éva Köves. Something that is unpleasant and rather repulsive to others is made attractive in her photographs, and is reborn in her photo-paintings. The transparency of the plastic sheet is indelibly linked with the tectonic aspect of the scaffolding – as if showing us the contemporary, more everyday equivalent of the earlier constructivist "glass and steel" dream. Details speak for the rest of the work, and are complete in themselves, with no need of supplementation. Verticalities receive more emphasis than previously, and the folds of the sheets mark the sensitive skin of the buildings, their epidermis. The play of light and shadow make every detail, bulge and crease individually emphatic to the senses. It is as if we were looking at a painstakingly worked surface in plaster of Paris, upon which the events and the changes time has wrought had all left their prints, settled in layers that are stuck one on top of the other.

The most recent "picture-groups" (the four "Still Lives" of the year 2000) manifest a new, compact format: the square pictures do not just hang together loosely, but are organically intertwined, forming a completely tight material and intellectual bond. Change in the varied angles of perception now carries the tension inward, towards the centre of the composition. These squares, clinging together while alternating their subject matter, seem to recall the dynamism and speeded-up rhythm of the film screening (Dzsigá Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera", or "Kino Glas", in particular). The film winds on, and the fragments of street, stairwell and room are squeezed together, forming new, and heretofore unknown groupings.

The actual artistically active period of Éva Köves' life amounts to just barely a decade – and the numerous surprises, novelties and singular conceptions that these short years have borne allows us no more than to wait in expectation, as the film rolls on with unstilled dynamism.