

PRESENTING THE PICTURE: A FEW NOTES ON ÉVA KÖVES'S WORKS

Éva Köves has created an extremely complex and rich painterly system: a carefully devised construct, which has elaborately been thought through right down to the smallest details. *Painterly system*: apparently, these two notions have shifted sufficiently far away from each other, probably precisely on account of the emerging polarity evidenced in twentieth-century art; however, Éva Köves has managed to re-connect them once again. In her art both notions are present with equal weight and in a dialectic harmony. *Painterly* is the pure, comprehensive and transparent visual world that she has created, as it is precisely the possibilities of the creation of par excellence painterly forms that provide the final structures, in which the visual system is differentiated by the dynamics of the surface: thick and massive paint layers versus thin and transparent ones. She thinks in a *system*, in which the various visual situations provide the consistent, logical and analytical survey of the relations between objects and space, light and shadow, two-dimensionality (linearity) and three-dimensionality (depth). When placed side by side, these paintings, which are linked to one another and form an organic unit, which reflect on each other's formal system and apparently continue one another, yet each of which displays a remarkable autonomy, reveal a *picture architecture* constructed on the basis of a particular visual dramaturgy, in which the arbitrary elements and the associative painterly improvisations seem to work subordinated to the fundamental system. Yet, instead of being closed and dogmatic, this systematicness is open in the direction of all kinds of painterly improvisations and spontaneity and of all forms of painterly self-reflection.

Éva Köves's modesty, along with her analytical thinking by which she models the immanent questions of the fictitious picture space, her intellectual systematism, the monochrome grey of her paintings and her reduction of forms, altogether fail to prevent the presence of a strange, poetic and concealed painterliness, which combines her subdued and rational visual world with a kind of romantic lyricism. This quiet lyricism, this withdrawn and effaced emotionality (which by the way somehow resembles the aestheticism of nostalgic and romantic wanderlust) is primarily manifested in the preservation – or even enhancement – of the painterly immaterialization of the photographic basis of capturing a real object, of the growing uncertainty associated with the reading of the objective, representative elements, and of the emotive surplus meanings of the effects of light and shadow. While she follows with analytical rigour the changes taking place in the fictitious picture space, along with the minimal shifts in meaning and the transformations in the interpretation of objects and spaces, she sustains – as a „by-product” – the mood of the painting, which in a way complements the rational, analytical programme, thus legitimizing another possible form of picture type or another kind of authentic approach. Her works are not landscapes, not fragments of urban scenes, not scaffoldings for buildings, not iron structures of railway stations, bridges and market halls, not industrial constructions, which she renders uncertain with the help of painterly methods and poetically reinterprets using extremely subdued, almost monochrome colours and par excellence brushwork; quite the contrary, she models visual problems and typical painterly situations, discovering the suitable vocabulary of motifs, colour structures and interconnections of forms to go with them. At the same time, she preserves, and often enhances, the significance of content associated with the poetic surplus meanings of her pictures, which – in a way „parallel” with the context of her analytical method of inquiry – allows still another layer of interpretation.

This almost naive, almost disconcerting lack of prejudice towards the visual programme forms one of the characteristic components of the artistic attitude of the 1990s. Éva Köves's painting follows a non-programmatic, non-analytical course, while her artistic programme, along with her deliberate aesthetic

strategy and analytical approach, are evidently present in her works. Yet, her aim is not simply the deconstruction, the permanent relativization, the critical questioning of linguistic systems; in a certain sense her aim is the *liberation of painting* from the yoke of conventions and analytical models which art has created for itself.

It is true that Éva Köves tries to paint in such a way that she at same time *forgets* and re-interprets the analytical programmes, which she has devised for her own artistic practice. Thanks to the deliberate act of *forgetting*, she views – and presents to the viewers – the picture anew. For Éva Köves, the picture is the storehouse of possibilities, while it exists in the form of its own visual evidence, concrete uniqueness, inimitability, in its own natural and evident *visual character*. Therefore, she re-endows the pictures with the ability to gain legitimacy through their own colour qualities, through their own internal structure, the immediateness resulting from their own physical dimensions and their own visual-sculptural immanence, while at the same time in her visual connotations she renders perceptible a whole list of art historical and technical references. Naturally, these references have a fundamental influence on the process of interpretation, thus linking her pictures with the analytical concept of twentieth-century painting, despite all their *naïveté*, whether deliberate or spontaneous; in other words they reinforce the same contextualization that they have just questioned, thus conveying the effects of invigorating freshness, power and ingenuousness.

This artistic ambition led Éva Köves to the motifs revoking the style of geometric constructivism: motifs borrowed from the material reality of actual cities and presented in a somewhat alienated and *purified* form. It is only natural that for a Hungarian painter the basis on which she could build her own system of references is primarily provided by the constructivist tradition of the 1910s and 1920s: i.e. the vocabulary of forms of geometrical abstract art and the rationalist aestheticism of PICTURE ARCHITECTURE's functionalism combining universalistic world creation and rationalist systematism. One of the basic motifs of Éva Köves's pictures is the geometric structure formed by iron constructions of precise geometric design and details of industrial halls, railway stations, suspension bridges and building scaffoldings, which mostly appear against a photographic background, in the style of the objectivistic, cold, impersonal and emotionless materialism of black-and-white photography. Still, even when she works with photographs of mountains and rocks, hilly landscape and clouds, or when she employs the shadows of various – mostly hard, geometrical and industrial – objects, instruments, machinery and iron constructions, well, even then the visual and plastic structure of the picture is determined by systematism, objectivistic, clear arrangement, calculated and balanced composition. The geometrical structures re-interpreted using soft and par excellence painterly gestures – despite all their poetic, romantic and sometimes narrative emotionalism – preserve their objectivistic and impersonal, rationalist and constructivistic character, conjuring up an abundance of memories of geometrical abstract art, from the compositions of PICTURE ARCHITECTURE of Lajos Kassák and Sándor Bortnyik, through Béla Uitz's Icon Analyses and László Péri's constructivist reliefs made of concrete, right down to László Moholy-Nagy's constructivist compositions made in Berlin, which incorporated the stylized and abstracted elements of the traffic signs, mechanical structures and semaphores of Berlin's S-Bahn into the "quasi-abstract" compositions arranged in the style of planar constructivism, the clear evidences of which have recently been discovered by the latest studies.

The visual forms composed of characteristically selected and edited sections borrowed from the set of real objects, urban scenes or natural formations and captured in photographs become the structure of a „quasi” geometrical abstract painting by the fact that the formations appearing on the picture plane are projected onto our memories of art historical studies, the typical vocabulary of forms associated with

constructivism, PICTURE ARCHITECTURE and productivism. New formations emerge from the cross-references of the memories and the actual – photographic – pictures, which become interesting and surprising precisely by virtue of the poetic and subjective interaction between the various references, without actually guiding the viewers towards a definite direction of interpretation in the manner of some *programme*. Quite the contrary, they leave the directions of individual interpretation open, preserving the fleeting, transient and permanently changing mood, the „memorial” character of the visual experiences.

This is the duality that captivates the viewers who study Éva Köves’s paintings: on the one hand, there is a *stability* suggesting pure comprehensibility and discipline and assuming the inherent structure and the immanent visual logic of constructivist composition and rationalist systematism; on the other hand, there is a *changeability* of images evoked from memory and montaged on one another and of blurred ”*déjà vu*” experiences manifested as a permanent condition and involving permanent change and emotionally motivated and constant re-appraisal. Between the extreme poles of *stability* and *changeability* there emerges the sensitive and poetic artistic reality, in which the intellectual relevance and art historical references gain a homogenous visual form, along with the flashbacks of collective memory and the fleeting and hardly expressible, almost incomprehensible emotional reactions based on personal experiences.

Stability and *changeability* are the essential poles of this visual world, which is rather subdued with regard to colour and form, yet it leaves the field open for spontaneous painterly improvisation, and unfolds in its sovereign lyrical richness. This is precisely what captivates the viewer’s intellect: the way in which Éva Köves builds a rigorous pictorial structure from this *visual attitude*, without in any way linking, however, the „deconstructed” PICTURE ARCHITECTURE organized on the basis of this strict and coldly rational, immanent visual logic with system of forms pertaining to geometrical abstract, a movement conventionally associated with this method in the course of history. She builds a PICTURE ARCHITECTURE from the deconstruction of PICTURE ARCHITECTURE, in which the various references „disturb” the single components of the pictorial structure, thus „enriching” their content. The visual presence of the various references suggests different models of painting; they activate different memorial images from the history of art, conjuring up different stylistic forms along with the underlying aesthetic strategies, linking them to subjective experiences and thus introducing different elements of moods and emotions in the coldly rational and *calculated* realm of meaning of the pictorial structure.

Calculatedness and *spontaneity* are simultaneously present in Éva Köves’s painting. And here we have come back to the statement whereby in Éva Köves’s art we are witnessing a successful attempt at *presenting the picture anew*. This lack of prejudice, this openness, by which she *bypasses* aesthetic taboos and interpretative reflexes long dominating in avant-garde art, by which she eliminates one-sided and self-imposed intellectual „limitations” taken for granted before, by which she sweeps aside methodological dogmas with charming naiveté, well, this courageous and yet evident, non-militant, non-avant-garde and non-aggressive sovereignty is what makes Éva Köves’s artistic attitude so actual and authentic. It is this freshness and lack of prejudice, this openness and *radical naiveté*, which enables her to make us see the picture *anew*, to make us forget the conventions once created by the avant-garde art itself – from methodological considerations and a position of radical criticism – so as to overcome earlier conventions and empty conventional linguistic systems, all in the interest of building new, more open and more complex communicational systems.

Perhaps this dialectical critical position is the key to the artistic stance and historical novelty and importance of Éva Köves and her generation: members of this generation have no intention to carry out a

full-scale revolution, as they do not feel to be backed by the legitimizing power of a universal revolutionary method. They do not have this method in their hands, therefore, they do not have any legitimizing power in their hands, either. Their only weapon is the position of dialectical criticism, the *radical naiveté* and *lack of prejudice*, with which they are able to deconstruct, in a wholly sovereign way, the closed systems earlier considered as valid, creating a new pictorial order in the place of this deconstruction. Therefore, they are not destructive, they are no iconoclasts, as their goal, if they have any in the classical and romantic avant-garde sense of the word, is the creation of a new pictorial order. Members of this generation try to see the picture itself *anew*, thus showing the viewers a new way of taking an entirely novel look at the art of the twentieth century, without all the aesthetic taboos and intellectual dogmas, yet with a profound familiarity of the art historical material.

Lóránd Hegyi