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SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

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“I keep going back to my past”

Ilona Keserü’s oeuvre from the perspective of the 1960s

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The theme of the Dissertation

My dissertation deals with the life-work of Ilona Keserü, the painter, regarded by art historians over the past 40 years as an artist who has created one of the strong voices and consistent oeuvres in the Hungarian art of the second half of the 20th century. The theme of the dissertation may not seem to raise complex issues. I venture to interpret an oeuvre, focusing on the artist's work in the 1960s, based on facts of art history, working simultaneously with written sources and visual documentation, facts of great variety and complexity.

My research does not aim to provide a monographic overview of Keserü's oeuvre, while it does not exclude her biography to appear either. The study maps the process of Keserü's artistic work in a traditional chronological order, up to the mid-1980's, up to the point when a new aspect emerges on her personal artistic agenda of experiments with colours¹. This aspect (a method for analysing the biological-physiological nature of vision, among other things), also brought a new direction in the oeuvre. The scientific basis of this change, a thorough and systematic analysis of the "observer's" methods can be the subject of another study (monograph), therefore, the works in the groups titled *Utóképek* (Afterimages) and the *Portrék – ábrázolás* (Portraits - depiction) will not be discussed in the dissertation. These themes are to be the subjects of a specific study also because Ilona Keserü continues to work very actively today, and consequently, we cannot consider her artistic strategy closed or as one belonging to a previous period. It was not the first time Keserü took a direction that surprised her biographers when, in the early 2000s, on her roll pictures parting with verticality, she presented a retrospective synthesis of the traditions of panel painting, murals, canvas embossing and sculpture. The textile is now on the ground, and based on the metrics of the extended arm, Keserü worked across the canvas with broad gestures, and with an intensity that refers back to her gesture paintings, made in action in the mid-1960s. By

¹ Here, I will only make a few references to the vast thematic group of *Rainbow and Skincolours*, *Afterimages*, *Infinite colour sequences*, and *Color-Moebius*, spanning thirty years since the 1980s, besides the research and emblematic use of the *cangiante* colour system, in the focus of Keserü's attention since the early 2000s.

a controlled performative magnification and repetition of her old gestures, Keserü seems to have re-lived the past casting a strong, summarising glance, for the unfolded canvas to become the medium of the often re-iterated "personal brutality" that "imbued the age and has left a trace that is still relevant".² Before her, it was perhaps only János Vaszary in his late period who used such powerful gestures in painting when making his gladioluses, and although the period he made his work was not the most suitable for crossing borders, if he had had the courage and the spiritual ability to travel in time in order to cross the limits of conformity, then this would have been the point where his and Keserü's paths crossed. Of course, this is only an attempt to grasp the male power, so rarely manifest in a female form in Hungarian art. I venture to point out how problematic this statement is, among others, by taking a gender-based approach in my analysis of Keserü's work in a Hungarian artistic tradition that lends itself to relativisation.

The meaning of the term biography is not fixed, changes over time, and ideally, a biographic work is based on a postulated connection of the age, the individual and the works. As its title suggests, the present dissertation looks at a period of Ilona Keserü's career from a perspective of the past connected to the present. It ventures to identify, by way of interpretation focused on the artist, a possible pattern or system made up from the experiences of the biographical space, the creative spaces, the definitions interpreting reality and aesthetic motivations. As a result of an interpretation focused on the artist's personality and reducing the scope of the observation, my study explores the significance of the creative self, its growth in a socio-cultural space. It does not necessarily consider certain relations and events (e.g. the heritage of the classical avant-garde and the Iparterv- exhibitions) from the widely accepted angle of the development of the canon.

Consequently, Keserü's 'adventures' – with all of their social, cultural and emotional aspects – have great significance from the point of view of her life story. When following the works closely, we always end up finding personal stories, which inevitable resulted in an essayistical tone in my dissertation.

The dissertation looks at Hungarian art between 1946 and the turn of the millennia through the work Ilona Keserü. Following the changes in the foci of art historical reviews and art criticism, it will become visible when, according to the apparatus of the reception of art, an artist reaches the zenith of his or her career. In the case of the

² Ilona Keserü: Pályakép (Career of the artist), in: *Ilona Keserü, Accademia d'Ungheria in Roma*, Roma, 2001, 7.

artists belonging to the circle mentioned above, including Keserü, this period was the 1960s. It is not distinguished dates or landmark events that make this period especially significant but the continuity of related external and internal events of the artist's life. My dissertation aims to identify the relationships of the specifically connected periods of the artist's life, and to find out how an artistic career of over 40 years can be placed on the local and global map of art, and how it fits into the history of culture and art of the second half of the 20th century in Hungary.

If they want to avoid the trap of evidences, today's viewers need to observe these images from a point where the oeuvre offers unexpected perspectives and adventures.

It was Géza Perneczky who first pointed out that with her elaborate painting, in 1965–1966 Keserü took a great leap "leaving behind three or four decades of void, to join directly the stylistic trend of the period, with her art full of strong and instinctive gestures, authentic and natural individual motifs. She is one of the few Hungarian painters who not only understand the job of a painter today but have the necessary strength in the execution of the work as well."³

This "understanding the job" and solid painterly world based on free gestures and the long-term, structive power colours that followed from it did not emerge just out of the blue. The permanently related internal and external events of the artist's life direct the attention to a new perspective from which to observe her early works, in a rhythm dictated by Keserü's education and personality. In doing so, the biographic facts are not only colourful extras among the aesthetic and artistic points but become parts of the context and of the text that describes the multi-dimensional sensual field that determined and influenced Keserü's creative thought.

The problem to explore

Re-reading the events and stories related to Ilona Keserü, and identifying the points of break-out in Hungarian art criticism and art historiography was also helped by the project carried out jointly by the Research Group of the 1960s of the Research Institute for Art History of the of the Hungarian Academy of Science and the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art in preparing the volume of studies, workshop and

³ Géza Perneczky, Keserü Ilona festményei, (The paintings of Ilona Keserü) *Budapester Rundschau*, 5 January 1968, in: *Keserü Ilona kiállítási katalógus* (exhibition catalogue), István király Múzeum Közleményei, issue 125, , Székesfehérvár, 1978, 8.

exhibition titled *The Long Sixties*. This research provided the basis of the study of Keserü's early graphic works, which became the basis of further chapters.⁴

Keserü said herself that she considers her life-work as one to be placed in the second half of the 20th century.⁵ Analysing Keserü's oeuvre, it became more and more questionable for me whether it needs to be or it is possible for it to be interpreted within the historical, theoretical and stylistic framework of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. Another question that emerged was that of the framework of the interpretation of the concept and process of the avant-garde and the notion of the abstract work in Keserü's given artistic period. And whether we will miss significant points in doing so. I was led to this change of perspective by the dialectic of the artist's early work, which basically consists in a more thoroughgoing new observation and interpretation of these works.

The logic of the research

Critics agree that Ilona Keserü is one of the most original and active figures of the art of the 1960s and 70s. While from the points of view of content as well as phraseology, her art seemingly develops in parallel with the Western model of abstraction, there is no question about her autonomy. Practically, she is intact of the influence international trends reaching Hungary quite randomly. Looking back from a distance of several decades, we can assume that one of the most attractive features of Keserü's artistic strategy is the representation of the homeliness so absent from international and Hungarian art. The notion of "homeliness" may seem strange in a text of art history and scholarly criticism, and is obviously used less in art history because the notions and metaphors of alienness and solitude have always been considered more adequate to the self-image and self-awareness of Hungarian art. However, due to its special kind of independence, Keserü's life-work can also be considered isolated.

How and for what works can it be relevant and possible to turn the relations of personal invention and international experience, "order and adventure" into a homogeneous context? What needs to be considered for the reconstruction of the historical patchwork emerging from the autonomies? Would the diversity of the

⁴ Long Sixties; http://longsixties.ludwigmuseum.hu/?page_id=251

⁵ Éva Forgács: Retrospektív. Keserü Ilona gyűjteményes kiállításai, (Retrospective. Exhibitions of Ilona Keserü's collected works) Forgács 1992b, 219.

autonomies and perhaps the emerging pattern contribute to a more complex and view of the history of Hungarian art of the 20th century, which would incorporate the continuity of culture as well as the disruptions and individual spots? Interpretation, the method, is a tool, and the interpreter uses for his or her purposes the tools that have proven the most efficient. It is an experiment – sometimes a game. As the subject is art, in this game several elements that are not necessarily related as cause and effect, nor organically, are juxtaposed like in a puzzle that may not have a clear and final solution. It is a suspended game, whose outcome and final findings are obviously interesting to me but I am at least as interested in the inner suspense, dynamics and flow of progress of the process as in the results. One of the most significant intentions motivating the interpretation of Keserü's oeuvre is to discuss concrete works that have not been hidden but have not been paid due attention to and have not been made the subject of thorough observation. (What I have in mind here are Keserü's surprising conceptual works – which were not numerous –, the parallel universe of accompanying drawings, and the collages serving as an inspiring spiritual background.)

Keserü's reception

„(...) an apt characterization is not novelty in itself; after all, the literature on art – and indeed, literature in general – is gradually turning into a fatiguing mass of good ideas and perceptions, and this takes the wind out of the sail of anyone wishing to define a thing (while respecting others who are aware of this depressing circumstance).“⁶

It was the touchstone of a friendship of over 40 years when, in 2008, Keserü asked, Géza Pernecky to write an essay for the catalogue of her exhibition in Debrecen.⁷ Their friendship began well before Pernecky emigrated in 1970, when he, as an *independent* critic, wrote several reviews of the art of Keserü and her contemporaries, often about works that were still in the making. As early as in the mid-1960s, Pernecky already called the public's attention to the fact that the air of Hungarian art, stale and stuffy then for about 20-30 years, was being stirred and refreshed by the strong presence and intellectually well-grounded painting of Keserü and her generation. It was him who first analysed how Keserü's colour gestures cut into the homogeneous surface, and used terms to describe her painting that were challenging taboos in themselves, writing about lush colours, saturated with pleasure, strength, shapelessness, and the sensual

⁶ Dezső Tandori: Változatok Keserü Ilona műveire II. (Variations on Ilona Keserü's work II) In: Keserü 2002, 21.

⁷ Géza Pernecky: Csata és szivárvány. Spektákulum – jegyzetek és színpadi töredékek Keserü Ilona művészetéhez (Battle and rainbow. Spectacle – notes and stage fragments for Ilona Keserü's art) in: Keserü 2008, 5-55.

nature of painting. All these were phenomena mostly neglected in the art historiography of the 1960s. The first time they came to be considered was in the early 1970s. Several decades later, Péter Nádas (who, as a writer, enjoyed the privilege of being an outsider, as well as benefits of distance and the advantage of an overall retrospective view) sums up Keserü's work as one where "painting was not based on beauty but on pleasure".⁸ The emergence, fulfilment and forms of appearance of the pleasure principle are a recurrent theme in my dissertation.

By 2008, the literature on Keserü's work had grown rather bulky and complicated to access, as it was comprised basically of articles and reviews. Pernecky was therefore right in assuming that in the language of art history, scholarship and theory he had little chance to make statements about Keserü's art exceeding in relevance the already existing ones. In an unexpected dramaturgical turn (or upon irrational inspiration), he re-framed the old phrases, and found a belletristic form for the monographic overview of Keserü's life-work. By doing so, he ventured to do something quite equivalent to visual perception: a sensual representation of the visual in a text. He presented the tradition of describing art in an allegorical dialogue. As a result, the lines, which are sometimes in perfect alexandrines brought Keserü's art back to the archaic distance of the myths of art, and not only her art but also her magical figure, akin to that of sybillas and witches. This gesture had a dual purpose: with his alternative criticism, Pernecky provided a new perspective for spectator. At the same time, now bound by no limitations, he became a time-traveller, curator and minstrel, a demiurge of the events in the disguise of the naïve dramatic plays of 18th century school dramas and spectacles. Elaborating on the fictional nature of reality is Pernecky's invention. Ultimately, he also challenges the validity and relevance of existing professional literature. My study also takes this doubt as its starting point.

Hungarian art historiography is characterized by a predominantly positive reception of Keserü's life-work, usually based on the same, cultic point: the tomb-stone motif, found in 1967. Indeed, it was undoubtedly a significant recognition and finding, strong, original and independent. But how has it become a permanent topos? In addition to the fact that usually the same works are reproduced from Keserü's oeuvre and the same significant period of her art is quoted, which inevitably results in isolating the works from one another and from other periods of her career. As opposed to the canonical

⁸ Péter Nádas: *Saját jel* (Own sign), Keserü 2004, 13.

forms of stylistic analysis based on the priority of the autonomy of aesthetics, in studying Keserü's life-work I use the biographical approach, following closely the progress of life and art, in light of which certain works reveal what is excitingly strange in them, rather than what is well-known and familiar.

Offering interpretations starting out from the work and returning to it, exploring its essential aspects, is a chance for direct dialogue. I read the following revelative sentence in Miklós Almási's review of a new edition of Hans Belting's work in the end of art: "With the end of art history came the age of the analysis of the works. This makes me happy because there is no area in aesthetics more productive than this: the Great Theory, the Great History have come to be doubted, while the work itself as a microcosm is a tangible and graspable totality."⁹ It is similar to what Hans Belting calls methodological flexibility, aimed at a coherent analysis of works and at grasping their topicality. This led Belting to the model of several parallel art histories. Another significant task is the study of contemporaneous contexts: in interpreting art it essential not to separate the historical, geographical, political and cultural context of the birth of a work from the work itself. Therefore, I consider it important to relate each pieces in the oeuvre to a life situation. In doing so, primary documents of the artist's life may come to the fore: interviews, notes, diaries, private photos and documents, as well as collections of memories and objects (stored in other media) structuring time and space, and commentaries on these documents interpreting them in the framework of the research of visual culture, possibly from new aspects. By way of simultaneous analysis of those documents, we can observe from the perspective of small events and movements such significant periods, also constructing the artistic space, as the year Keserü spent in Italy in 1963 (discussing such elementary questions as what she saw there, whom she met there, what she found worth recording there, etc.).

Studying Keserü's oeuvre, a peculiar artistic character emerges, one that seems to have had an artistic programme already in her years of study, like an avant-garde artist, only she followed paths totally different from the ones that would have been marked

⁹ Miklós Almási, *A kétszer írt könyv* (Hans Belting: A művészettörténet vége. Az első kiadás újragondolt változata – tíz év után), (A book written twice (Hans Belting: The end of the history of art. A revised version of the first edition – after ten years), *Mozgó Világ*, March 2007; <http://mozgovilag.com/?p=2597>

out for her by the tradition(s) of Hungarian art. ("I have considered myself a professional since I was a child" – Dezső Tandori quoting Keserü.¹⁰)

The determination with which she began started her artistic career at an unusually young age as well as the exceptional circumstances that helped her artistic and human character develop (the time she spent as Ferenc Martyn's student) also distinguish her from the generation of painters who began their career in the 1940s and 50s.¹¹ Therefore, I consider it my task to discuss the circumstances and context in which she began her career, the master-disciple relationship she had Ferenc Martyn, the College of Fine Art, which was the only institution for the training of artists in the 1950s, and the dialectic of the early works, as after finishing her studies at the college Keserü made immense efforts to shake off and move beyond the reflexes of traditional realist academism on her own, taking inspiration from her own theoretical education and artistic vision.

Sources

The tasks I undertook in my dissertation, the methods I chose to apply, require sources for the study to be based on strong arguments. My experiment: to present the authentic portrait of a creative person's problems, age, her relationship with that age and her independence from it, and an overview of her oeuvre is a matter of sources rather than enthusiasm and inventiveness. In our case, interviews play a distinguished role among the sources. Some "master interviews" look back on important periods and turning points of the artist's career from the early, formative years, while others from the zenith of Keserü's career (1970s and 80s). These interviews are coherent, despite the fact that they are full of repetitions, and that new elements, new facts come up all the time. At the same time, it is quite admirable that Keserü never end contradicts herself. Nevertheless, each text is a little different, they present the essence and the

¹⁰ Dezső Tandori: ("I have considered myself a professional since I was a child," in: Dezső Tandori: *Visszatekintés: Keserü Ilona művészete az 1960-as években*. (Looking back: Ilona Keserü's art in the 1960s). Magyar Ifjúság, 2 March, 1984.

¹¹ On the change of generations, the modernists getting old, and the "missing" generation that broke the tradition of continuity, among them Keserü, who "brought a style that was too unique" see Lajos Németh: *Gesztus vagy alkotás*, (Gesture or work) in: *Gesztus vagy alkotás* (ed. Árpád Timár and Sándor Hornyik), MTA MKI, Budapest, 2001, 164–172.

circumstances from different angles, which resulted in the fact that the present study often analyses phenomena on the micro-level of gestures, texts and marginalia. Keserü is fully aware of the nature of recurring stories and events: "In different periods of their life, depending on how they have evolved in the course of their lives, one can tell five or six different stories about the same event."¹² The permanence of the forces shaping the individual's decisions and strategies is indicated by their resultants that provide the aesthetic solidity of the argumentation and of the creative gestures. Obviously, the dissertation is aware of and relies on the existing Hungarian and international literature in Keserü's work.

Research Method

The dissertation combines the advantages offered by source analysis, interview analysis, life interview, study of historical sources and *micro-history*. After thorough research of the material it became clear to me that, once they become accessible, the little events, encounters, impressions and experiences that shaped Keserü's life inevitably become valuable. Therefore, my methodology necessarily comes to include cultural study, sociology, ethnography, feminist literature related to gender studies, and oral history. The secondary literature that represents the bulk of the history of Keserü's reception, and the further contexts of this secondary literature, have provided evidence supporting the fact that Keserü's art entered the Hungarian art scene with such force that it still remains an important task to describe, record and evaluate the phenomenon and provide a summary of the sources. And this is where the interpretation of her works comes to play a key role. At the same time, the aim, as well as the subject of the dissertation require that it should break away, to some extent, from the rules of classical art historical monographs and present Keserü's quest for aesthetic values throughout her life-work from the perspective of her life story (political, social and emotional), by way of interdisciplinary research. The methodology of *cultural contextualism* is combined here with the analysis of works growing into a case study as the primary tool.

¹²Judit Gellér: Beszélgetés Ilona Keserü Ilona festőművésznővel. (Interview with painter Ilona Keserü.),
file:///Users/katalinaknai/Desktop/Gellér%20Judit:%20Beszélgetés%20Ilona%20Keserü%20Ilona%20festőművésznővel.html

Dissertation structure:

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 - 1.1 "When I became a student in Budapest, there was nothing there anymore but museums"
 2. "Like taking a fresco off the wall." The 1950s
 3. What does Keserü want? – The 1960s
 - 3.1 "Rome puts everything in place."
 4. Tableau with a lady – the IPARTERV exhibitions
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 1. Ilona Keserü – Chronology
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Publications:

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Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest - Vaszary Galéria, Balatonfüred, 2014. 1 May –27 July, 2014.

Conference participation, Lectures:

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