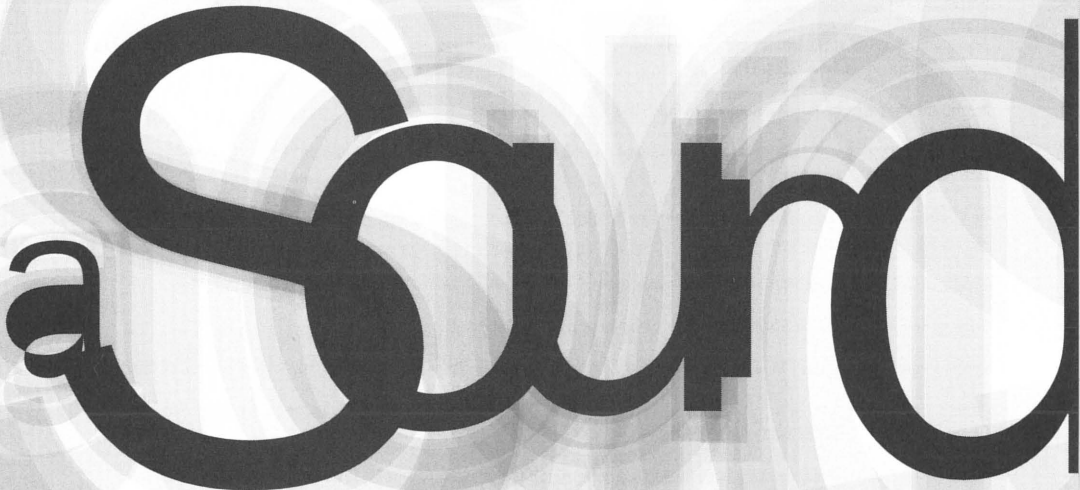


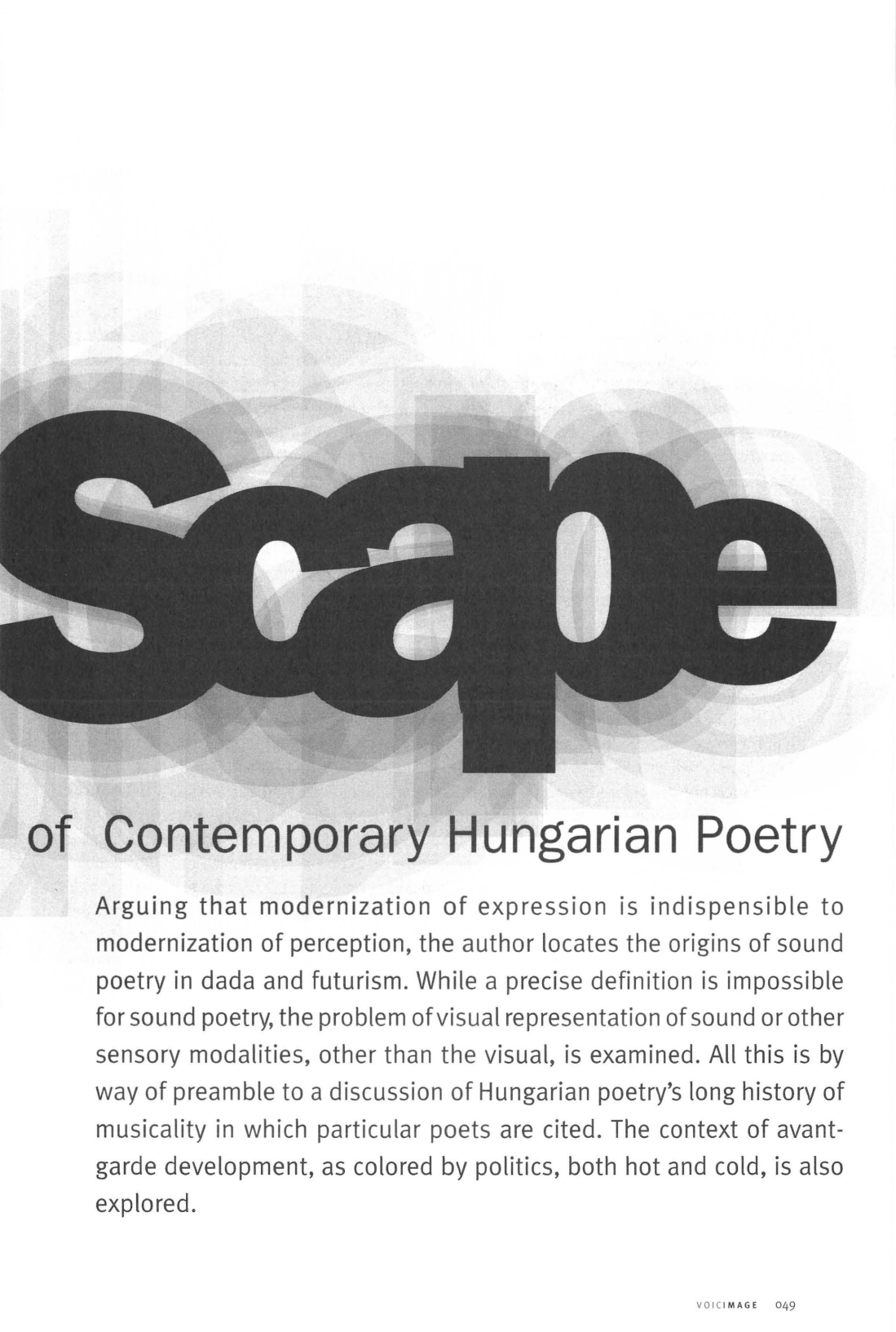
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a s r o



# Scape

## of Contemporary Hungarian Poetry

Arguing that modernization of expression is indispensable to modernization of perception, the author locates the origins of sound poetry in dada and futurism. While a precise definition is impossible for sound poetry, the problem of visual representation of sound or other sensory modalities, other than the visual, is examined. All this is by way of preamble to a discussion of Hungarian poetry's long history of musicality in which particular poets are cited. The context of avant-garde development, as colored by politics, both hot and cold, is also explored.

**With the paradigmatically complex** and quite often very specific developments of twentieth century's poetic practice, poetic activity continuously rediscovered the potentiality and efficiency of the oral and vocal dimension of language and expression. Evidently, as it is usual in the history of art and mankind's spiritual self-expression, the exploration of the huge field of vocality included experiments and experiences which not simply preceded, but even came to full bloom together with the process of articulation of the expression itself. The exciting and interesting *ancestral symbiosis of perception, cognition and expression* makes this discourse much more complicated, but as we have not sufficient space to develop this in detail, for now we state that the modernization of expression is indispensable to the modernization of perception. Meanwhile, at the same time and evidently, the continuous articulation of the supply of expressive forms articulate the capacity and the special sensibility of perception and cognition as well.

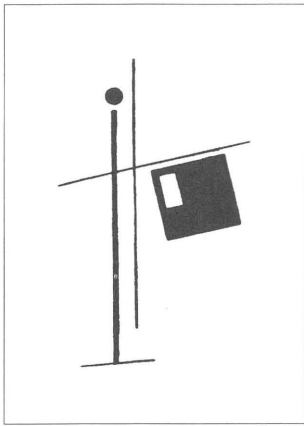
This heroic period of the radical modernization of poetic language is attached, as it is quite well-known, above all to *futurist and dadaist experiences* (not undervaluing other sources of renewal). There was an extremely important precedent produced by *symbolist poetry*. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the recognition of the deep spiritual identity of poetic and musical experience (conceptualized vigorously in Verlaine's famous *Art poétique*). Intuition leads to the theoretic separation of the language of poetry, on one hand, and the language of prose forms, on the other hand. It means that "literature" as an entity missing any essential link with musicality, will be separated from "poetry" which is identified more and more with music. This conception is materialized, in a way, in the vocal practice of *futurist declamation* and *dadaist lautgedichte*, and all the history of twentieth century poetic experimentation shows somehow the functionalization of musical parameters inherent in language, which earlier were neglected and taken as accidental or as less than secondary factors of linguistic expression. Futurism and mainly Marinetti's declamation harshly revitalize intonation, timbre, rhythm, volume and onomatopoeism. Dada's sound poetry eliminates the nearly obligatory semantic automatism in poetic communication, and focuses on the phoneme and letter as basic elements of the language of poetry. Later on, radical poetic experiments, engaged in sound experiences, tried and succeeded to penetrate the phoneme itself (see some congenial inventions of *Isou*) and/or functionalized the extralinguistic domain of speech activity (such as inspiration and expiration noises, articulation noises, groaning, sighing, whispering, howl, etc.). See for example, the heroic poetic efforts of *Artaud*. With the continuous development of the technical basis of civilization and, consequently, of artistic activity, the range of sound expression forms and possibilities and the domains to be yet explored have been incredibly widened. All the artists, poets and musicians, and all the participants and theoreticians of present day culture are or, if not, should be well aware of what has happened in this large field outlined by poetic, musical, artistic, performative activities. As a result, it is really difficult to qualify generically (within traditional categories), if a sound art work should be considered music, poetry, performance or a conceptual piece. (Many can find a generic identification in the intermedial range based on the conceptual symbiosis.)

That's why sound poetry has such a large number of identifying aspects — from the relatively purist tendencies of *phonetic poetry* (the early Heidsieck or Garnier, Rühm or Rotella) or *minimalistic vocal poetry* (Spatola or Lora-Totino) through Chopin's or Cobbing's or Dufrêne's or The Four Horsemen's *vocal noisism* or Rothenberg's or Morrow's *chanted poetry* and through Blaine's or Minarelli's *actional sound poetry* up to clearly *musical sound poetry* (Amirkhanian, Stratos, Arcand, Fontana, Moss) or even to music engaged in linguistic experiences (Cage, Ashley, Bertoni-Serotti etc.), there is an abundant variety of genres and manners of expression in sound poetic activity. For this see, among others, Minarelli's articles and papers on the concept of *polipoetic genres*.

The process outlined above with regard to the development of vocal and sonoric functionalization of the language of poetry is encoded by the problem of visual components and carriers. On one hand written language — even as a score of human speech activity — serves as a two-dimensional starting point for vocal reinterpretation in oral poetry or declamation, which is already a three-dimensional creative action. Then in the process of this three-dimensional (re)creation, beyond vocal and musical parameters inevitably appear visual (*gestual, ambient, scenic* etc.) codes as can be clearly seen in the futurist declamation programme (*Declamazione dinamica e sinottica*) or in Ball's memoirs on the early formation of *dadaist lautgedichte* (*Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Luzern, 1946). So modern sound poetry was born organically in a total space of creativity characterized by the simultaneous presence of linguistic, vocal-sonoric, *gestural* and *actional* elements.

A well-known question which has a paradigmatic evolution in recent art history, is this: how to restore the link backwards from acoustic codes to visually — how to note a complex vocal-sonoric-actional art work with visual signs. Evidently, it is a question far beyond the problem of notation: visual scores evoking the original artistic act are more than a simple diagram or visual description. Visual notation must be an autonomous reinterpretation of the original artistic act, exactly the way declamation or sound poetry action was or could be a recreation of a written poem or of a visual work. The autonomy of single artistic spheres, connected by the processes of medial reinterpretation and recreation, is dialectically completed by the special creative nature of the intermedial artistic mind. The verification of this reciprocal continuity of medial reinterpretation and recreation can be seen in the practice of futurist *parolibero* and *tavole parolibere*, as autonomous visual poems often have their acoustic parallels in declamations which are often visually recoded in *tavole parolibere* as visual scores.

Since the question and its artistic solution is the problem of modern music's notation — which produced a highly interesting domain of intermedial contacts of "pure" modern music and visual art (see for example, some scores of Ligeti, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Boulez or others) — is relatively well-known. At this point we look to more radical steps in intermedial artistic concepts and in their linguistic and structural consequences: to Cage's conceptually redefined musical or performative instructions, to Higgins' conceptual scores interpretable both in a visual-conceptual and a musical-actional way.



**FIGURE 1**  
Lajos Kassák, “Bildarchitektur,”  
from *De Stijl*, 1922.



**FIGURE 2**  
Lajos Kassák, paper collage, 1926.

After having outlined, even if in a summary way, the basal developments of the vocal-sonoric rearrangement of poetry and its visual consequences, let's see what has been going on in Hungary in the last few decades. As a short prehistory, we recognize that Hungarian poetry had a long tradition of — musicality — even virtuoso musicality. Great Hungarian poets such as Bálint Balassi in the sixteenth century or Mihály Csokonai Vitéz at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century, or János Arany in the second-half of the nineteenth century worked out an almost perfect sound for the language of Hungarian written poetry. Still, the conceptual recognition of the organic identity of poetry and music, and, together with that, the conceptual separation of poetry from “literature” realized by French symbolist poetry (evoked initially with Verlaine’s famous poem) was not conceptualized at that time in Hungarian poetry. Nevertheless post-symbolic musicality was developed to an extensive level by the poets of the review *Nyugat* (West), which was a forum for the modernization in literature during the early twentieth century, in the poetry and in the rich translation activity of Dezső Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth, Mihály Babits. A totally new, proto-avant-garde sensibility and an adequate primary musicality of poetic language was found in the poetic work of one of the greatest Hungarian poets of all times, Endre Ady. This perceptive and linguistic modernization has an interesting parallel in the early music of Béla Bartók, essentially during the first two decades of the century.

These, events suggest a reciprocal co-penetration of music and poetry that might have consolidated in a rich generic range as in the case of futurist or dadaist practice, yet didn't. Furthermore, the first strong wave of historical avant-garde was signaled by the outstanding poet, writer, *Lajos Kassák*. He is better known in Europe as a painter, great organizer and editor of important reviews such as *A TETT* (The Action), *MA* (Today), *Munka* (Work), *Dokumentum* etc. These took their first decisive inspiration from German-Austrian expressionism and, on the other hand, from cubism and, a bit later, from

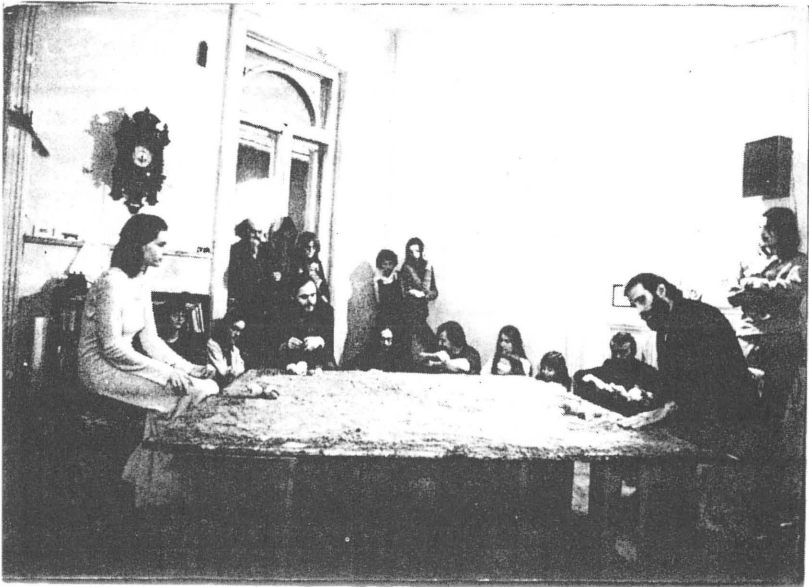


FIGURE 3 Kassák Stúdió (later Squat) at work, 1974.

constructivism. These were relatively purist tendencies, as they influenced almost exclusively fine arts, or — as in the case of expressionism — had a quite intense influence on artistic intentions and dynamism, but didn't radically upset the whole structure of poetic language. Kassák and his colleagues (such as Róbert Berényi, Sándor Barta, Béla Uitz, Róbert Reiter, Erzsébet Újvári, or for a period László Moholy-Nagy) formed a new artistic vision, launching a new practice in applied arts, typography, cover-design etc., but essentially didn't integrate the asyntactic and asemantic use of poetic language. So, regarding the acoustic aspect of poetic language, instead of initiating any kind of vocal-sonoric poetry, the only relevant step done by them in this field, was the interesting practice of choir-recital of poems, an activity which had a progressive relevance both in cultural-sociological and in an artistic sense.

After the Versailles-Trianon peace treaties and, in a longer perspective between the two wars for a long list of historical reasons that cannot be detailed at the moment, this first strong avant-garde wave practically stopped: because of an immense variety of consequences including the fatal mutilation of the country, the forced emigration of most of the avant-garde artists (even Kassák went on with his activity for years in Vienna, where he had a memorable meeting with Marinetti) and the strong oppression of the then-new right-wing regime (most of the avant-garde artists were engaged in more or less radical leftism).

After the second world war, Hungary experienced a new oppression, in the form of Stalinist dictatorship, when neither moderate nor conservative spiritual positions were tolerated. Despite the overtly oppressive nature of the Stalinist dictatorship in the 1950s, and then the increasingly disguised oppression of the long Kádár-era, due also to a complicated texture of various (sociological, political, cultural, etc.) effects and the new winds of the 1960s in Europe (which did not penetrate the frontier),

nevertheless, a highly intensive new wave of neo-avant-garde thought developed in the late 1960s and in the early 1970s. The most progressive outcomes were in the field of experimental theater (see the extensive example of Kassák Stúdió, later, in emigration, Squat in New York) and in progressive pop music (see the multiple examples of Kex and János Baksa-Soós), but in fine arts and poetic practice important results were achieved. Still, the most important influence of this new wave was the pre-forming of the artistic mind of the young generations, because of which from the late 1970s through the 1980s an over-all effective “parallel,” independent, over-underground culture and art practice developed outside the official, monolithic institutions of the regime.

Perhaps for the first time in the history of Hungarian avant-garde movements, the dominating artistic trend was exactly this over-all view of art, the total co-penetration of poetic, musical and artistic ideas. That's why music became so decisive for poetry as well as for art. The concert-theater situation and the relative freedom offered by the means and effects of the same situation, produced a new space for artistic-poetic-musical experimentation. A number of relevant groups formed — and worked or have been working intensely — artists, poets, musicians and all kinds of performers such as Bizottság (Committee), Konnektor, BP Service, Lois Ballast, Art Deco, Jugó Tudósok (Yugoslavian Scientists) and so on.

It seemed evident that musical and visual space could have a strong influence on the use of poetic language, first on the level of vocality and then on the level of sonority and conceptuality. Nevertheless, real Hungarian sound poetry was put in motion outside Hungary.

In modern Hungarian poetry, between the two wars and after the second one, until the 1960s, the only poet who occasionally went beyond the semantic border of language — from poetic musicality moved on towards abstract phonic possibilities inherent in language — was one of the greatest poets of this century, Sándor Weöres. Hungarian sound poets of the first generation made sound tributes to him: Tibor Papp in his *Pagan Rhythms* and Katalin Ladik in her *Group of phonemes* or *Panyigai*, for example.

Katalin Ladik, poet, performer, actress, born in 1942 in Novi Sad, was a Yugoslavian citizen till the end of the 1980s. She published several books (both in Hungarian and in Serbian-Croatian) and had innumerable performances in Europe. But her most outstanding artistic expression is vocal art and sound poetry. Her international fame is due to her exceptional vocal capacity and voice training, and of course, to her deeply original poetic inventions in vocal expression. In her sound poetry activity an atavistic richness of body language sublimated in voice meets a folkloristically deeply colored linguistic background and an up-to-date modern sensibility. It is not surprising that her sound poetry works attracted the attention of *Henri Chopin* in 1979, in his monograph on international sound poetry (*Poésie Sonore Internationale*, Jean-Michel Place editor).

Tibor Papp was a 1956 refugee, living subsequently in Paris. In the first period of his sound poetry activity he concentrated mainly on verbal rhythms and the alternative or simultaneous adoption of French and Hungarian languages. He developed a large-scale cooperation with emigrant Hungarian avant-gardists (in Paris, with Pál Nagy and Alpár Bujdosó, edited for decades the most important review of Hungarian neo-avant-garde: *Magyar Műhely /Atelier Hongois/*), and similarly with French avant-garde artists, collaborating in Polyphonix group, with artists such as Jean-Jacques Lebel, Charles Dreyfuss etc. Since the 1980s he has been engaged in computer poetry and created some original poetic programming software such as *Distichon Alfa* which can generate an almost endless number of distichons. At the same time he became a theoretician of computed-generated poetic language.

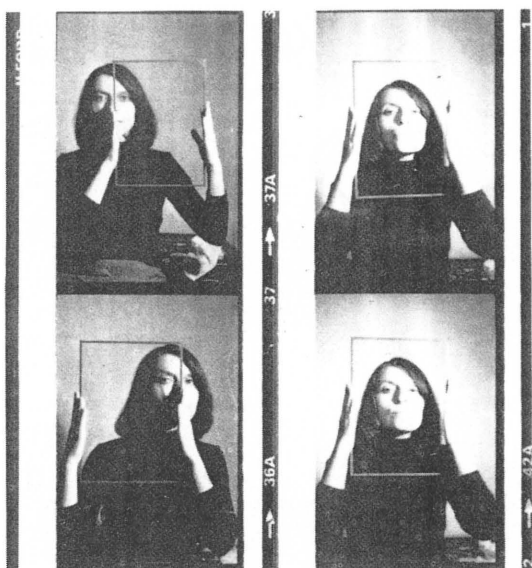
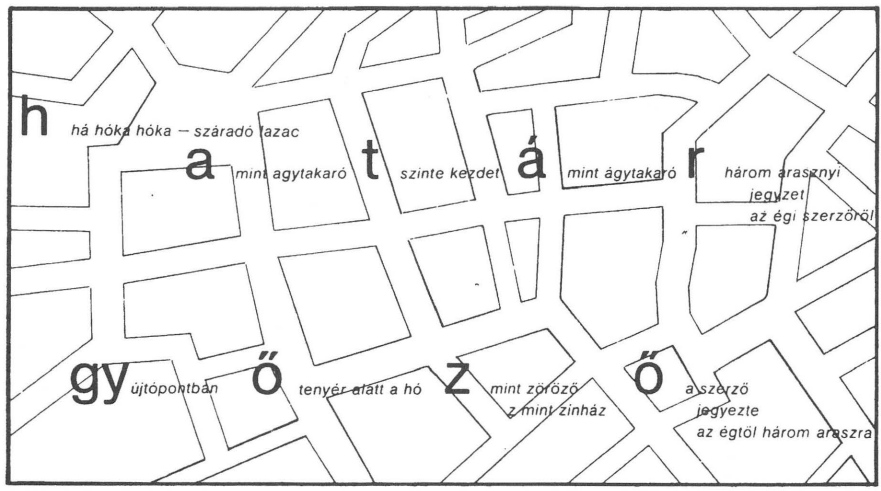


FIGURE 4+5 Katalin Ladik in performance, mid-1980s.

**á** mint agytakaró  
**b** ha lóhálorpássz szállj le a lóról  
**c** comme bákóm  
**d** in succés in succés /pn'la desastrul final  
**dzs** mint hárisnyatarló fellegek csak-nehezébb  
**f** csak hanu rab  
**h** stende nobis Domine  
**m** lék-betétkönyvek jobbára kis példányszámban mondhatni titkos értékük túlmutat a szűk szakmai körök kívánalmain  
**ma** mint agytakaró  
**g** mint géhás  
**e**



**n** apon papír kráteres tölgyeket árnyaló keleti fal  
**e** csak-nehezék  
**k** ell mint iszákos embernek a nagy tavak  
**l** locsogási tilalmat rendeltek el augusztus elejétől a főváros minden kerületében  
**ly** a veszélyeztetett  
**sz** szárdt szárdszálon gyöngöző pirából  
**u** like who  
**zs** ézsus-mán tányéron an az ablak mán mán egy  
**j** é ny lesedik viseltes vargúnyánkat  
**ty** ogurk. työgünk bunós akarattal  
**ü** ke modus rectum  
**ű** is szobor de  
**x** ilon k helyett p-vel  
**í** és ii – acélsőből egy töltemény  
**s** a láthatár behorpad  
**v** izes a fedőlap  
**p** ha öháton jössz szállj le a lóról

FIGURE 6 Tibor Papp, Map-scores, mid 1980s.

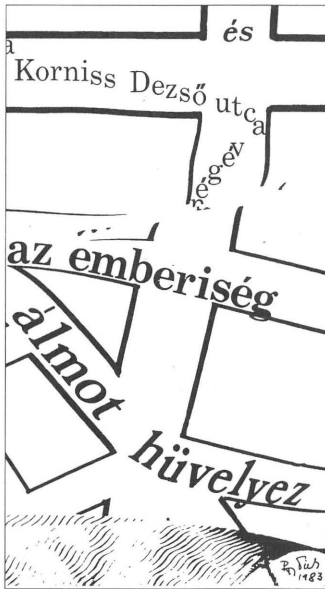


FIGURE 7 Tibor Papp, Map-scores, mid 1980s.



FIGURE 8 István Kántor (Monty Cantsin) in performance, mid-1980s.

Inside Hungary, in the 1970s more Hungarian poets — usually working in other forms of poetic self-expression as well — started a real sound poetry practice, in which the inspiration and the influence of avant-garde movement of previous periods were quite decisive. One of them was yet more or less a foreigner: István Kántor, for decades more known by his artist name Monty Cantsin. In the mid 1970s, he left the country and lived primarily in Canada. He is a performance artist, musician, composer, with a profound sound poetic inspiration. In his songs, multimedia performances or other works vocal and verbal expression remains decisive.

Ákos Szilágyi's sound poetry is inspired by the gap between the semantic and the phonetic level of language. He creates a permutative oral poetry in which the consistent alteration of the sound form of the same words or phrases leads to the continuous modification of semantic meaning. Using this method, the parallel development of the semantic and phonic modulations, inserted always in a very characteristic rhythmic composition, creates a deeply grotesque effect, which is, at the same time, full of existential anxieties.

My own sound poetry activity which started at the end of the 1970s. In the initial period, musical inspiration was very strong in both in verbal/vocal and compositional sense. I worked out a sort of abstract sound poetry in which musical cues are decisive. The voice often ends up becoming sound with the sonority or musical complexity of the piece always important. I've been working continuously with bands (Szkárosi&Konnektor, Spiritus Noister, or even the English group Towering Inferno), consequently my poetry usually has a strong intermedial and/or performance character in which visuals and action — even if recently in a minimal way — become components of the whole (sound) poetic composition.

*Hal hálaimja*

Hol ó hol én hal ó hal én ha ó hal én éhenhalok imhol im hal imhol im hal

én éhen haek imhol im hal im

hol im hal...

*Szilvi Álos*

**HAL HÁLAIMÁJA**

Halleluja

Hallátógásra

hol ó hol én  
hal ó hal én  
ha ó hal én  
éhenhalok  
imhol im hal  
imhol im hal

hol ó halál  
hol én halál  
halál hala  
ha halra lel  
haláira hal  
hal hal halált

halál lohól  
a hal sehol  
sehol halál  
halál sehol  
seb hol halál  
halélausz  
hal visszausz

én hallom őt  
őt hallom én  
halam halam  
én hallak ám  
hallá halok  
halál okán

hallom hallám  
hallám hallám  
hadd lám halam  
hadd lám halam  
hullám-halom  
hullámon át  
hullámon

hullámaim  
a láma – im  
imára hiv  
imára ám  
imám e hal  
halái-imám

hullám-halom  
hullám-halom  
Allá' ilah  
Allá' ilah  
alárom  
hullám alá

Alláh ilah-  
halál illan  
halálaim  
halálaim  
halleluja  
halleluja

hol ó hol én  
hal ó hal én  
elhullik én  
elhulló én  
elhull a hal  
hathulla hull

a hála im  
halálom ám  
náiám e hal  
hal-hála lám!  
halleluja  
halleluja

ha hallal hál  
halálal hal  
hal áttal hal  
hallal ha hál  
elhál elhal  
elhál elhál

jón lóhalált  
s hal halhalált  
miféle hal  
ha itt meghal?  
halleluja  
halleluja

ha hallja s él  
elhül e hal  
hátom halál  
én lenn a hal  
hal én hal én  
alé! a hal

hol itt halál  
hol ott halál  
holott holott  
halott halott  
hal villan ott  
halon halál

halleluja  
halleluja  
halleluja  
halleluja  
hej a halál!  
hej a halál!

FIGURE 9+10 Ákos Szilágyi, Thanksgiving Prayer of the Fish, mid-1980s.

Following these poets which started their activity in the 1970s, András Petőcz began to work with sound poetry in the 1980s, as one of the (then) young poets inspired by the more and more assiduous presence of Magyar Műhely in Hungary. Petőcz's poetry essentially is based on the tradition of French phonetic poetry: the strong role of repetition is combined with a poetic language constructed of phonemes, syllables and relatively few words. He has been collaborating with the outstanding Hungarian composer, László Sály.

In the 1980s, too, artists and poets of other genres begin to work in the framework of sound poetry as well. Gábor Tóth was known as a visual poet when he discovered for himself the language of vocality and sonority, creating a special mode of verbality and gesturality in his poetry. Recently he involved noisism in his practise as well and makes a sort of noise-dj-poetry. As for noisism, one of the most original creations of the Hungarian avant-garde in the last decades is related to the activity of a self-made artist. Since the early 1980s, Viktor Lois has been constructing mobile sculpture-instruments from old household machines, waste and refuse. These constructions are, on one hand, authentic sculptures, on the other hand, they are moveable and in some way soundable as wind, plucked or percussive instruments. Their sound is electrically amplified. In order to explore the exciting possibilities of composition with these self-built instruments he has formed various groups (the best known is Lois Ballast) with which he participated in several festivals and tours in Europe. In recent years he has composed real songs using this instrumental basis with vocal contributions.

Evidently, the concept and even more the practice of sound poetry is extensive, and artists arrive in this field from various directions, from different studies and different experiences. Among sound poets,

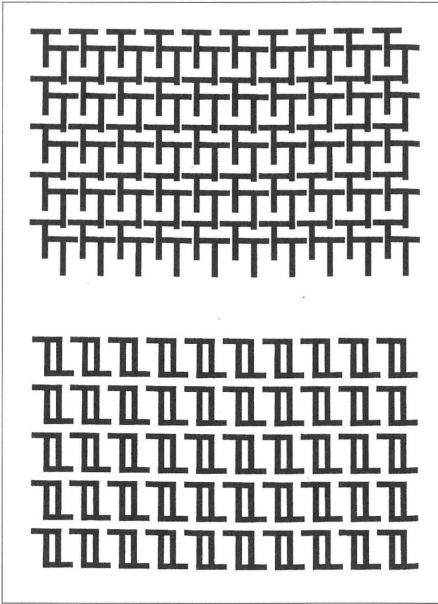


FIGURE 11 Gábot Tóth, Score, mid-1980s.

some arrive from textual poetry, some from fine arts and so on. It is obvious that a number of musicians have continuous contact with sound poetic activity, working in both fields (which often are not really separable). Such is the case of well known composer László Hortobágyi, whose music has a very strong individual character, synthesizing in its language high-tech contemporary expressive forms, deeply transposed ethnic instrumental and vocal traditions and new inventions based on much musical experience. It is the consistent presence of archaic and hypermodern forms of vocality in his compositions that make his work relevant from the standpoint of sound poetry.

Reviewing the development of Hungarian experimental culture as a whole from the mid 1970s, the strong and decisive presence of musical expressive forms is more than characteristic. A number of new formations, forums, ways of expression and many artists form their thoughts and practice on

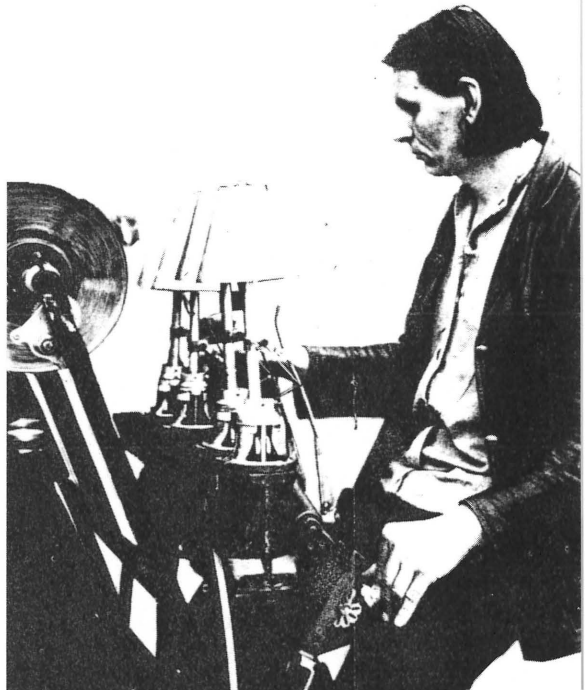


FIGURE 12 Viktor Lois in concert on his sculpture-instruments, mid-1980s.

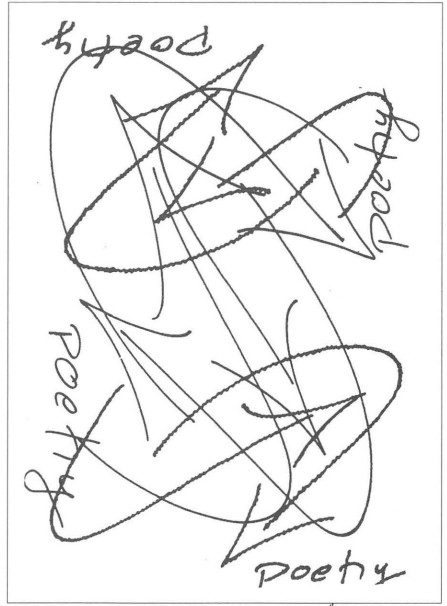


FIGURE 13 András Petöcz, Poetry, mid-1970s.

the basis of musical experiences, using musical forms or inserting them somehow into their artworks. The analysis of this phenomenon could be the subject of a separate paper. But it is worth mentioning that in the 1990s this organic complexity of poetic experience seems to disappear in specialization: meanwhile artistic experiences (musical, actional, multimedia or intermedia activities) are involving more and more a verbal conceptuality, the so-called poetic activity turns back to linear forms. Interdisciplinary-minded artists who work with text, language or with any form of verbal expression, or poets who work in musical, visual or intermedial context, more and more consider themselves simply to be artists. They don't define themselves as poets. Is it the sign of a conceptual separation between two concepts of artistic praxis and existence: a traditional one and an experimental one? Will Verlaine's idea of the basic identity of poetry and music be revised?



FIGURE 14 Viktor Lois in concert on his sculpture-instruments, mid-1980s.



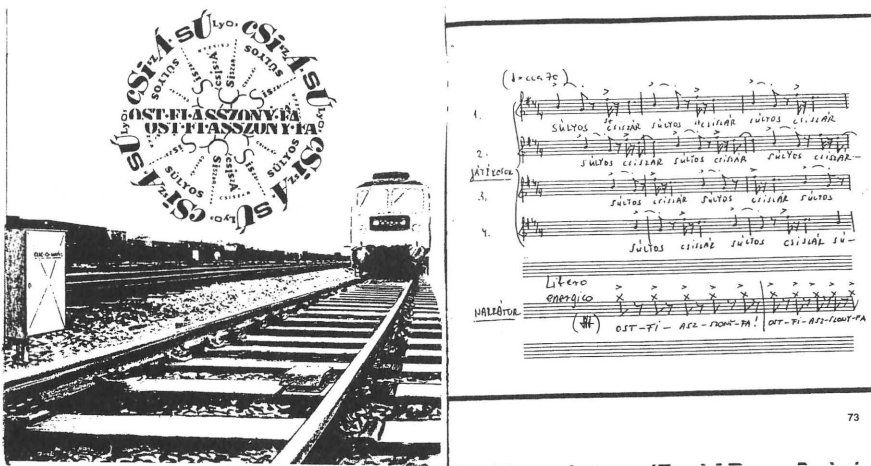


FIGURE 17 E. Sz's "Súlyos csiszár," notation and visual interpretation of a sound poem, mid-1940s.

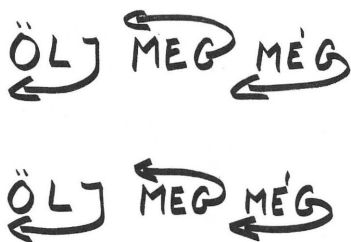


FIGURE 18 Enzo Szkárosi's "Kill me again," poem-score, mid-1940s.



FIGURE 19 Enzo Szkárosi's "Bulletproof Space" (Impress, create, multiply), poem-score, mid-1940s.

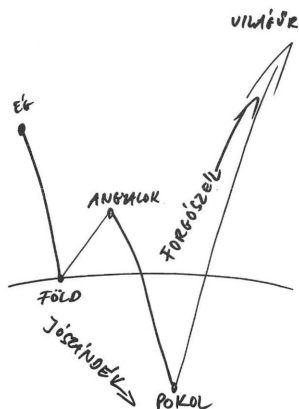


FIGURE 20 Enzo Szkárosi's "Goodwill and Whirlwind," poem-score, mid-1940s.

