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## Tót and TÓTal JOY of Nothing

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# TÓT AND THE TÓTAL JOY OF NOTHING

JASMINA TUMBAS

## I. Introduction

With a sardonic and tenacious declaration of gladness, the Hungarian artist Endre Tót conveyed the psychic wounds of his time in two ways: he used the sign –“0”– for the number zero, and he announced “TÓTaIJOYS.” Lamenting the “censorship, isolation, [and] suppression” that he “sensed in every field of life,” Tót countered with what he calls an “absurd euphoria of Joys.”<sup>1</sup> No artist has ever been as persistently, stubbornly “glad” as Endre Tót, who ceased being a painter in 1970 to immerse himself in works flooded with zeros or simply marked with the phrase, “I am glad if I...” In what follows, I think through how his decision to repeat zeros must be acknowledged as a conceptual strategy to lay bare and work through the negativity and power of institutionalized socialism in Eastern Europe.

Tót conceived works of art that exhibited excessive, scornful happiness, that pointed directly to its very absence, and that identified an aesthetic act founded on the failure to realize precisely what the political ideology proclaimed: welfare for all the people. Announcing his “joy,” Tót undermined authority with the irony of gratitude. In part, his repetition of zeros signify dissociation, the psychological means to withstand repressive social conditions, and they signal his conscious, tactical, pre-emptive determination to express the totalitarian reduction and degradation of a citizen’s life to zero. I view Tót’s choice to deploy the 0, and to emphasize being “glad,” as his decisive effort to live *in art* in order to live *through* political circumstance. In this regard, Michel Foucault’s comment in “Is it Useless to Revolt?,” is worth remembering. Revolt “is how subjectivity...is brought into history, breathing life into it,” he observed, but while being “a simple choice,” it is “a difficult work.”<sup>2</sup> Tót’s grim work was to assume the forced smile of gladness in the face of nothing.

## II. Concepts in the Post

Confronted with zero, Tót smiled the grin cut by Communism, the same system that his fellow East European Dan Perjovschi represented in *Wasn’t Funny* (2007). A Romanian artist some twenty-four years Tót’s junior, Perjovschi’s drawing declares that to have experienced life under state socialism was anything but

a laugh.<sup>3</sup> [Figure 1] Perjovschi conveys the psychological and corporeal impact of authoritarian rule, recalling Kristine Stiles’ observation that, “marked bodies enunciate the silence that is a rudiment of trauma and a source of the destruction of identity.”<sup>4</sup> Perjovschi uses humor in ways similar to that of Tót, who thirty years earlier deployed wit as a critical method for addressing such traumatic circumstance. Perjovschi’s wounded smile signifies the impact of communist socialism on the very bodies of its citizens, just as Tót’s ingenious decision to mock and provide witness to autocratic governance simultaneously transformed political circumstance into a conceptual aesthetic of “TÓTaI JOY” that incriminated the state.

After Tót stopped painting, he turned to experimental forms of art, especially using language, photography, and mail art as conceptual sedition.<sup>5</sup> “The public soon noticed the attitude of criticism inherent in Tót’s gestures,” László Beke remembered, adding, “a talented painter suddenly gives up painting and he is only glad if he can draw 000.”<sup>6</sup> Under the principle that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art,” conceptual art emerged in Eastern Europe and the West in the mid-1960s when artists utilized conceptual practices to address the politics of art institutions.<sup>7</sup> But the stakes for artists in the East were different than for artists in the West, especially in Hungary where Tót presented “gladness” to one of the most repressive regimes in the Eastern bloc. For example, Hungary launched Stalin-like mock trials under its USSR-type socialism, executing László Rajk, the communist Minister of Interior and former Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1949 as a “Titoist spy”; and nine years later, in 1958, Imre Nagy, also a communist and the Chairman of the Hungarian Council of Ministers, met the same fate on false charges of treason.

Endre Tót was twelve in 1949, and 21 in 1958 when such events resoundingly established Hungary as a police state. He remembers: “My family experienced the ‘arrival’ of the Russians twice, lost everything twice; once in 1945 when the Red Army took control of Hungary and then in 1956, when the Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian revolution.” For the child and young adult during these periods of violence, Tót felt that “it [was] like an eternity.” Then, in 1961, Tót’s “eternity” became an infinity when his father died of leukemia at the age of 60. “I think his early death may have been caused by the dictatorship,” Tót laments.<sup>8</sup>

Tót's conceptualism encountered the very clear discrepancy between ideology and political practice in a country where artists fought against conservative and limiting art regulations and where surveillance and incarceration were real threats. Like many artists during the Kádár era (1956-1988), Tót had a number of encounters with the authorities, most significantly in this context being dismissed from the Academy of Art because his work did not conform to Socialist Realism.<sup>9</sup> In its place, Tót turned to conceptual art, body actions, and samizdat publications. As Piotr Piotrowski has rightly pointed out, such strategies, which "were quite straightforward and mundane in the West, appeared in a different historic frame" in Eastern Europe, and "[t]heir performance often involved deeply held existential and political convictions."<sup>10</sup> "[If] one can speak at all of the 'classic' doctrine of conceptualism in the Hungarian context," Piotrowski has argued, "one must consider the work of Endre Tót."<sup>11</sup>

Tót's first gladness pieces began in 1971. Using an A6 sized postcard that he eventually sent as mail art, Tót typed the prosaic phrase: "I am glad if I can type this sentence."<sup>12</sup> He expanded this concept into a series of equally mundane actions in which he appeared in photographs with such phrases (typed or written somewhere on the image) as: "I am glad if I can watch myself in the mirror." "I am glad if I can lift my leg." "I am glad if I can walk back and forth." "I am glad when I can type rain." "I am glad if I can photograph my own shadow." Tót's texts underscore the wretched fact that simply to carry out an act of ordinary life demanded absurd gratitude from all who live under the specter of authoritarianism. Tót's work was immediately recognized as significant both in and outside of Hungary, as evinced by the invitation in 1972 to participate in the Paris Biennial, which featured a large mail art exhibition, including such well-known artists as Klaus Staack, Petr Štembera, Ray Johnson, Geoffrey Hendricks, Ben Vautier, and Klaus Groh, among others. Tót's *The Most Wonderful Images in the World*<sup>13</sup> was also featured in Groh's milestone publication *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (1972). In this piece, Tót announced: "Lately, I am especially concerned with the problems of 'lack' or 'disappearance.' With this work, I tried to express the problem."<sup>14</sup> In 1972, such words insinuated the known fact: under dictatorships artworks, documents, mailings, and artists can and do frequently disappear.

The theme of forgetting and disappearance informs many of Tót's "ZERO" projects. One work from the early 1970s bore the number zero in the middle of the page with the headline, "If you look at this zero you got to forget all." Another piece consisted of a page filled with small zeros carefully typed across the whole sheet of paper, except at the bottom, where the artist ends the last line of zeros with the sentence: "zer0s make me calm." Similarly, in his *Nullified Dialogue* (1975),<sup>15</sup> typed in Budapest, dedicated to 0.0, and dated "spring 0000," Tót used typed zeros to construct and overwrite a dialogue between two protagonists named 000 and 000000. In one section of the dialogue, 000 accuses 000000 of forgetting his name:

000: Yoo've forgotten.

000000: I've got oooooooo good memory.

000: You can't even remember my name.

000000: I dooo't love yoo oooo yoo oooo in Oooooo oooing o oooooooos gooo oooo with ooooooo ooo it was ... Googoo or Hooooo. Which was it?

000: It was yoo.<sup>16</sup>

This erasure by surrogate zeros suggests the erasure of privacy, if not identity, by police surveillance, as such monitoring cancels the ability to write openly and invalidates truthful direct communication and connection, even between one nothing and another zero. Tót's emphasis on forgetting, or being forgotten, also magnifies the artist's struggle with the reality of his situation, constantly needing to forget the fact that he was being watched in the East, at the same time as he was being forgotten in the West. After all, "zer0s make calm."

Tót's decision to use zeros could be said to accord with all three states of dissociation identified by Stiles, writing on the interrelationship and slippage between normative and pathological types of dissociation. She notes that dissociation is a common condition of mind often experienced in creativity and in distraction as, for example, while driving a car. A third pathological state of dissociation derives from trauma. While the first two types are "coded positively," the third is "coded negatively when associated with traumatic subjectivity":

[In trauma], aspects of consciousness are truncated from normative experience and memory, only to reappear in altered forms as de-realization, depersonalization, amnesia, confusion and alterations in identity where various parts of the subsystems of mind 'disconnect in terms of information exchange or mutual control,' leading to compartmentalization of experience, fragmentation of identity, memory, and perception. Such forms of dissociation sustain victims through traumatic experiences too painful for consciousness to absorb and are a key survival mechanism that protects the psyche.<sup>17</sup>

Tót's repetitious declaration of gladness and his expurgation of identity and language through zeros may be understood as signifiers of this type of traumatic dissociation. In such work, Tót established the ground for Perjovsch's question, "What happened to US?," as well as preempted the answer: We smiled our wh00000le lives away in order to survive.

In 1983, Tót mailed a postcard to Bernd Löbach-Hinweiser, an artist, environmental activist, and professor in Cremlingen-Weddel, Germany. This postcard makes my point even better for how it qualified Löbach-Hinweiser existential status as "Zer0." Writing on the front of the postcard, Tót opined: "You are OK. But Zer0kay!" With a zero embedded in the "OK," Tót reminded the artist that no one is ever OK, just as he emphasized the absence of happiness in his gladness works. On the reverse side of the postcard, Tót wrote: Zero Hello again! Just a few simple words (in this very complicated world):

The world will 00000000000 – Have you thought about that? Later more, Deci 000.<sup>18</sup>

Tót's fragmented communication posits the reminder of a convoluted world in which only 00000000000

suffice to represent it. Serious consideration of such a proposition raises the stakes for the use of zeros, by announcing that this piece of conceptual mail is anything but trivial, and that Tót deliberately explores the question of existence and communication using a modest postcard as his means.

### III. Joy, Deficit, and fort/da

Tót's work, and his medium, brings to mind Jacques Derrida's ruminations in *Post Card* (1987), where he proposes that postal contact always bears a loss of the message, a deficit that severs intimacy and connection. Such forms of communication are always bound to be mere creative miscommunication because the actual message can never be truly transmitted. Derrida's point is dead on for artists who lived in Eastern Europe, where mail art works were regularly confiscated and authorities could, and did, read every word sent to the West. Tót prefigured some of Derrida's ideas in *Post Card* with his artistic visualization of the inability, and simultaneous longing, to communicate that his "glad" postcards expressed. Tót also anticipated the philosopher's theorization of the limits (or failures) of communication, when some sixteen years before *Post Card*, Tót also visualized the unattainable desire to be allied with others, despite the inevitable loss of the message, and he doggedly pursued the effort to create a vehicle for such interaction with his art, however transient, impersonal, conceptual, and intellectual. Mail art provided Tót, and artists throughout the world, with a medium that, despite contact, always recapitulated the distance that preceded or defined the sought connection and would continuously plague intimacy with its absence. Thus did the postcard simultaneously render palpable yet increase the lack of proximity, while seeming to nullify the geographic space between people. "No closure in these envelopes, no unity of sender and receiver in the economy of waiting," Norie Neumark notes about Derrida's *Post Card*, proposing that mail art "might be better thought of as gifts that inherently do not arrive, gifts for which one always waits."<sup>19</sup>

The condition of waiting and longing, which resides at the core of Derrida's exegesis on postal communication, is what Alan Bass understands as Derrida's deliberate play on Sigmund Freud's discussion of the "fort(gone)/da(here)" game. Described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud recounts how his eighteen-month-old grandson invented a game of throwing away objects and retrieving them every time his mother left him. The child followed this action by making the sounds "oooo" (gone) and "aaaa" (here).<sup>20</sup> Freud interpreted this activity as a kind of "compensation" game. The mother's "departure has to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return," Freud theorized. "[I]t was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game."<sup>21</sup> The pleasure derived from the continual "repetition of this distressing situation," resides in the fact that the child assumed agency over the situation. "At the outset he was in a passive situation [and] was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part [Freud's emphasis]."<sup>22</sup> Expanding

his observations about the interchange between pain and pleasure to include an hypothesis of their function in art, Freud further noted: "The artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults....do not spare the spectators...the most painful experiences, and yet can be felt by them as enjoyable."<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on Derrida's identification of deficit in the communicative capacity of the postcard, and on Freud's observations about the fort/da game, let me turn to Tót's repetitious use of zeros in the *TÓTal zeros, for everybody, nobody and me* (1973-1977) series. It could be said that in this body of work, Tót thematized loneliness (in the Derridian sense) when he referred to the other as absented (in the Freudian sense as "fort") behind the political wall that divided East and West. One work in this series showed two zeros leaning on one another like lovers in the middle of the page, with a sentence at the top stating: "Ooh darling! Yoo see, we are so lonely." Tót's frequent erasure or exaggeration of zeros and the letter "o" in favor of proper vowels (Ooh...Yoo) could also be seen as phonetically evoking the sounds made by Freud's grandchild during the fort/da game. Such efforts to embody, expose, and communicate the fragility of his anxious states of mind and transform them into "joy," points to what Freud believed was "convincing proof that ... there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind."<sup>24</sup>

Tót's need to "forget all" and feel "calm" through the act of repetition may be conceptualized as the aesthetics of traumatic recurrence.<sup>25</sup> This aspect of Tót's work may then be said to simultaneously impart a commingling of pain and gladness for both himself and his audience. In this way, the repetition of zeros becomes integral to realizing the artist's "absurd euphoria of joys." Considering Freud's diagnosis of the game and its application to art, and mindful of Derrida's insight into the aloneness of a postcard, Tót's work could also be said to display the struggle to maintain power over a situation completely out of his control. Moreover, however assertively Tót utilized the space of communication, his very effort was always destined to fail, as his unwavering assertion of joy always resulted in the recipient's lack of faith in his gladness. Hungarian artist and art critic Géza Pernecky recognized this dilemma when he wrote about Tót that, "the less we believe the artist, the more he reiterates it [his joy]."<sup>26</sup> While Pernecky is obviously correct, it might also be said that the verity of the sadness behind Tót's gladness is palpable, bringing the believability and truth of his psychological state into view.

Reflecting on his isolation during the 1970s, Tót noted: "If I disregarded the stifling effect of the ideology of the age, I would say these were the joys of loneliness, the delight of solitude."<sup>27</sup> Retrospectively assessing the recompense of solitude experienced in the former East, against the cacophony of the West, that reward, nevertheless, could not be extricated from "the stifling effect of the ideology of the age," which he did not disregard. This point is especially relevant because Tót's conceptual interventions into the political and cultural landscape of

socialist Hungary were not meant for, and certainly had no place in, official museums, but instead functioned as ways to render tangible the artist's resistance to sequestration in the East and his insistence on not being forgotten or made to disappear. In order to assert his presence, Tót mailed postcards and telegrams all over the world; he stamped his body; he carried posters in demonstration; he existed. The result? Tót found that, "the Mail Art network was like a thriller, ... [offering] some freedom with the post because my mailings could overcome the iron curtain."<sup>28</sup> In order further to circumvent censorship in Hungary, he regularly travelled to Belgrade (where censorship was less severe than in Budapest) to post his mail.<sup>29</sup>

Tót's double portrait of himself and Vladimir Lenin represents the most biting critique of what it meant to live under such precarious political conditions. Lenin appears on the left looking sternly at the spectator while a jovial Tót appears with a big smile on the right. Below these images in typescript is the sentence: "You are the one who made me glad" (1975). Klara Kemp-Welch has observed that, "the juxtaposition mocks Lenin's severity."<sup>30</sup> In this way, Tót's joy stands in contrast to the sobriety of the great communist leader of the Russian Revolution. Tót appears as an unkempt artist, a youngster or hippie, who has yet to become a proper man and who, therefore, represents failure to conform to the self-disciplined example of the Bolshevik patriarch. In this way, the semiotics of the long-haired, smiling youth served as deliberate defiance, exposing the fact that while Lenin was long "fort," his "da" was acutely felt, a pain which the artist mocked as joy.

#### IV. Failure

In a fictitious storyline of how Tót's work might appear if it were a popular thriller rather than conceptual art, Pernecky (quoted above) placed failure at the center of Tót's conceptual strategies and imagined the following scene:

A man rises to his elbows in bed, and presses his left palm on the mouth of his stirring wife, half asleep. With his right hand, he silently and slowly reaches under the pillow, pulls out his gun, and warning his waking wife to be silent, he carefully removes his cover, puts both feet on the floor. His strained trunk leaning forward, he aims the gun at the door. He pulls the trigger but there is no blast. Instead, an inscription appears on the screen: "I am glad if I can fire." Then he lies back in bed and sleeps till he can begin it all anew.<sup>31</sup>

Pernecky sets up a phallogocentric incident with a male protagonist, who fails to fire his gun while lying in bed with his wife. In his characterization, Pernecky presents Tót as an impotent man and artist. In Pernecky's rendition, Tót fails in all of his actions. Coupled with Tót's decision to embrace that failure with a joyful declaration of denial, "I am glad if I can fire," and a willingness to "begin it all anew," over and over again, Tót appears the fool to Pernecky. Yet, while mocking Tót, Pernecky writes that Tót was "the only Hungarian artist who managed to make it to world fame in the concept and mail art circles."<sup>32</sup>

Tót's decisions, as I have insisted, were strategic. By embodying failure in his conceptual works, the artist may have succeeded in distancing himself from what Jack [aka Judith] Halberstam calls, in another context, "the punishing norms that discipline behavior." In this way, Tót might be said to have arrived at the point where his "failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood."<sup>33</sup> Tót's acknowledgement of recurrent failure brings into focus what it meant to be a conceptual artist in Hungary where one could only be destined to fail. Not coincidentally, failing also included the fact that Tót considered himself an "illegitimate child of Fluxus" because he learned of Fluxus almost a decade after it commenced in the West and was never really part of the movement, although he exhibited with Fluxus frequently from the early 1970s onwards.<sup>34</sup> Yet, when asked where he thought his art fit in the histories of the avant-garde, it was not to Fluxus that Tót pointed, but rather to the influence of Yves Klein, Marcel Duchamp, Dieter Roth, George Brecht, and Ray Johnson.<sup>35</sup>

Taking only one of these artists as a referent for Tót's art, his monotonous ZEROED works might be compared to Klein's "void." Inundated with an inferred traumatic imprint, Tót's zeros invoke Klein's "voids," or the "affective atmosphere of the flesh"<sup>36</sup> to which Klein referred when thinking of the indexical human presence in Hiroshima that he witnessed in the late 1940s. For Tót, Stiles has commented, "reality behind the Iron Curtain atomized the human spirit to "zero."<sup>37</sup> Pierre Restany, the renowned French critic and founder of Nouveaux Réalisme, recognized Tót's kinship to Klein in the relationship between the monochrome, the zero, and the void, writing in 1972: "In the immaterial zone of a concentrated (ZEROED) sensitivity, Endre Tót appears to be the Yves Klein of mail art, a postal monochrome."<sup>38</sup>

Closer to home, like most conceptual artists working in Hungary, Tót's art revealed the mentorship of the poet, artist, and critic Miklós Erdély. Considered the earliest conceptual artist and most influential figure of experimental art in Hungary, Erdély regarded art as an "empty sign," emptiness that produces "a place for the not-yet-realized" within the "recipient's mind," thereby opening new ways of perceiving and acting in the world.<sup>39</sup> Tót's conceptual and samizdat works could be said to have expanded on such a proposition. In *My Unpainted Canvases* (1971), for example, Tót filled a book with drawings of frames that had neither image nor words. These framed works, empty of content, bear only the frame's dimensions but no titles or images. This method, or erasure, took an explicitly political turn in *Night Visit to the National Gallery* (1974), when Tót altered a booklet of the National Gallery in London by blacking out all of the illustrated works, pointing to absence and censorship of Western artworks in Hungarian museums.<sup>40</sup> "The beloved is far away, very far," Tót commented, "its absence is constantly present."

Another work, perhaps inspired by Erdély and Klein, but which is pure Tót, is from the 1970s: a blank page with a solid black rectangle in the middle, over which Tót typed, "I cover this zero 'cause I don't want it to drive yoo crazy." [Figure 2] Here the number zero, the signifier for Tót's relentless return to a site of trauma, is blacked out,

I cover this zero 'cause  
I don't want it to drive yoo crazy



thereby reinforcing the zero as a double void, a double negative. While Klein identified the affective presence of atomized bodies in Japan, he also claimed the endless infinity of the sky as the void. Tót's difference from Klein's more positive representation of the void is vivid in *TÓTa/zer0s*, as this compelling conceptual image posits the zero as the black hole of totalitarian life that drove the ubiquitous "yoo crazy."

## V. Conclusion

Tót's fate changed when he won a DAAD fellowship to work in West Berlin in 1977. Nonetheless, the ever-vigilant Hungarian authorities five times refused him permission to travel. For the next some eighteen months, a widely publicized scandal broke out in West Germany about the restraints on the artist, forcing the Hungarian government to relent and grant him permission to leave.<sup>41</sup> After departing Hungary, Tót immigrated to Germany in 1978. The very next year, he wrote graffiti on the Western side of the Berlin Wall: "I should be glad if I were allowed to write something on the other side of this wall" (1978).<sup>42</sup> Tót never neglected his immediate condition. Epitomizing his struggle to express himself in his native community, Tót's inscription signified his effort now to communicate *to* the East while living *in* the West. Overturning the years spent working in the reverse, as an exile driven out and unable to produce art in his nation and forced to take refuge in another country, Tót now experienced the inversion of his aloneness. Neither did he abandoned his conceptual project, but rather continued his gladness works, repeatedly using a photograph of himself smiling. With phrases typed beneath his grin, Tót now claimed: "I'm always glad of those days when nothing happens to me, except that I wake up in the morning and go to bed in the evening" (1977-1979).

In an equally poignant text, he proclaimed: In Berlin, one fine, sunshiny day I was calmly walking in the street. I didn't think of anything. Suddenly, everything came to my mind. I got very sad. But a little bit later I forgot everything. I'm glad that I forget everything.<sup>43</sup>

Self-consciously announcing the violence of nothingness within gladness, expressed in zeros, and his inability to forget the void, Tót made the decision as art to be "free" even if living in the West meant living in exile with no way home until after 1989. A new and paradoxical isolation ensued: the Western brand of TÓTa/JOY.

As I have argued throughout this text, Tót's "gladness" undermined the hypocrisy of socialist propaganda and rendered nothingness visible in the morose abjection of a "0." Tót's pervasive sadness, balanced by a rigorously practiced systematic "gladness," visualized his fight against defeat even in a condition of failure. "As Halberstam would argue in 2011, "Failure provides the opportunity to use those negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life."<sup>44</sup> However true Halberstam's insight, it came forty years too late for Andre Tót, whose failure, nonetheless, is his courage in art.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tót quoted in Géza Pernecky, "Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy," in *Tót Endre: Nothing Ain't Nothing/ Semmi Sem Semi, Retrospektiv 1965-1995* (Budapest: Múcsarnok, 1995), 32.
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?" in Jeremy R. Carrette, ed., *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 134. Originally published as "Inutile de se soulever?" in *Le Monde*, 11 May 1979. Translated by James Bernauer as "Is it useless to revolt?" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8, no.1 (Spring 1981): 1-9.
- <sup>3</sup> This is one of hundreds of figures drawn by the Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi on a huge wall at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007, the artist titled his exhibition "WHAT HAPPENED TO US?" Such irony stands in marked contrast to nostalgic filmic portrayals like *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) or *Sonnenallee* (1999), the smug humor of which ridicules the state socialism that millions of Europeans endured from 1945 until 1989.
- <sup>4</sup> Kristine Stiles, "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma," in *Strategie II: Peoples Mediterraneens* [Paris] 64-65 (July-December 1993): 95-117; reprinted with a new Afterword in Jean O'Barr, Nancy Hewitt, Nancy Rosebaugh, eds., *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996): 36.
- <sup>5</sup> Klara Kemp-Welch has argued that Tót's "move away from painting was more than the formal gesture of negation of the visual that provided the motivation for the earliest conceptualist generation in the West." But there was no "negation of the visual" in the West, which is why Art & Language rejected the idea of the "dematerialization" of art, and all the conceptualists made visual art. See her, "Affirmation and Irony in Endre Tót's Joys Works of the 1970s." In *Art History & Criticism 3, Art and Politics: Case-Studies from Eastern Europe*, Liniara Dovydayte (ed.), Kaunas (Lithuania: Vytautas Magnus University, 2007), 136.
- <sup>6</sup> László Beke, "The Hungarian Performance. Before and After Tibor Hajas," in *The Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1998), 104.
- <sup>7</sup> Sol LeWitt "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Artforum* 5:10 (June 1967): 79-83.
- <sup>8</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien GmbH, 2007), 269.
- <sup>10</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 272.
- <sup>11</sup> Piotrowski, 320.
- <sup>12</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> *Die Wunderbarsten Bilder der Welt*
- <sup>14</sup> Klaus Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (Cologne: Verlag M. Dumont Schauberg, 1972), n.p. "Ich beschäftige mich in den letzten Zeit besonders mit den Problemen der "Mangel" oder "Verschwinden." Mit dieser Arbeit probierte ich das Problem auszudrücken." Translation from German to English by the author.
- <sup>15</sup> Endre Tót, *Nullified Dialogue*, Hinwil, Galerie Howeg (1975). (Typed in 1974 in Budapest) Artpool Art Research Center, researched in Fall 2011.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Kristine Stiles, "Parallel Worlds: Representing Consciousness at the Intersection of Art, Dissociation, and Multidimensional Awareness," in Roy Ascott, ed., *Reframing Consciousness: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era* (Exeter: Intellect, 2000): 52-60.
- <sup>18</sup> "Zero Hallo wieder! Nur einige einfache Worte (in dieser sehr komplizierten Welt): Die Welt wird 00000000000 – Hast du darüber nachgedacht? Spaeter mehr, Deci 000!/" Translation from German to English by the author. Copies of the postcard are in the Artpool Art Research Center, Budapest, Hungary.
- <sup>19</sup> Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, eds., *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 8.
- <sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass, trans., *Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xiv.
- <sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 600.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 601.
- <sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Kristine Stiles for discussions in the formulation of this aspect of an aesthetic of trauma.
- <sup>26</sup> Pernecky, "Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy," 30.
- <sup>27</sup> Tót quoted in Ibid, 32.
- <sup>28</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012.
- <sup>29</sup> In 1975, Tót participated in the "April Meetings for Expanded Media" at the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade. He also had an exhibition in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and found it necessary to smuggle his work out of Hungary, despite the fact that then his exhibition resulted in significant international press coverage. Tót's friendship with John M. Armleder, who in the 1980s became an important artist in the Neo-Geo movement and who ran the gallery Écart in Geneva in the 1970s, brought about invitations to do his first street actions in 1976, including the artist's ZERO demonstrations. Tót's work was also printed in the *Vision* publication on *Eastern Europe* by American artist Tom Marioni. See Tom Marioni, *Vision, Eastern Europe*, no. 2 (Oakland: Crown Point Press, January 1976): 39. Along with Gabor Attalai and Visy Laszlo, Tót was one of three artists that represented Hungary. They reproduced Tót's "I'm glad if I can draw a line."
- <sup>30</sup> Klara Kemp-Welch, "Affirmation and Irony in Endre Tót's Joys Works of the 1970s," in Liniara Dovydayte, ed., *Art History & Criticism 3, Art and Politics: Case-Studies from Eastern Europe*, (Kaunas, Lithuania: Vytautas Magnus University, 2007), 139.
- <sup>31</sup> Pernecky, "Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy," 29.
- <sup>32</sup> Géza Pernecky, *The Magazine Network: The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals, 1968-1988* (Cologne: Soft Geometry, 1993), 53.
- <sup>33</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
- <sup>34</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012. Also mentioned in Stegmann, *Fluxus East*, 269. Tót took part in numerous exhibitions and actions that involved Fluxus artists, including and the touring *Fluxshoe* exhibition in England (1972-1973), the *International Mail Art Action* with George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Pierre Restany, and Wolf Vostell (1974), as well as Ben Vautier's *Hotel Room Event* in Berlin (1979). For more information on the artist's involvement with Fluxus, see Stegmann.
- <sup>35</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012.
- <sup>36</sup> Yves Klein, "Truth Becomes Reality," quoted in Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and The Object 1949-1979* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 237.
- <sup>37</sup> Stiles in conversation with the author, December 8, 2013.
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted in Géza Pernecky, "Mental Monochrome," in *Endre Tót: Very Special Joys. Retrospective 1971-2011* (Debrecen: MODEM, 2012), 31. About the source: "The above quotation was part of one of his responses, dated November 00, 1978. Their correspondence was published by the Gallery "A" of Amsterdam with the title Some Nullified Questions by Endre Tót in 1979," 32.
- <sup>39</sup> He wrote: "The message of art is its inherent emptiness. The receptive mind receives this emptiness. The work of art creates a space within the recipient's mind when the latter "understands" its message. Then the recipient says, "beautiful" – which is another empty statement. This is followed by a feeling of freedom, which is nothing else than emptiness, a break in the chain of "recognized necessity": a place. A place for the not-yet-realized. In "Theses for Marly Conference of 1980," in Laura Hoptman, ed., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 101.
- <sup>40</sup> Tót quoted in Pernecky, "Endre Tót and the Mental Monochromy," 34.
- <sup>41</sup> Endre Tót in conversation with the author in Cologne, Germany, April 16, 2012.
- <sup>42</sup> Original German: "Ich würde mich freuen, wenn ich etwas auf die andere Seite der Mauer schreiben dürfte."
- <sup>43</sup> Tót in *Tót Endre: Nothing Ain't Nothing/ Semmi Sem Semi, Retrospektiv 1965-1995*, 78.
- <sup>44</sup> Halberstam, 3.



Ugo Mulas, Vincenzo Agnetti, 1969. Photo Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved.