

Women Artists of the Hungarian Avant-Garde and Their Connections to the Cobra Group

The Cases of Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere

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ABSTRACT

One of the most fascinating examples of networked art groups in 20th century art history, the Cobra art movement (1948–1951), disrupted the logic of center-periphery relations in art through a model of cooperation between artistic hubs, in this case, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, as the name of the group suggests. However, Cobra soon became a model that was easy to extend to further connections and hubs, including Scandinavia and East Central Europe. Unexpected and mutual exchanges occurred within this artistic network. The article explores these exchanges through two lesser-known episodes of Cobra's East Central European connections. Hungarian women artists like Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere became involved with the activity of Cobra, and their case studies show specific models of circulating ideas.

Keywords: art history, circulation, Cobra, network, women artists

During the last decade an increasing number of publications discussed the works of women authors in the avant-gardes – a recurring aspect of these research papers was to explore strategies of women authors and of their critics that finally resulted in canonical inclusion. Meanwhile, these scholars highlighted the systematic border crossings of form and genre in women authors' works (Chadwick 2021, Watz 2020, Földes 2021, etc.). Specifically, in the context of one century of Hungarian avant-garde art, the delayed, partial and peripheral integration of women authors was also obvious. The reasons are complex, and it is beyond the

task of this article to discuss them in detail – it is nevertheless important to point out that, as suggested in the theoretizations of this status, women artists of the avant-garde were already confronted with a double marginalization in historical narratives, in relation with their gender and with their non-canonical, experimental poetics, as Susan Rubin Suleiman argued in her article *A Double Margin: Reflections on Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France*. (Suleiman 1988) Thirdly, the aspect of spatiality also contributed to the processes of marginalization: twentieth-century Hungarian culture, as many other East Central European cultures, struggled in addition with an extraterritorial layer: the culture of emigration, and generally, the phenomenon of Hungarian culture beyond the territory of Hungary. The reintegration of artists of the diaspora into the Hungarian cultural memory faced multiple difficulties by the end of the 20th century (Hites 2009, 525), and in the case of exiled women artists of the avant-garde, critics had to overcome a process of threefold marginalization when attempting to fight the structures of oblivion.

In my article, I will explore the activity of two Hungarian women artists whose work entered progressive cultural networks beyond the Hungarian art scene, and circulated in the field of international avant-garde art. Madeleine Kemény Szemere and Margit Eppinger Weisz adopted specific roles in this art field, and I consider that in the context of interartistic creations, and the program of total art (Bru 2018, 9-64) in the avant-garde, the relevance of such stories may cross disciplinary borders as well, opening up possibilities of exploring the circulation of ideas between the fields of visual arts and literature, and art history and world literature studies, respectively. The activity of the Cobra art movement (1948–1951), to which both women artists whose works I discuss, connected in a loose manner, offers a networked model of circulation that has beyond its spatial dimension also a more general claim for interconnectedness.

Margit Eppinger Weisz (1902–1989) is present in the reference works of Hungarian art history because of a special episode: in her story, a rarely discussed phenomenon is condensed, which helps us reevaluate the traditional West-East directions of influence within European art, which in her case should be adjusted to a model of mutual exchanges. Moreover, in the narratives about her activity, the histories of the Budapest-based European School (1945–1948) and of the Cobra (1948–1951) artist groups connect. The key event is the arrival of two future members of the Cobra group to Budapest, in 1947.

Cobra was founded by mainly Danish, Belgian, Dutch and French artists. Corneille (Belgian-Dutch painter, 1922–2010) and Jacques Doucet (French painter, 1924–1994), arrived in Budapest and Szentendre respectively in 1947, and lived and worked in Hungary for several months (Küssel 2002, 28). They were both invited to Hungary by Margit Eppinger Weisz, with the involvement of the Hungarian Arts Council of the time to arrange the formalities of their travel. Corneille

and Doucet met members of the European School group during this period, and had solo exhibitions organised for them in Budapest as part of the European School exhibition series. Retrospectively, they both described their stay in Hungary as a pivotal event in their careers, arguing that the European School members made their guests familiar with visual artworks created by innovative artists like Klee and Miró. In addition, the works created by the European School artists, combining techniques of abstraction and surrealism, became a further inspiration for the visitors. A certain hybridization of these elements define their later works of the Cobra period.

I have discussed the relevance of the Cobra model for Hungarian art in a separate paper (Balázs 2021). This time I will focus on the role of Margit Eppinger Weisz in this story, and on how her person is present in the narratives about Corneille and Doucet. I will then examine the early stages of Madeleine Kemény Szemere's career that unfolded in Hungary during the 1920s and 1930s, and then her work abroad, that continued to develop within French-Swiss-Dutch networks, as part of the Cobra group's sphere of influence.¹

Margit Weisz studied fine arts in the 1920s under the supervision of Adolf Fényes, then she went on a study trip to Berlin and Paris. She returned to Budapest in 1930, where she married textile manufacturer Loránd Eppinger in 1932. During the 1930s, they had two children, Marion (1933) and Ervin (1936). In 1944, the family home and the factory that provided their livelihood were bombed – subsequently they took refuge in Banská Bystrica. The family returned to Budapest in 1945, the couple becoming involved in the art scene as financial supporters and mediators, and their new home became a meeting place for artists. It was also during this period that Margit Eppinger Weisz met the artists of the European School and, during some trips to Western Europe, also Corneille and Doucet. The fact that Margit Eppinger Weisz assisted Corneille in promoting his own works is reflected in the contemporary press. One of these newspaper articles refers to the host herself as to a painter:

“We visited the young artist, who works in the studio of an artist friend in Budapest.

‘How did you end up in Hungary?’, we ask.

‘That’s a nice story! It was back in winter when I was preparing for my own big exhibition in Amsterdam. My studio is on the fifth floor. I mainly paint large paintings, so I thought it would be most effective to let the paintings down through the window to the street. I’ve made the delivery down on thick

1 The biographical information on Margit Weisz Eppinger, where not specifically indicated, is based on the website created by her heirs in her memory: <https://www.margit.org/cronologia>

ropes, much to the amusement of passers-by. With one of the paintings I almost hit a lady passing by, who responded to my profuse apology with a kind smile, telling me that she was a painter herself, who liked my work so much that when she came home she invited me to Budapest in partnership with the Arts Council.' ... We look around in the apartment hosting the Dutch painter. Paintings by Rippl-Rónai, Czóbel, István Farkas, Kmetty, Egry, Diener-Dénes on the walls, a real small museum. A whole room full of paintings by Adolf Fényes." (Fehér 1947, 12)

Corneille later told another, simpler version of the story about transferring the paintings to his own exhibition, in which the paintings were transported by tricycle in the streets of Amsterdam, and the unknown lady addressed him on a bridge as the painter was struggling with the somewhat precariously stacked paintings on the tricycle. Nevertheless, the improvised exhibition of pictures on the Amstel bridge in this story is as wildly romantic as the pictures lowered through the window in the other version (Küssel 2002, 28).

The surviving Eppinger Weisz paintings of this period are characterised by a moderately modernist approach, clearly connected to figurative language, but one that moves away from the formal technique of realism as a result of the use of colour and a certain crudeness and minimalism. Veronika Pócs describes the works of this period as follows:

"Eppinger Weisz' painting style shows a closer resemblance to that of her friends Béla Czóbel and János Kmetty, who carried on the post-Nagybánya style in their works based on nature. Czóbel's works, as well as Eppinger Weisz', show the influence of both the French fauves and the expressionist artists. In the intimate lyricism of her paintings, traits of an inclination to some sort of melancholy and contemplation can be appreciated. At the same time, whether it is a portrait, a landscape or an interior painting, she rekindles and highlights the expressiveness of the details in her compositions with paint patches and lines in more vivid color." (Pócs 2019)

During these years, Eppinger Weisz was present as a painter at the group exhibition of Socialist Artists in December 1945. In August 1946, her paintings were exhibited at another group exhibition in Szentendre,

in the company of Béla Czóbel, János Kmetty, Dezső Korniss, Jenő Gadányi, Vilmos Csaba Perlrott, among others (Verba 2003, 76). The list of names suggests that her network of contacts at the time linked her to the artists of the Szentendre Artists' Colony and the European School.

The bibliography concerning Jacques Doucet also highlights Eppinger Weisz's dynamic social skills and her familiarity with contemporary art. As we have seen, Corneille met Eppinger Weisz in Amsterdam. The meeting with Doucet took place at the Kahnweiler Gallery in Paris – and led to another invitation to Hungary: “it is then that Doucet met Corneille, who, like him, was here due to the invitation of Margit Eppinger Weiss. They shared an enthusiasm for Budapest, gypsy music and Hungarian art”, wrote in retrospect Andrée Doucet, Jacques Doucet's wife (Küssel 2002, 59-60).

Corneille's letters to his circle of friends in 1947 also reveal Eppinger's role as a caring housewife and patron. In one of the letters, the inspiring space of Szentendre is represented as a crucial space: “My host sent me to this village to rest in his summer house after my hard work. But this morning, wandering around this picturesque village, I was so taken by the motifs that I ran back for paper and pencil.” (Küssel 2002, 86). In another account, it is the personal environment and presence that is crucial, the way the host couple introduce him to new and interesting people, balancing the need for an eventful lifestyle with the need for immersion in the art of creation: “Hungary has sunk into the swamp of politics, and my host who owns great textile factories, began having trouble with the occupying forces (...). Her wife, a very caring woman, seems to have sworn to cure me out of my melancholy (...) She has a wide circle of acquaintances, so wherever I go I find the most charming company” (Corneille's letter to Louis Tiessen, 20th June 1947, Küssel 2002, 58). Both personal and artistic inspirations influenced the development of Corneille's later career and his specific visual universe, and this valid also for his paintings from the Cobra period.

Margit Eppinger Weisz and her family held regular art meetings in their home on Sas Street until 1947, and actively participated in circulating novelties about art. Marion Eppinger's memory notebook, written and drawn by several guests including Corneille and Doucet, is an important record of the period and of the network of contacts (Pócs 2019).

In 1947 the family left Hungary, and after a short stay in Switzerland, they settled in Argentina beginning with August 1948. Here Margit Eppinger Weisz continued her work as an applied visual artist, producing textile designs for her husband's business. From 1964 she also worked as a painter again, producing portrait studies and sketches, creating a visual world that moved further away from realism. In 1975, the Martina Céspedes Gallery exhibited her works in Buenos Aires in a solo show. After her death in 1989, her family took care of her legacy and made it known, with the involvement of local and Hungarian art historians,

the most important moment being a representative exhibition in 2019, *Travesías* [Journeys], at the Fundación OSDE.²

The career of Margit Eppinger Weisz underscores the significance of exploring Hungarian experimental art of the 1930s and 1940s in its original context, in connection with its informal and institutional networks. Eppinger was at once an artist figure, a sponsor, and a contact person among artists of the time. Her surviving oeuvre shows that she was a skilled artist, well versed in the visual language of the period, who participated in exhibitions of progressive art of the time, but her social position and perhaps her female role tended to push her towards a promoting and sponsoring activity. It is in this role that most traces in the bibliographies of art history represent her. The story might have ended in a different way without the episode of emigration.

Madeleine Kemény Szemere (1906–1993) has a slightly different career story. From the 1920s onwards, Lenke Szemere's early work received a lot of attention in magazines such as *Színházi Élet*, *Magyar Művészet*, *Nyugat*, *Népszava*, all of them praising the young woman artist for her original vision and for the social dimension of her art.

A 1925 article in *Színházi Élet* included her name in the title (*Who is Lenke Szemere*), and described the young artist, who started out as a child prodigy and grew more and more mature, as a pupil of Adolf Fényes and later István Réti, with the following keywords: "Her socialist world view drives her towards the abandoned, the hunchbacked, the pariahs, the spiritual clowns." (Lázár 1925, 52). In *Nyugat*, Artur Elek spoke of the meticulous details of her paintings, and of the harmony of their form and meaning (Elek 1925, 98). In 1927, the critic of *Népszava* praised the unfolding of the social meaning of her works and placed the artist's activity in an international context. "She is the first Hungarian representative of the art of the proletariat. In this respect, her name has joined the list of those headed by Millet, Meunier, Laermans and other immortals." (I. E. 1927, 7).

The discussion about a certain kind of 'ugliness' of the depicted figures seems to be typical of the Hungarian art field of the period, as represented in an article written by Herman Lipót, who seemed to prefer a more classical, conservative type of beauty: "Typically for young artists, she boldly seeks for interesting themes in the ugly and the sad, and does not seem to accept our good-willed aphorism: – Dear artist, believe me, it is not only the ugly that is beautiful in the fine arts." (Herman 1931, 577). What is even more interesting is how this 'ugliness' or grotesqueness will soon develop in Szemere's work from an individual trait into a more general, mask-like figuration – a step that was necessary in this artistic career to become relevant for the visuality of the Cobra group.

After a promising artistic career in Hungary, Lenke Szemere moved to Paris in 1930, where she adopted the name Madeleine. Her future

2 *Margit Eppinger Weisz: Exposición*, accessed 28/04/2023, <https://www.margit.org/la-exposicion>

husband, Zoltán Kemény, a painter of Transylvanian origin, also settled in Paris in 1930, and married Madeleine Szemere in 1933. They were both working in the fashion industry at the time, for the Zurich fashion magazine *Annabelle*. When the Second World War broke out, they fled to Marseille and then to Switzerland. During the war, they were interned separately, and then reunited in Zurich in 1945. After the war, inspired by the works of Jean Dubuffet, the Kemény couple began to experiment with incorporating children's creativity and vision into their work. In 1947, Madeleine Kemény Szemere sent Dubuffet an exhibition catalogue of her own work – as a result, the Kemény couple were invited to the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, and Dubuffet invited Madeleine to exhibit at the Foyer de l'Art Brut in 1948. Here, Corneille, recently returned from Budapest, saw the works, and invited the Kemény couple to participate in Cobra's 1949 international exhibition of experimental art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. His involvement led to the publication of both their works in the fourth issue of the *Cobra* magazine (Wingen 2002).

Their careers then followed a somewhat prototypical pattern in terms of male/female artistic careers in the international art scene: Zoltán Kemény's career was clearly heading towards international fame: he participated in two editions of Documenta in Kassel (1959, 1964) and won the International Sculpture Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale in 1964. He died a successful artist in 1965. Madeleine Kemény Szemere, on the other hand, gave up painting in 1956, and her works were only rediscovered in the later years of her life by the art collector Karel van Stuijvenberg (N. Mészáros 2008). After her death in 1993, a retrospective exhibition of her work was held in St. Gallen in 1995, and since then her paintings have been repeatedly spotlighted as the work of a notable female artist of the Cobra group (Jacques 2019).

When we compare the world of Lenke Szemere's early works with the vision of Madeleine Kemény Szemere, we find many exciting connections. Most strikingly, *Mère et enfant* (1947) and *Mother and Child* (*Anyá és gyermeke*, 1931), still created in Hungary, show common motifs. The positions of mother and child are almost identical in the two paintings, but the early attitude towards a kind of sociographic, emotional approach shifts towards grotesque in the later painting, through a technique showing gestures of detachment. The painting from 1947 represents the mother/child relationship as a kind of homology: the child's body repeats the mother's body forms in a kind of grotesque miniaturisation. The body curves are deliberately rougher, so that the emotive gestures of tenderness in the previous painting become simplified. The perspective shifts towards a kind of universality beyond the human world, and, therefore, can be extended to non-human existence.

It is precisely this aspect that will be meaningful in terms of Cobra's interest in abstraction, archaic imagery, animal dimensions: in Madeleine Kemény Szemere, it is the "primitivism" characteristic of

Cobra that art critics highlighted as the most important element of her organic connection to the movement (Jacques 2019).

One of Cobra's organisational characteristics was that it did not document who belonged to the group through member lists or meticulously kept records: it was publication in the periodicals of the group, attendance of group exhibitions, that defined who belonged to Cobra (Kurczynski 2021). Although the Kemény couple were not among the most frequently exhibited Cobra artists, the history of the movement records their presence, and curatorial and interpretive works repeatedly list and characterise them in the context of the experimental artists' group.

The story of Madeleine Kemény Szemere is framed in the more recent interpretations in a male/female dynamics, from a feminist perspective, where the interruption of her own painting career for a longer period of time becomes meaningful. In the context of curatorial and historical works that explore and recontextualise the work of twentieth-century women artists, the oeuvre of artists like her is presented as part of an increasingly dynamic field, and therefore the issue of her position in art history is far from closed.

Conclusions

To conclude, we may argue that the proactive gestures that can be documented in the case of both Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere (active search for contacts with the Hungarian and international art scene, invitations, mediating activities, recognition and adaptation of Dubuffet's art brut, etc.) show both of them in roles that are exemplary in the contextual histories of art or in the operational logic of *world literature studies*. As we have seen many times, methodological innovations come precisely from the exploration of new, previously neglected types of contexts and of new kinds of sources. The contemporaries clearly appreciated Lenke Szemere's works, and Margit Eppinger Weisz's mediating efforts – the task of art history and cultural history in this case is to rediscover traces that have faded over time, to reclaim objects and texts buried by the sediments of historical time.

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