

Redefining Places Where People Were Supposed to Live. The Squat Story*

by Zsuzsa Selyem

Distances cannot be occupied. Not even going through them would be possible. Invisible walls, that's what they are. Or infinite metaphors, without final significant. I have here – and you have there – an example: a story about making alive a place. The story of Squat Theatre, "one of the most creative revolutionary theaters of the '70s and early '80s". (Andras Halasz) Far away from me, far away from you (which does not mean that I am trying to diminish the distance between us, no, not in the slightest sense, it means simply that you are far away and I am far away too from this story, and more precise I try to be, you are farther and I am farther from it, that's what I'm doing just now, to make by these words the distance visible).

Distance made visible by words: first of all it is the question of language. I am writing in English (at least, a sort of English), although I am not (a sort of) English, and you – I don't know anything about you, I only suppose that you understand English, everybody understands English, in a way, or in another. I try to feel the distance from myself by alienating my mother-tongue, and this is a means for getting closer to the Squat-story, which will be, if I shall at last tell it, a story about the alienation from mother-tongue and fatherland, from Hungarian and Hungary to English and New York.

*My involvement with Squat came about when my friend, Larry Solomon, asked me if I would accompany him to a play in Soho Bookstore that he was going to work on. The play was Pig, Child, Fire! and the players were a group of Hungarians (...) whose heavily accented English Larry was at pains to comprehend. He knew I had a good ear for accents. (Detail from Kathleen Kendel's letter. Buchmuller – Koós: *Squat Theatre*. 1996. p. 146.)*

*The production was staged by an extended family group of Jewish Hungarian refugees who fled from Hungary because they were about to be arrested for not conforming to the standards of Socialist Realism of the East Bloc nations. (Detail from officer Carl B. Weisbrod's report regarding the investigation on the complaint about a production of the Squat Theatre, *Andy Warhol's Last**

* http://www.galerie-k-s.de/iex/english/un_terri/uno1.htm# (2003)

Love, during which a 250 pound naked woman – the witch Kathleen Kendel – performed nude in storefront window of the Squat’s building on 23rd Street. *Buchmuller – Koós*, p. 148.)

Here I quoted two piece of reception of Squat Theatre, one was written by a professional witch, who performed in the first production of Squat realized in New York, the *Andy Warhol’s Last Love* – the other one was written by a professional officer who was to investigate whether the naked witch’s ceremony in the storefront window might be considered legally obscene. (He reported, it wasn’t, as Squat “is considered a serious group of artists who came to this country seeking freedom of expression through innovative methods”.) The letter speaks about languages (Hungarian, English), the report about countries (Hungary, USA). Hungary as a place, where artists were arrested for their non-conforming performances results Hungarian language to become an accent. A sort of accent.

Don’t oppress, express yourself! (One of the logos of Halász Theatre.)

Budapest, 1969 – “Péter Halász, Anna Koós and Péter Breznyik, willingly expelled from the University Theater in Budapest organize a new group in an unoccupied room of the Kassák Culture House (at Uzsoki-utca 57) named after Lajos Kassák...” *Buchmuller – Koós*, p. 206.)

This is where, when and how the Squat-story begins. Some people, who did not fit the official standards for making theater (Péter Halász, Anna Koós, Éva Buchmüller, Péter Breznyik, István Bálint, Péter Berg and a few others); a city, the capital of Hungary (occupied by the Soviet régime); the years of the so called “soft-dictatorship”; an expelling from an institution and an “occupation of a room” in another. After two years another proscription, and on January 24, 1972 the group decides to continue working in Dohány street 20, in the private apartment where Péter Halász, his grandmother and Anna Koós live. This works till 1976, the year of emigration. The group is invited to perform in Paris, London, Düsseldorf, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Marseilles, Nancy, Baltimore. From July 1977 they live in New York, 256 West 23rd Street, and this is when they start performing as *Squat Theatre*. From here no more exiles. Some of them return to Budapest after the regime change in 1989. Some of them continue living in New York, making films, teaching, performing etc.

These were only names of places, numbers denoting time and a few verbs: expelled, organize, ban, continue working, emigrate, perform. The story is about exile, about occupation of another place, another exile, opening the private territory for public, making room for theatre, taking room from the

private life (this was the “Halász Theatre”, the “Flat Theatre” in Budapest), or taking room from the cotidian place of pedestrian traffic and making theater in a storefront window (this was the “Squat”).

Theater always existed in a form or another, but under the soft dictatorial regime theater existed especially in two forms, as Andras Halasz wrote it in New York, 1996: the tolerated progressive theater functioning in the so called “culture houses”, and the educational theater, that occupied all the theater-buildings. The culture houses had very diverse activity: cooking classes, carpentry, driving schools, airplane-modelling, English lessons for the working class and so on.

In those days circulated a joke, a joke that is working in all – especially East-European – languages, except English: a reporter of the newspaper entitled “Red Star” is visiting a culture house from a village. Nobody in the street, nobody in the shop, nobody in the post-office. Only a very old man in straw hat stands in front of a gate. Where is everybody? – asks him the reporter. In the culture house – answers the old man. Everybody? Every single soul. And what are they doing there? They are on English class. But then who is working the land? The old man answers, changing the language of speaking (from Hungarian or Russian or Romanian etc.) into English: *Maybe the students.*

This is how democracy actually was perceived in those days: people were forced to do what they did not want or did not know how to do. Theater had to be school; school had to be working place and so on: almost all words changed their meaning. It was enough to open my mouth and I already told a lie. This was the context of the “Halász Theatre” – also an interaction between fiction and reality, what stands at the base of Squat’s art-conception. The difference is that ideology pretended to be about reality, at least expected people to pretend that so is reality, while avant-garde theater pretended to be fiction, and expected people to pretend that it is fiction.

What happened in that unoccupied room of Kassák culture house? ¹ Performances in the borderline of being inhibited by official authorities and, meantime, being invited to the Nancy Theater Festival. Some

¹ 1969–70 – *The Ballad of Two Brothers*. Written by Péter Halász. Players: Péter Halász/János Márton, Can Togay/Péter Breznyik, Dóra Bácskay, Mária Bajcsay, László Kovács, Miklós Kovács, Csaba Virágh and Anna Koós. Directed by Péter Halász. Assistant director: Mária Körmendy.

– *Cause Everyone Just Hangs Around Doing Nothing*. Collective creation. Players: Éva Szendrei, Dóra Bácskay, Mária Bajcsay, Can Togay, Péter Breznyik, János Márton and Anna Koós. Directed by Péter Halász. Assistant director: Mária Körmendy.

1971 – *Labyrinth*. Written by István Bálint. Live music: György Kurtág, Jr. / Mária Körmendy on Japanese gong. Players: Éva Szendrei / Dóra Bácskay / Anna Koós (Ariadne), János Márton / Péter Halász

words about the performances: by making a sort of ritual theater (Artaud and Grotowski were the most important influences), or using movie-effects (they refer to Godard in their *Manifesto*), the concept of *theater* was questioned, the boundaries between actor and spectator were demolished, the relationship among diverse functions of a performance – playwright, actors, assistants, director – was comprehended in a specific, de-hierarchized sense. Their attitude, in political sense, is in strong connection with the students’ movements of ’68. (They make this connection in *Andy Warhol’s last Love*, where Ulrike Meinhof tells to Andy Warhol about her death as making love with an “alien” from another galaxy, and when Andy is asking her, whether she was the first who experienced such an encounter, she answers: “No. The first was Jan Pallach who burned himself to death in the fall of 1968 in Prague.”) But the non-hierarchical structure of a human organization and the questioning of traditional values are in strong connection also with the leading concept of dictatorial ideology: collectivity. How can we make distinction between collectivity in dictatorial régime and collectivity in the case of Squat Theatre? From historical point of view, they both are related to the second concept of the slogan of French Revolution: *fraternité*, or to the basic concept of ethics, that appears also in the various origin-myths of mankind. Pragmatically taking, collectivity for communist régime meant only another power discourse, the use of another metaphor-system, but in fact the system worked also by dividing people the central power choosing who is to be considered a class-enemy and be expelled from a community glued by denunciations and fear.

Taking collectivity seriously (that is, a performance was really the result of collective work) was considered by the so called “communist” authorities, correctly, a revolt. Without any direct attempt of revolt from the part of the performers –making authentic theater is always questioning the ruling conventions.

(Minotaurus), Can Togay / Miklós Kovács / Péter Breznyik / István Szeghő (Theseus). Director: Péter Halász. Assistant director: Mária Körmendy.

– *Quick Changes, Enchanted by Remote Seas and Far Lands, or the Dragon’s Turbulent Cry Silenced by Thunder Following Lightning, in the Tibetan Sense of the Word*. Collective creation. Players: Péter Halász’s Grandmother, Mrs. Aranka Fischer, Éva Szendrei, Dóra Bácskay, Margit Dobner, Anna Koós, Péter Halász, János Márton, Can Togay, Miklós Kovács and László Kovács. Live music by György Kurtág, Jr., Zoltán Jeney and László Sári. Directed by Péter Halász. Assistant director: Mária Körmendy.

1972 – *Murder in the Skanzen*. Players: Péter Lajtai and Péter Halász (interchangeable father and son), Éva Szendrei, Marianne Kollár / Mária Körmendy, István Szeghő, Anna Koós, Péter Breznyik, Dóra Bácskay and János Márton. Texts written by Péter Lajtai, István Bálint and Péter Halász. Seven headed dragon and giant fish made by Péter Donáth.

Though our approach was nonpolitical, to ignore, not to participate; to find our freedom outside the status quo, our mere existence became political by the forces of our circumstances.
(Buchmuller – Koós, 1989, p.100)

After being exiled into the flat of Dohány street 20, performances redefined radically the concepts of private and public. Can you imagine? Sharing your life totally with your... – now: what is the proper expression? Colleague would be today, but then they meant more for each other, perhaps: neighbor – your neighbor?

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. (Exodus, 20.16)

In Dohány street 20 and in the homes of other friend too, the word “neighbor” was taken as seriously as it can be. The apartment was private and public in the same time. Private: the Halász family did not have another place where to go if they became tired or anything else. Public: everybody could attend the performances. No, this is not quite true, fact is – as many people related – that a totally stranger did not dare to go there, only friends and friends of friends. The privacy of place did not stop functioning, and it was not possible not to feel it. This interregnum between a public and a private space helped the performances to pass through boundaries between actor and spectator, but not only this, the plays became in a way existential: Péter Breznyik really cut his wrists, the blood was his own blood, or Anna Koós is really doing dishes while it can be heard the “Kaddish”, or the Sancta Claus really arrived from above as they put a paper-ceiling which was burst by him as he jumped down among the many children of the members of the Halász theatre.²

² Here I shall copy the performances of this period of time:

1972 – *Murder in the Skanzen*. Adjusted to the apartment of Dohány street 20.

– *Metamorphosis*. Péter Breznyik and Ágnes Laurenczi / Anna Koós

– *Puppet Theater* for children. By Péter Halász.

– *Seven Clown Stories*. Written by István Bálint. Players: Marianne Kollár, Anna Koós, István Szeghő and Péter Breznyik.

– *The Breakfast of Adolph Kurtz*. Concept by Péter Lajtai. Players: Péter Halász, Éva Szendrei, Anna Koós, Péter Breznyik, Miklós Kovács, István Szeghő, István Bálint, Péter Lajtai, Emő Dobos and László Algol.

– *Seven Days in Surány*. In an abandoned sandmine the group, together with newly formed theater company of young engineer students organized by László Najmányi, gather to perform day and night setting up tents along the perimeter. After 4 days police went there and prohibited the performance. After a week the group went back with a film permission.

– *Face ti Face, or training to be together for a time unspecified*. Idea: István Bálint.

To present your acts, your airs, your ideas – to see and conceive these as potential theater was an invitation for conversation or rejection, insult or cooperation from others. During many trials and thirty-six different performances in the apartment we came up with our own definition of theater.

For endless hours, weeks, even months we sat together throwing ideas around and finally discussing how a performance was going to happen, down to the most minute details – but never rehearsed. We were asked many times, why?

...

It was a gut feeling. Certain actions were simply not fit to rehearse, like drawing blood from an arm, setting a smoke bomb in the street or having dinner on stage. We knew one another, trusted

– *The Puppet Theater of Péter Halász*. A solo. With household objects and 9 phallic red chess pawns carved by Péter Donáth. Poems by István Bálint and Péter Lajtai. Improvised texts by Péter Halász. 1973 – *Alice and Her Sisters* with and by Éva Buchmüller, Marianne Kollár and Anna Koós.

– *Tribute to Miron Biaoszewski* with Péter Halász, Péter Breznyik and Anna Koós. At the Polish Cultural Center in Budapest.

– *“Breznyik and a Woman ” Lying in State, Then...* A six-hour-long solo by Péter Breznyik. Self-sacrifice.

– *The Chemistry Engineer and the Construction Manager*. Happening by László Algol.

– *King Kong*. A 3-dayperformance.

– *The Perfect Prothesis or the Beggars of the Day*. By Péter Breznyik and Anna Koós.

1974 – *Hölderlin’s Empedocle*. Idea: István Bálint. Players: István Bálint, Gergely Molnár, Sándor Simon, Marianne Kollár, Kati Örsi and Anna Koós. Éva Buchmüller sings *In the Upper Room*.

– *Guido and Tyrius*. Performance for children and adults on an isle of Szentendre.

– *The Jew Jokes*. A solo by Péter Halász.

– *English Lesson*. A video by Anna Koós.

– *And Slew the Children in Bethlehem*. With Péter Breznyik, Sándor Simon, Gergely Molnár, Marianne Kollár, Emő Dobos, Judit Scherter, Andrea Bősze, Éva Buchmüller, Anna Koós with Gallus Halász and Péter Halász.

1975 – *Diary Theater*.

– *Sand Table*. With Bach’s *St. John’s Passion*. Players: Éva Buchmüller, István Bálint and Péter Halász.

– *Anna Doing Dishes*. A solo by Anna Koós.

– *Fishing*. With István Bálint, Marianne Kollár, Péter Halász and Péter Breznyik.

– *Preface to Don Giovanni*. By Péter Breznyik. With Anna Koós and Marianne Kollár.

– *The Three Sister* by Anton Chekhov. Text: an abridgedversion of the original play limited to the lines of the 3 sisters. Players: Péter Halász (Irina), István Bálint (Olga), Péter Breznyik (Masha). Anna Koós as prompter.

– *It Is Hard to Say Good-bye to Happiness*. An impromptu at a campfire in the apartment. With Éva Buchmüller, Péter Halász and István Bálint.

– *Postscript to Don Juan*. Players: István Bálint, Marianne Kollár and Borbála Major.

one another's range of possibilities, and considered one another's expressions to be authentic.
(Buchmuller–Koós, 1989, p.100)

1976, January–February – the group leave for Paris, 1977 – New York. After a short period of searching they find the Squat: a new concept of place for theater. The performances take place in the window of a storefront, the spectators sat inside the store, the everyday-life of the street was the part of the play, by passers were stopped and interviewed, once the police arrested the actors, neighbors denounced the theatre for obscenity, spectators left the performance because they felt themselves – rightly – being manipulated, etc. Extreme reactions were the goal of Squat. They attempted strong communication, huge effects. For this, they used myths, rituals, trivial moments of everyday life, giant babies, objects that seemed somehow human beings and vice versa, they used the simple fact that they are playing in the window of a storefront and some unsuspecting pedestrians are looking inside the window, so becoming unintentionally part of the show – and all this were mixed rather spontaneously, leaving room for the reactions of spectators.

The storefront had to have a large window and an entrance from a busy street. Our New York theater was located on 23rd Street – a cross-street in Manhattan with relentless traffic and throngs of people. Spectators took their seats in the back of the store facing the stage, which was in front of the window. They could see the street, which provided a permanent, live background. Presented in this context, fiction assumed the air of reality, as the common sight of the street beyond the stage could become very theatrical. The street was an integral part of the play, resetting the boundaries of fictional events.

...

Rituals and ceremonies, at their conception, had no scripts. Revolutions and spontaneous events in the life of individuals had no scripts either. Yet we considered all of these to be the origin of theater. (Buchmuller–Koós, 1989, p.100.)

Shopping is one of the late 20th century rituals.³ In the time of cold war the accomplishment of this ritual became a sign by which good and bad could be differentiated: the “good part” of the world observed this ritual without any obstacles, the place was prepared as it had to be (with a lot of wares, articles, yes:

³ It is a rite, as (1) it happens in a separate, consecrated place, (2) people use to take part in it without knowing precisely what they are doing in fact, (3) they are doing it without any strong necessities, (4) participating enforces one's position in society.

“goods”), people also prepared themselves properly (with well-lined purses), the priests of the rituals, kind and beautiful women in special clothes directed gently the people to accomplish the ritual – while the bad part of the world had only empty and ugly buildings, which get only for times to times goods to be sold, then people had to stay in lines for hours, sometimes they had to go away as they come, as it did not left any goods for them etc. And people from “the bad” part of the world dreamed about getting across, to the “good part” of the world. The cold war fueled by the industry of lying. Squat Theatre put itself in the middle of the lying-rituals and realized totally other rituals inside the big, society-manipulating one.

*The dimly lit stage suggests rudimentary living quarters. A giant sculpture of a man is hanging upside down from the ceiling. From the groin of the sculpture, a man's head protrudes. A woman sits near the hanging man. A goat with a golden cherub like mask attached to his horns eats some cabbage. A four-year-old girl plays in the sand which covers the floor. Beyond the window the street is visible. Solemnity is broken when the first laugh from the audience, like a big sigh of relief, greets the incidental appearance of a pedestrian, a man coming close to the window, shielding his eyes to peek in. (From the description of *Pig, Child, Fire!* performed at the beginning in Rotterdam, then in New York. Buchmuller–Koós, 1989, p.59.)*

This theater concept owes a lot to Antonin Artaud's cruelty-concept. The act Artaud is speaking about has as its goal the organic and physical transformation of the human body. Theater is not a parade where some myth is virtually and symbolically interpreted, theater is “melting-pot with fire and real flesh and blood, where the tread bones, members and syllables renew the bodies”. Squat Theater continued this concept – and it was more than it with facing the Artaud's out-of-placeness in society. Sur-realist theater meant not only another place, a fictional one, a mythical or some religious experiences in Mexico, Artaud's sur-realism meant: no place in the world. Anna Koós in the *Pig, Child, Fire!*, Act III reads Artaud's letter to André Breton while the involuntary movements of her vulva are projected onto a monitor via a camera between her legs. In their book she quotes that detail from Artaud, where he writes about Van Gogh's rejection from the part of society: “For a madman is also a man whom society did not want to hear and whom it wanted to prevent from uttering certain intolerable truths.” The production of Squat Theatre performed the no-placeness of surrealism, where no-place did not mean “nothing”. No-place there was the involuntary responsiveness of that part of a human body which traditionally was taken as a “nothing”, a mere lack, an absence. It can be noticed the connection between Squat's choice of place, the storefront window and the vulva: shop window is the place where prostitutes are waiting for their

clients. And this is how Squat went on: sur-realism was for them the nowhere-ness of here and now, the extreme happenings of everyday life. Serge Ouaknine in his essay about Squat analyzing the role of the place writes: "What will appear in the context of expectation and trapped desire will belong to the sur-real (etymologically: posed-upon), i.e., to turbulent fiction where events do not pretend to be only "elsewhere" (as in the case of conventional theater), but also here and now, imminently, in terms of space and time." (Quoted by Buchmuller-Koós, 1989, p.103.)

Andy Warhol's Last Love was the first performance realized by Squat in New York. Theater as melting-pot gains a new meaning here, as the expression "melting-pot", everybody knows it, is used to USA as place, as society, as way of life. The little avant-garde theater from Budapest placed itself in the vivid, exciting, stirring meeting point of diverse cultures, languages, arts, skin-colors etc. and made its performances in dialog with these movements. Squat felt New York in the 70-ies and 80-ies as the center of arts – as it was Paris in the beginning of 20th century. It was excited how many things can happen on a single day, how diverse people can meet each other and how easy is to communicate.

And what is happening now, now, when I write this paper (March 28, 2003)? I asked you, my dear desk-neighbor in high school, my dearest translator of Persian Poetry, my far-away Imola, for you has living near to that place for more than 10 years, to write a few lines about that place:

Theatre is theatre. They kept the tradition: in the place where once upon a heroic time the Squat Theatre used to be in Chelsea, today is another theatre: Clearview Cinemas. Now playing: Adaptation, City of God, Dreamcatcher, The Hours, Irreversible, etcetera, for ten bucks a piece, and what a piece. I must look really suspicious, with my slightly darker complexion, leaning next to a wall, taking notes of the ambience. I read the city. DON'T JUST STAY THERE, DO SOMETHING. Perhaps, I look like an Iraqi woman preparing herself for revenge. 'Cause everybody is coming, going, doing something. Still Chelsea has a cool wibe, and I remember a sentence read somewhere else today: "MY GRANDMOTHER IS A BAD ASS. She's really cool. And than we talked about synchronicity and Jung".) We are close to the corner of 23rd Street and 8th Avenue. And you are supposed to move, unless waiting for the bus. And what does the bus station have to say? RUDY, yes, that's a movie about our Rudy. Further reading, counterclockwise: Buritoville, 33 Pizza (I have one, for a jump-start), Gap, Gym, Trailer Park, Boston Market, Ricky's, Salon Cecilia, YMCA, Chelsea Hotel (THE Chelsea Hotel, not bad), and Cuba Libre. This is street level. One story higher gets even more sophisticated: the rare, and valuable as such, gaps between the

surrounding two to five story buildings allow more space for ads: LET'S JUMP OUT THROUGH THE WINDOW, SIGUR ROS AND ANIMA, I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT, etcetera and a rainbow flag.

On my way towards the subway station I pass by a guy, who is singing: "I'll be lying next to her", while posting an ad on a pole, asking his soul mate to make an appearance. Little further down, someone is shooting a picture of a pregnant woman with a sticker on her belly: NO POLICE STATE. And then comes the last ad I am willing to read today: MAY YOUR THOUGHTS BE AS DEEP AS YOUR POCKETS.

What a perfect location would be this place for Squat Theatre. As of today.