

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design
Art Theory PhD

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Fashion as Wolrdbuilding in the Years of Transition

Doctoral Thesis

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Tamás Király: *Red Star Dress*, 1987. Photo: Jonathan Csaba Almási

Theses

The dissertation takes as its starting point the work of Hungarian avant-garde fashion designer Tamás Király (1952-2013) in the '80s, and aims to provide an international context for his oeuvre. Király was a unique figure in the Hungarian underground, who combined fashion with playful, iconoclastic performances that subverted the categories of identity and gender and responded to the gradual fall of the socialist system in various ways. I started working on Király's oeuvre in 2013, and in the past few years I have curated several exhibitions and events, and published articles on Hungarian and international platforms with the aim of creating a place for Király's legacy in global art history. The first chapter of the thesis reflects on the conclusions and the dilemmas that have emerged from this process.

In the following parts, I place the Hungarian artist's work in dialogue with the avant-garde fashion communities of the former Eastern Bloc. During my doctoral studies, I spent several months in the cultural centres of the region – mainly Tbilisi, Riga, and Moscow – to interview artists who responded to the collapse of the Soviet regime through dress performances and experimental fashion collections. I introduce the *Avant-garde Fashion Assembly* in Tbilisi (1995-1999), the *Untamed Fashion Assembly* in Riga (1991-1999) and the alternative fashion scene of Moscow between 1985 and 1995 in two chapters. My main claim is that these large-scale fashion events, though little known in global art history, as laboratories of new desires and emotions, were important platforms of world-making during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following years of transition.

Finally, I look at the possible links between the Eastern European and the New York underground, for which my starting point was a fashion show Király did in the East Village in 1986. Between 2023 fall and 2024 spring, I was a Fulbright fellow at The Museum of Modern Art and at New York University, where I researched the use of fashion in experimental theatre and drag performances in New York's Downtown scene in the '80s and the '90s. This chapter, on the one hand, explores the fantasies of the New York arts community about Eastern Europe toward the end of the Cold War period, and, on the other, shows how the community responded to the AIDS crisis through these performances. While my doctoral thesis interprets Eastern Europe's fashion performances as the queering of the collapsing regimes, this chapter also shows how queer art has emerged out of this particular and still traumatic period in the history of New York City.