



UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-SORBONNE

ÉCOLE DOCTORALE VI – Histoire de l’art et archéologie
Laboratoire de recherche Centre André Chastel

T H È S E

pour obtenir le grade de
DOCTEUR DE L’UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-SORBONNE

Discipline : Histoire de l’art / Art contemporain

Présentée et soutenue par :

Flóra MÉSZÁROS

le : 6 Juillet 2016

Hungarian Artists in Abstraction-Création

Sous la direction de :

Monsieur Arnauld PIERRE–Professeur, Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV)

Sous la co-direction de :

Madame Krisztina PASSUTH–Professeur Émérite, Université d’Eötvös Loránd (Budapest)

Membres du jury :

Monsieur Balázs ABLONCZY – MC HDR, Université d’Eötvös Loránd (Budapest)

Monsieur Thierry DUFRÈNE– Professeur, Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre La Défense

Mme Markéta THEINHARDT– Professeur, Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV)

Mme Sarah WILSON – Professeur, Courtauld Institute of Art (London)

La position de thèse- Hungarian Artists in Abstraction-Création (Flóra Mészáros)

By 1930 Paris became the center of different trends of abstract art in Europe and also the center of international avant-garde art. The international artistic group *Abstraction-Création* was founded in Paris by Auguste Herbin, Georges Vantongerloo, Hans Arp, Albert Gleizes, Jean Hélion, František Kupka, Robert Delaunay and Léon Tutundjian on February 15th, 1931. The forum had about 100 members over the years, including Wassily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo and Alexander Calder. Out of the Hungarian artists, Étienne Béothy, Alfred Reth, Lajos Tihanyi and Ferenc Martyn joined the association, whereas László Moholy-Nagy was granted membership in the association without living in Paris. The union operated for five years, until 1936 (when it finally dissolved due to financial problems and personal conflicts). In order to provide a special forum for non-figurative art, they organized individual and collective exhibitions and owned a gallery for a short time. From 1932 to 1936 they published an annual journal, called the *abstraction-création art non-figuratif*, which published theories of abstract art and photos of their artists' works, thus presenting a kind of portfolios. In doing so, the forum offered, in a figurative sense, opportunities to discuss the problems of non-figurative art. The cohesive power of the platform was the non-figurative approach shared by all members, though it was realized in two distinctive ways. On the one hand, the organization saw itself as a ground-breaking forum of *abstraction*, reaching non-figuration by abstracting the forms of nature. On the other hand, some artists actually continued the ideas and principles of *Art Concret (Concret Art)*, Neoplasticism, Van Doesburg's Elementarism and so on; so they believed in *création*, creating non-figuration by only using geometric elements.

In its own age (during its operation and immediately after it) *Abstraction-Création*, working between 1931 and 1936, was mostly left out of European art historians' discourse. From the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s, because of the parallel abstract artistic tendencies, a new, belated interest appeared towards abstract art. It was the period when the first summative monographs were written on abstract art; meanwhile a deep research into the results of the 1930s or *Abstraction-Création* was still missing. The research on the non-figurative initiations of the 1930s in Paris, including *Abstraction-Création*, only started in the 1970s. Not only the number of references to it and the mentions of it grew, but the first exhibitions devoted to *Abstraction-Création* were organized too. By way of an example, a very important summary written by Gladys Fabre related to one of these exhibitions held in 1978. Fabre's primary goal in her essay was to lay down the bases of research targeted at

Abstraction-Création. Since the publication of this catalogue *Abstraction-Création* has only been discussed occasionally, mainly from the point of view of one of its participants' activity. Some essays mentioned its importance, but no further discussion followed. So its structure, goals or history mostly have not been part of the art historical discourse of the last four decades ; the only exception to it is still the catalogue published forty years ago.

The same can be said about the research on individual Hungarian participants, whose abstract period in the association was also presented as one stage of their lives with no further in-depth analyses. Regarding the subject of the present dissertation, from the activity of Hungarian members such as Béothy, Reth, Moholy-Nagy, Tihanyi in *Abstraction-Création*, only Béothy's art and publications and his role in the group were analyzed in detail in Krisztina Passuth's monograph on Béothy. In this dissertation I sought to give a deeper insight into Ferenc Martyn's activity in Paris, including his work in *Abstraction-Création*.

Considering the above discussion, particularly what has been written about the lack of research on the Hungarian participants in *Abstraction-Création*, the major goal of my dissertation was to satisfy the long-felt need to elaborate on a hitherto unexamined subject and place it in a scientific context. Beyond the basic goal of the dissertation to concentrate on all Hungarian artists in the group for the first time, I realized that it was necessary to set another aim as well, namely the re-evaluation and interpretation of the whole activity of *Abstraction-Création* in light of new information accessible about it, thereby trying to depict, against a broader historical background, the group from a new theoretical and art historical perspective.

In order to reach these two main goals, the use of various research methods was required. Firstly, it was necessary to collect and sum up all the appropriate information about the group from the writings, available especially in French libraries, that focus on the association, including numerous monographs and essays written on the group's international and Hungarian artists. Secondly, for a deeper analysis of the artworks, it was necessary to visit a lot of museums, private collections and galleries in France and in Hungary between 2009 and 2016, in the period of my research. Thirdly, and most importantly, more than a hundred original sources can be found nowadays, predominantly in French archives, concretely in the property of IMEC and Archives Bibliothèque Kandinsky, which have never been analyzed in the context of demonstrating a wider image of the operation of *Abstraction-Création* or of its Hungarian members. Moreover, I had the chance to meet and make interviews with researchers, several personal friends, students and family members of the Hungarian participants of *Abstraction-Création*, and also with art historians, collectors and gallerists who discussed the topic.

Having specified the goals and methods of the dissertation, let me summarize the main results of the dissertation related to *Abstraction-Création*, on the one hand, and to the activity of Hungarian artists in it, on the other.

It was important to clarify that internationalism was one of the main characteristic features of *Abstraction-Création*. The fact was confirmed that about 50 members joined it annually, but altogether we can only reckon with the total of 100 active members. Of the 100 artists, only eleven were French, others were Americans, Spanish, Dutch, Russians, Italians, Japanese, Swiss, etc., including the relatively high number of five Hungarian members as well. Moreover, the international structure of *Abstraction-Création* characterized the whole artistic scene of Paris of the time, which in turn was determined by the attractiveness of Paris. In the dissertation all the historical reasons were listed why Paris became a primary destination for both immigrants and artists between the First and the Second World Wars. So there were the social, ethnic and political circumstances, such as persecuted ideologies in other countries, which induced a lot of artists, including some of the Hungarian, to move to Paris. For instance, Béothy's decision was motivated by this, and Moholy-Nagy and Tihanyi left Hungary to go to Vienna and then to other foreign cities also because of political reasons on the first place (Tihanyi went to Paris in 1924). Another main reason was the aforementioned artistic attractiveness of the city, which was a motivation for Martyn and Reth to move to Paris.

Beginning from the 1920s there were a few events and formations that prepared the soil for the relative extension of non-figurative art by 1930 in Paris. I tried to collect and demonstrate the significance of these precursors, so to say; such were *1925 Exhibition/ Paris World's Fair* with some unconventional pavilions; the exhibition of *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui 1925*; and journals *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920-1924) or *Cahiers d'Art* (from 1926); and few more exhibiting places, like *Galerie L'Effort Moderne*.

Art historians regularly emphasized that it was the two precursors of non-figurative art in Paris, namely *Art Concret* led by Theo van Doesburg, and *Cercle et Carré* in Paris in 1930, that can be taken to have been fully mixed in *Abstraction-Création*. In my opinion, they can only be considered as precedents for *Abstraction-Création* in initiating the dream of realizing a long-lived non-figurative forum and in the fact that a lot of former members of both groups could be found in *Abstraction-Création*. But the differences were more striking, since the theoretical basis and ideas and even their final operation were really different from those of *Abstraction-Création*. First of all, both previous groups made efforts to both define and restrict the definition of abstract art, while *Abstraction-Création*, in contrast with that, clearly

expanded its definition and also the definition of the term *non-figuration*. Secondly, *Abstraction-Création*'s name resulted from an uncertain decision and all the early documents suggest that the association focused on the term of non-figuration and on the extension of its meaning. Moreover, giving two possibilities to reach non-figuration, notably *abstraction* or *création*, did not at all mean that they determined the two directions of the aforementioned groups. The term abstraction was not identical with the conception of *Cercle et Carré* and the *création* evidently was not generated from *Art Concret*. All the more so, since by the time of the operation of *Abstraction-Création* there were two artistic approaches to abstract art, namely the geometric and the organic, which interestingly cannot be fully separated from each other, to say nothing of the fact that a lot of artists experimented with both directions.

However, we cannot forget that international artists, like Theo van Doesburg (*Art Concret*), Michel Seuphor and Joaquín Torres-García (*Cercle et Carré*), started to think of forming a non-figurative forum, presumably because they wanted take steps against the strengthening of Surrealism, but none of them became the leader of *Abstraction-Création* (Theo Van Doesburg died at the beginning of the operation of *Abstraction-Création*). Instead the French Auguste Herbin became the president of it, and being a strong and dominant personality as he was, he defined the political, artistic characteristics of the group and came up with a concept for this non-figurative formation that differed from those of Theo van Doesburg, Michel Seuphor and Joaquín Torres-García.

Finally, the fact that one of the basic differences between *Abstraction-Création* and former non-figurative associations was that *Abstraction-Création* showed much more tolerance towards Surrealism seems to be at variance with the opinion that it arose from the fusion of these associations.

Not only the clarification of these theoretical and art historical facts was in the focus of my dissertation; I also paid attention to the presentation of the whole organizational structure of *Abstraction-Création* in a totally new way by taking into consideration hitherto unanalyzed primary sources and giving a deeper analysis of the historical background. As a result, it turned out that the gradual loosening of the group, the participation of some unknown artists, including the majority of Hungarians, the inner conflicts and, finally, the cessation of the group happened because of reasons other than the ones suggested in the literature before. In this discussion of the organization I demonstrated and summarized Étienne Béothy's role in the committee.

So, in view of these sources it is certain that in the beginning the organizers dreamed of an exclusive group of non-figurative artists, namely of the founding members, and they

planned a much more theoretical basis and a more different organizational system for the promotion of non-figurative art than other associations before them. But as a result of learning from the examples of the short-lived previous non-figurative associations and from their struggle for their own subsistence because of the economic crisis, hoping to survive for long, they had to open their doors for much more abstract artists, including those who were not well-known and who were just making their first steps towards abstract art, like the Hungarian Martyn, Reth, or Tihanyi. So *Abstraction-Création* step by step gave up their own original aims and became a looser collective forum of non-figurative artists. Moreover, because of the political views of Auguste Herbin and some other communists and because of Herbin's growing power – he regularly left out the committee members from important decisions – a lot of committee members and participants resigned and left the group in 1934. These inner conflicts fragmented the solid structure of the group; meanwhile the economic crisis in 1934 caused the group to open their doors again. While Herbin strengthened his power, he failed to remain loyal to his original principle of excluding figuration from *Abstraction-Création*. The result of this was that the group accepted artists who somehow or other were interested in, or later got in touch with, Surrealism.

In this connection it is important to see that artistically Surrealism was not at all backgrounded, but, on the contrary, it had an impact on the final character of the *Abstraction-Création*. In my dissertation, I tried to demonstrate how tolerant the association was towards this Surrealist circle theoretically and how the two different directions were formed artistically in relation to Surrealism at the end of the operation of the group and what the Hungarian Martyn's place was in this Surrealist-abstract direction.

I believe that economic reasons also explain the operation and the success and failure of the group's cahier (maybe only five annual issues of the cahier were created, but it was the most successful realization of publishing a journal of a non-figurative association of the time) and of its gallery. In the essay I paid attention to the comparison of the group's cahier with contemporary examples and to the presentation of its goals, such as the operation of its gallery. I tried to show all the important moments when the five Hungarians participated in these platforms, especially underlining Moholy-Nagy's and Béothy's privileged role in them.

As regards the Hungarian members of the group, I think it is clear that they did not form their own community and they did not represent a special Hungarian artistic direction in the forum, so their activities had to be considered individually. I demonstrated the motives, the previous ideas of the Hungarian members and how they finally benefited from their

membership in *Abstraction-Création*. The Hungarian participants joined the group at different times. In my opinion probably Moholy-Nagy was the only artist among them who received a direct invitation from *Abstraction-Création* (in 1932); for the others it was a conscious decision to contact the association. Béothy joined them in 1931, Reth and Tihanyi in 1933 and finally Martyn in 1934. Their aspirations to access to the group kept varying; most importantly, all of them followed their painting or sculptural ambitions, probably it was only Reth and Béothy who were mainly led by pure artistic ambitions, notably to accomplish their abstract route in the group. I think Martyn and Tihanyi hoped to get financial support and/or artistic recognition through their participation and maybe Béothy had the same intention too. On top of these, the exhibiting and/or publishing possibilities were also attractive for all the three artists.

Moholy-Nagy, who came to the group as an external member and who was and as one of the most appreciated artists in new modern trends, did not live in Paris at that time, but he contributed to the group just like a full member. He was the only artist besides J.W. Power who had a solo exhibition; moreover, he published in each printed cahier.

Béothy became the secretary of the association in 1932 and he had the chance to be not only in the committee, but in the editorial committee as well. He published statements and reproductions in the journal and participated in a lot of exhibitions. He truly became an abstract artist and found new ways in organic abstraction during his participation.

Reth, just like Moholy-Nagy, was talented in recognizing new artistic directions. Then, after 1924, he restarted his career, working in abstract art and joined *Abstraction-Création* to fulfil his abstract ideas. He was mostly interested in the relationship between colors and lines and drew inspiration from Delaunay's research, as he had done it before. Reth emphasized rhythm and movement in his painting and experimented with different materials during his activity in *Abstraction-Création*.

For Tihanyi, it was in the Hungarian group, the *Eight* (1908-1911), that he found his real community and not in *Abstraction-Création* twenty years later. Tihanyi's monograph came out in 1936, but it was published by the Surrealist Robert Desnois, and not, as he had hoped, by the group. During his activity, he mainly concentrated on this book, rather than on his participation; meanwhile he produced half-geometric and half-organic abstract paintings whose motifs were parallel with the group's trends, but Tihanyi refused to follow any models in the association.

Martyn found his own form of expression first in organic abstraction, then in combining abstract elements with surrealist methods during this activity. He always used the

same kind of constructive way of thinking that he had learnt from his Hungarian master, Rippl-Rónai. Martyn was not an iconic member of *Abstraction-Création*, but he became a representative of those successful artists at the end of the operation of the association who followed the Surrealistic artistic direction too, and among the Hungarians he was the only one who was truly inspired by this participation. Although he never contributed to any exhibitions of *Abstraction-Création*, his most significant activity was carried out in Paris when he participated in the operation of *Abstraction-Création*, which effected his whole activity after then in Hungary.

So among the Hungarian members of *Abstraction-Création*, Martyn was the only artist who returned to his home country at the beginning of World War II and represented an unprecedented and individual pioneering route for an artist in his homeland. Reth and Béothy stayed in France and continued to work actively in the *Salon des Réalités-Nouvelles*; and became well appreciated French artists. Meanwhile Béothy was careful not to lose his Hungarian artistic connections and organized the first Hungarian abstract exhibition at the Tamás Gallery, replacing Ferenc Martyn. Unfortunately, Tihanyi did not have the chance to develop and continue the route he had started because of his sudden death in 1938. For Moholy-Nagy, who moved to the US and founded the Bauhaus Design School in Chicago, *Abstraction-Création* meant a great possibility to form new artistic relationships and benefit from them in his activity as director.