

exhibition

design



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Klára Rudas

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► looking for the role of explanatory abstract structures in the research-based exhibition

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Five exhibition design projects with Kassák Museum Budapest

We looked on the medium of the exhibition as a way of allowing the viewer to see our formulation of the problems of research as an area open to contemplation. This led us to cut down radically on textual information and employ visual structures capable of organically intertwining with the material under examination.

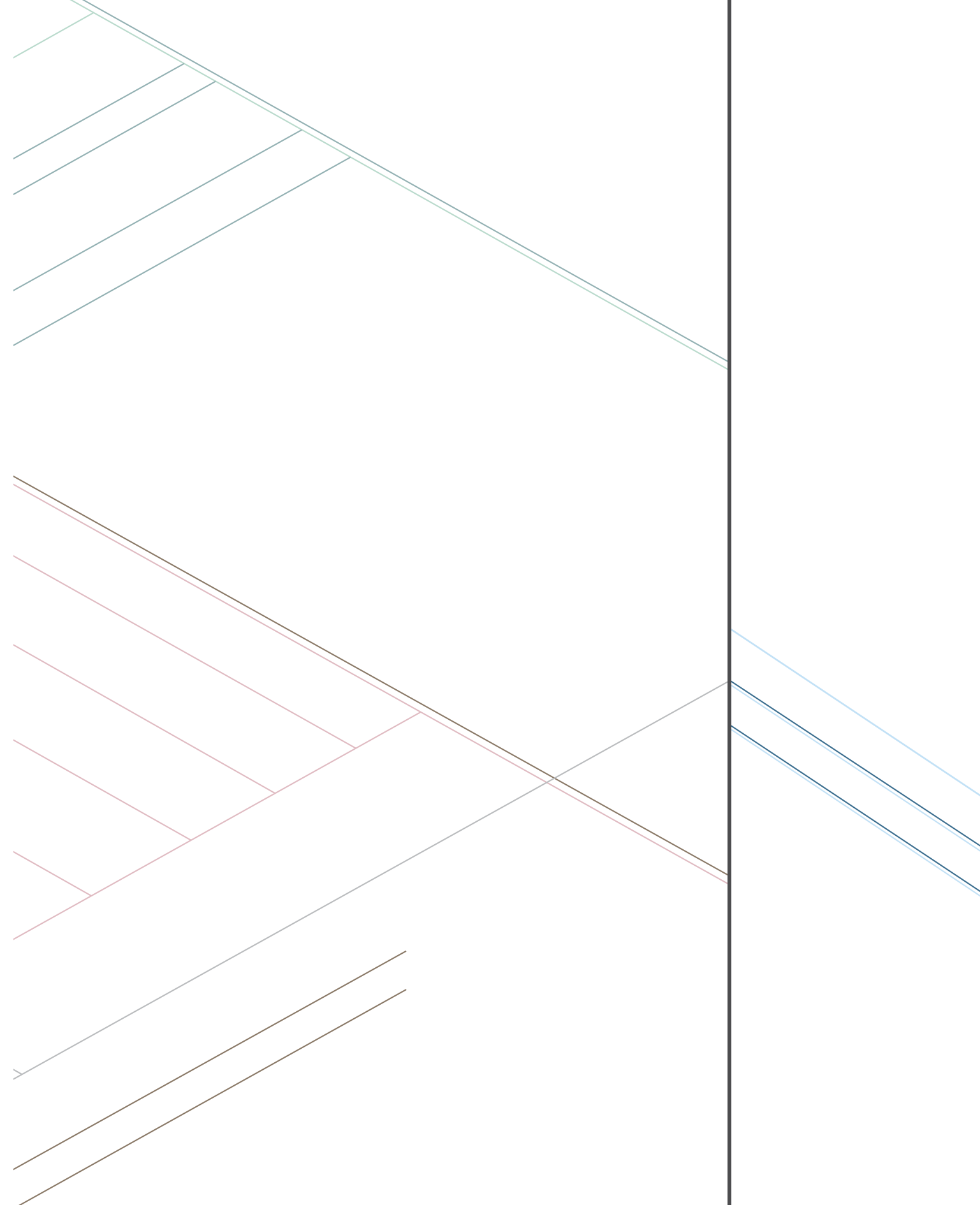
The abstract visual structures essentially differ from the usual explanatory images found in historical exhibitions. Its fundamental role is not to illustrate historical research or visualize the data but to reformulate the research and foster understanding and interpretation different from that offered by text-centred academic discourse. In one sense, the images are haphazard and individual, based on artistic intuition; in another, they are fixed and decipherable, because they are inseparable from the research findings (academic formulation of the problem) which brought them about.

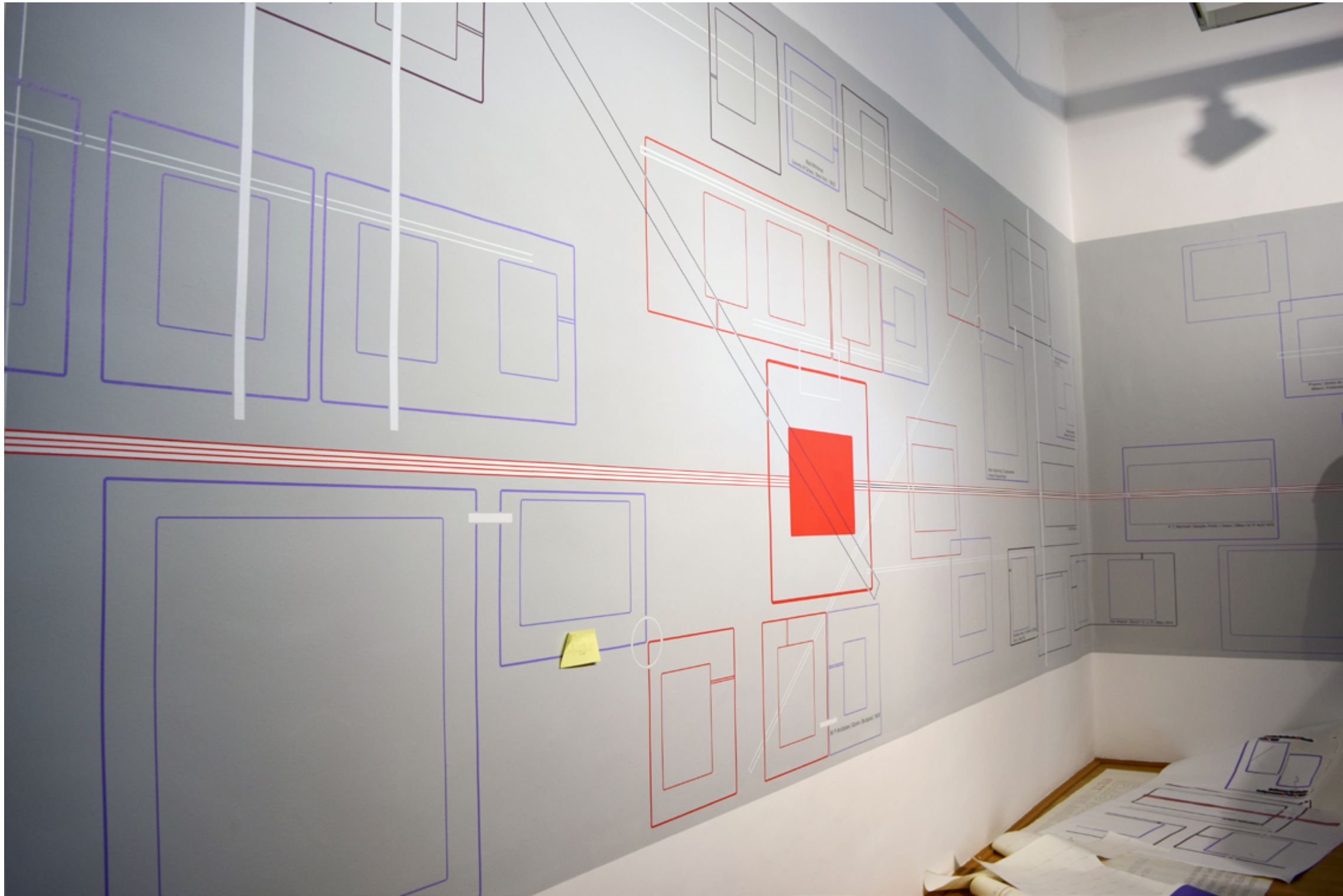
In some sections, the means of transmission that emerges out of the visualization takes on the illustrative role of infographics, effectively relying on concrete data. In others, it is an image that approaches an autonomous abstract structure, the opposite of the illustrative role. The emerging visual formations thus never quite occupy the subordinate status of the illustration but can in no case be regarded as completely autonomous abstract structures. The explanatory images lie somewhere along the visualization scale marked out by these two extremes.

**1.**

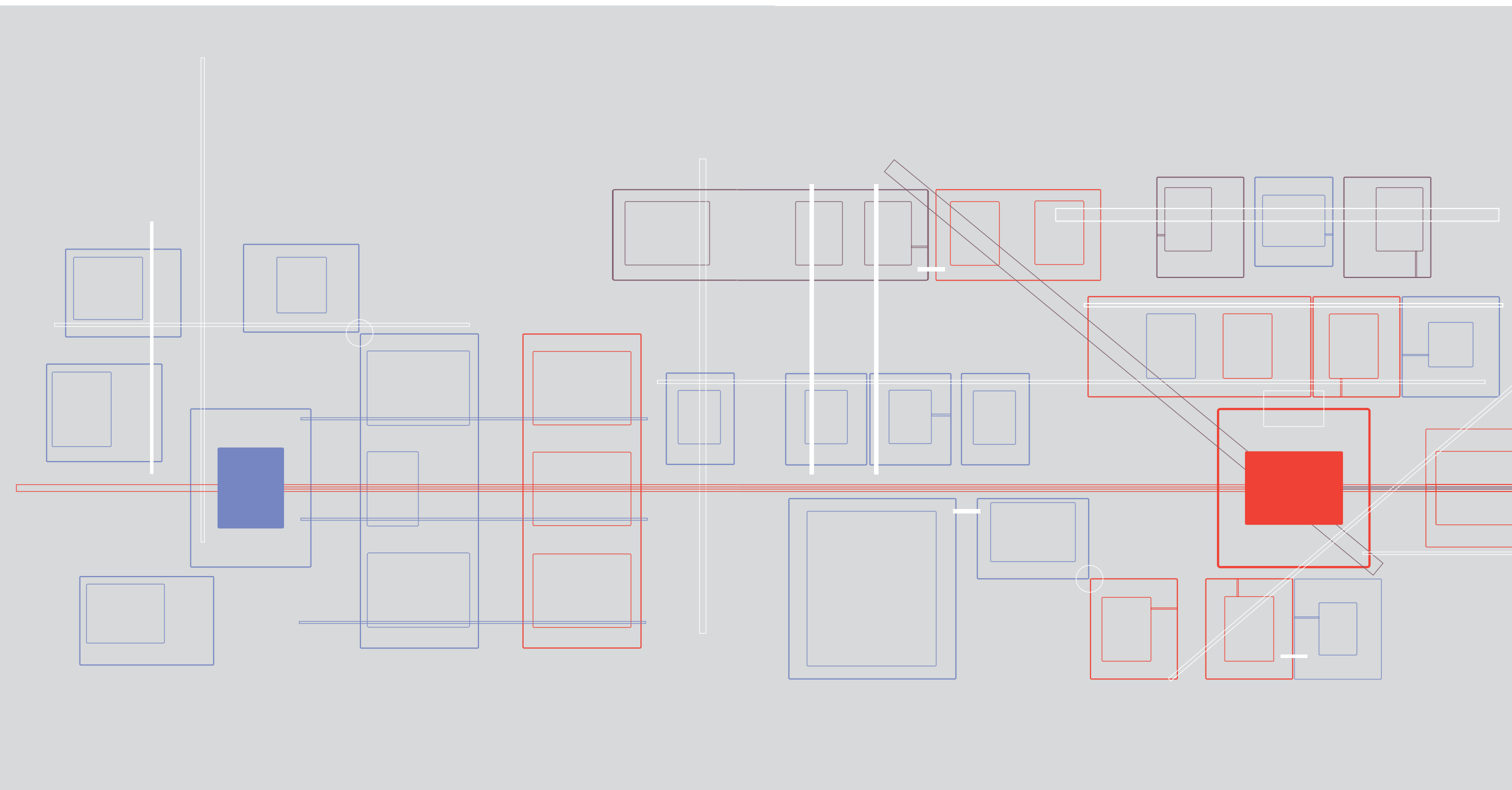
Signal to the World – War – Avant-Garde – Kassák  
Petőfi Literary Museum–Kassák Museum, 2015  
[kassakmuzeum.hu](http://kassakmuzeum.hu)

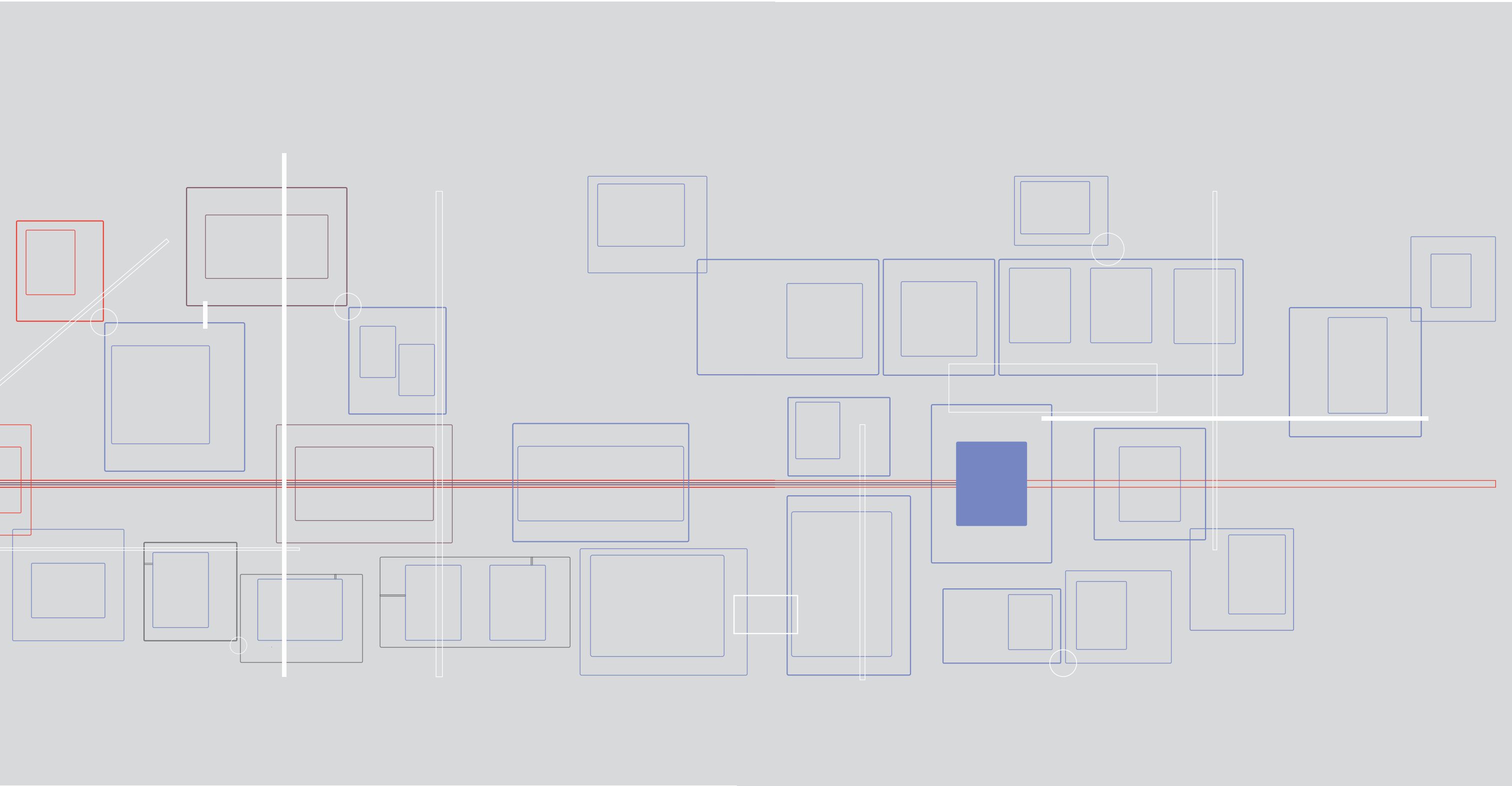
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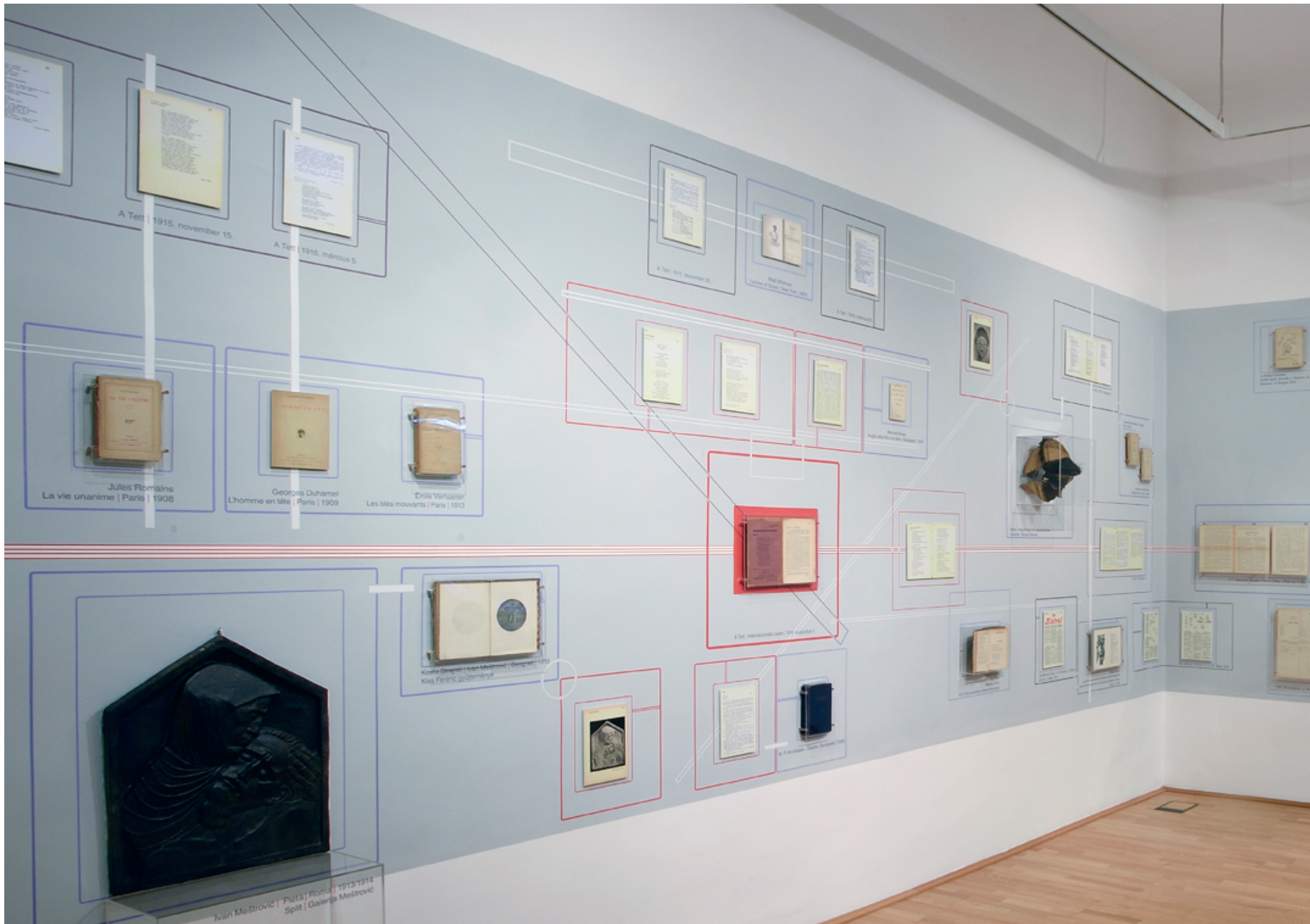




► The International Horizon of A Tett







► The International Horizon of A Tett

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Lajos Kassák's first journal *A Tett* (The Action), launched in 1915, was primarily an artistic and political attack on the culture of war. With a left-wing, socially-committed outlook, it employed social criticism and the novel principles of journal publishing to stand up to prevailing wartime discourse of stigmatizing the enemy. The radical artistic and political standpoint represented by *A Tett* may not be immediately apparent to the modern reader. In the hundred years that have passed, the points of reference against which the journal appeared seditious, violating norms and even "threatening the interests of warfare" have faded away. The exhibition outlines the Hungarian and international contexts in which *A Tett* operated, showing how the journal did indeed constitute a "signal to the world", the Kassák slogan chosen as the exhibition title. The purpose is not, however, to put on a reverential centenary celebration of Kassák's journal. To present *A Tett* merely as a bold stand against the war or, concentrating on the aesthetics of the art it published, as a museum of attempts by the early avant-garde to



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seek a way forward, would be too narrow an aim. Drawing on primary sources, the exhibition reconstructs the context against which *A Tett* was making a politically motivated and artistically valid response. This context comprised above all the **popular press**, the **culture of war**, and **artistic and political hinterland** of the journal and the anti-war **international art** that was the conceptual basis for Kassák's response.

The anti-war stance of *A Tett* is particularly striking when compared with the wartime propaganda machine of the popular press. At the time of its launch, in November 1915, newspapers with circulation in the hundreds of thousands were strenuously propagating the culture of war. This was the textual landscape into which *A Tett* ventured. Kassák and his associates were therefore received as internal enemies on the same terms as the country's wartime enemies. The artistic standpoint of *A Tett* was a target for the same mind-set that condemned the Futurist movement of "enemy" Italy.

Kassák's journal stood up against the culture of war with an attitude that regarded art as a political statement, opening up opportunities for a radically different way of working for Hungarian artists. The exhibition presents the intellectual development of the first Hungarian avant-garde journal. Its influences ranged from the Galileo Circle to the Futurist and Expressionist exhibition in the 1913 National Salon and the turn-of-the-century and avant-garde art movements. These were radically reinterpreted in the birth of the first Hungarian avant-garde journal, *A Tett*. Kassák's journal was more than the sum of its parts. The exhibition presents the process by which *A Tett* formulated its own recipe by digesting such influences as the war-party Futurists, the German Expressionists, the Abbaye de Créteil Colony and G. B. Shaw.

Infographics plays a key part in the exhibition as a means of visual analysis. The curators have not used it to avoid the job of interpretation, but they do wish to leave wide scope for visitors to make their own interpretations. Infographics set up complex connections without summarizing research in advance and packaging it into arbitrary narratives. This, however, is only a veneer of modesty: the exhibition has a definite ambition to convey subtleties and contradictions that confer a special quality to *A Tett* and its age.

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The exhibition was curated by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi and designed by Klára Rudas. Scientific consultant: Eszter Balázs.





KASSÁK IN THE WAR DISCOURSE IN AUTUMN 1914

here, it is social **solidarity** which leads the armies **to protect**  
our **vitality** and our **assets**

by virtue of the **health** and capability to **develop** possessed by the  
[Hungarian] race, we have every chance to make a happier society

[In Germany] the finest flower of life, the **solidarity**  
of living for each other, is coming to fulfillment  
Germany is **one giant family** with 65 million members

[we have] opened our eyes to the **conservatism** of the Germans  
the German police keep their eyes on the **moral integrity** of the country

[the French] have taken up arms out of political ambition  
and the **incitement of demagogues**  
a French child at the age of 13 becomes the same **narrow-minded,**  
**fanatic boor** as his father and grandfather

Paris has happily **received** all kinds of nations  
Paris was a **hotbed** of anarchism brought from every part of the world and was  
the starting point for the revolutionary fractions who want to **reform the world**  
by the dagger, the **bomb**, forged money, the artificial intensification of squalor,  
and, ultimately, by suicide

Rural France **wallows in ignorance**  
and rages in **hatred of foreigners**

the physical **sterility** and mental **decadence** of the [French] race

**cold** English **calculations**  
**warfare** narcotized by pencil

the drunken mouzjik could be a huge mass of **raw material**  
In Russia, you can do nothing but **blindly obey** or simply die

HUNGARIANS | ENGLISH | GERMANS | FRENCH | RUSSIANS

1914

HÁBORÚ

1915

## THE AVANT-GARDE IN THE WAR DISCOURSE (1915–1916)

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[Futurism], which the Italian is now trying out with his idiosyncratic **childlike** enthusiasm, is already passé here.

The Futurist is the overaged **child**, longing for danger and violence like a child for the adventures of Robinson Crusoe

[A Tett] is an utterly valueless journal riding on **perversity** and immoderacy

[Kassák] abuses his **erotomania** to the point of **pornography**

This war has pulled everything apart and **shaken up form**, as is reflected in Kassák's poems

The **subversive rage** [of Kassák] search for new paths

[Kassák's verse] is **formless**, wild and raucous warbling

the Italian nation has **lost its common sense**

young and **temperamental** Italian painters

[the Italians] are a people who **get drunk quickly**, but soon sober up

[The Italian is] the most **treacherous** enemy

Nowhere in Europe are **public morals looser** than in Italy

[Kassák and company] regard the **degenerate and sick** Futurists as their ideal

[Kassák] has mainly propagated literary **lunacy**

Futurist painting is bizarre and largely **incomprehensible**

[Kassák's works] are the most unparalleled **drivel**

Marinetti screamed for the **'beauty' of fire, blood and destruction**

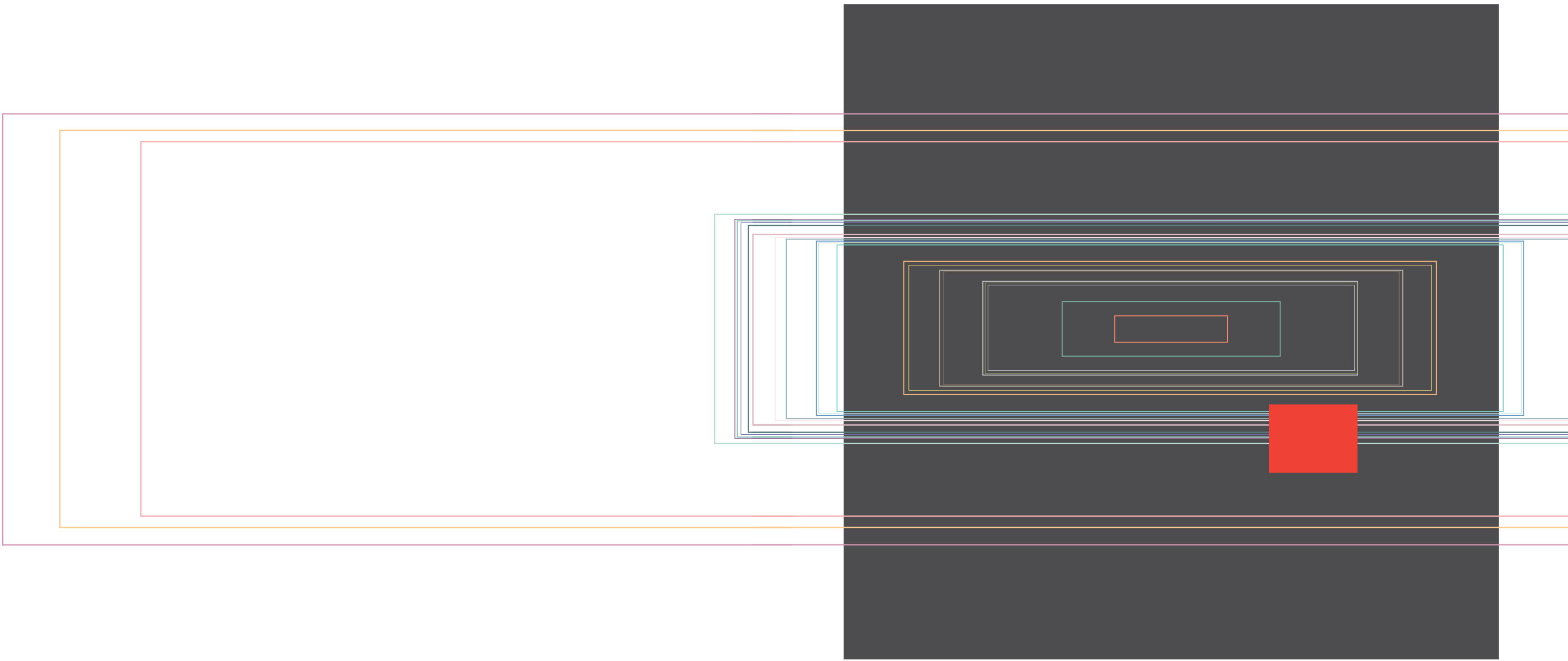
[Italy] is making a principle out of **destruction** of a beautiful past, like the Futurists

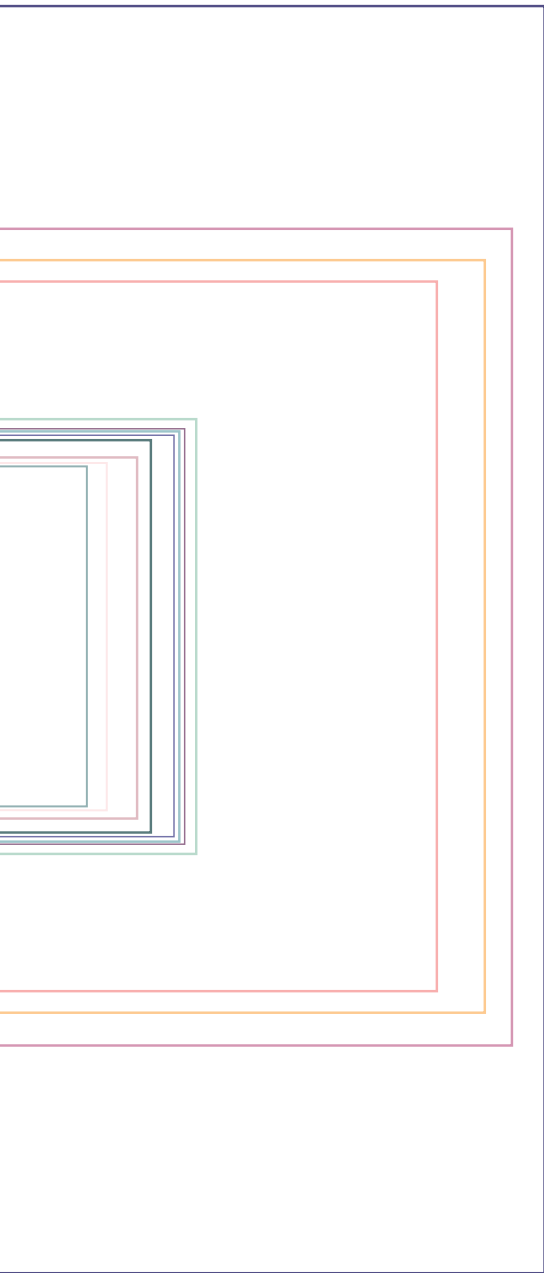
The movement that has **swept Italy into this war** is, in fact, essentially the Futurist movement

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KASSÁK ■ FUTURISTS ■ ITALIANS ■ HUNGARIAN FUTURISTS ■ THE FUTURIST STATE OF ITALY ■









► A Tett in the Context of the Popular Press

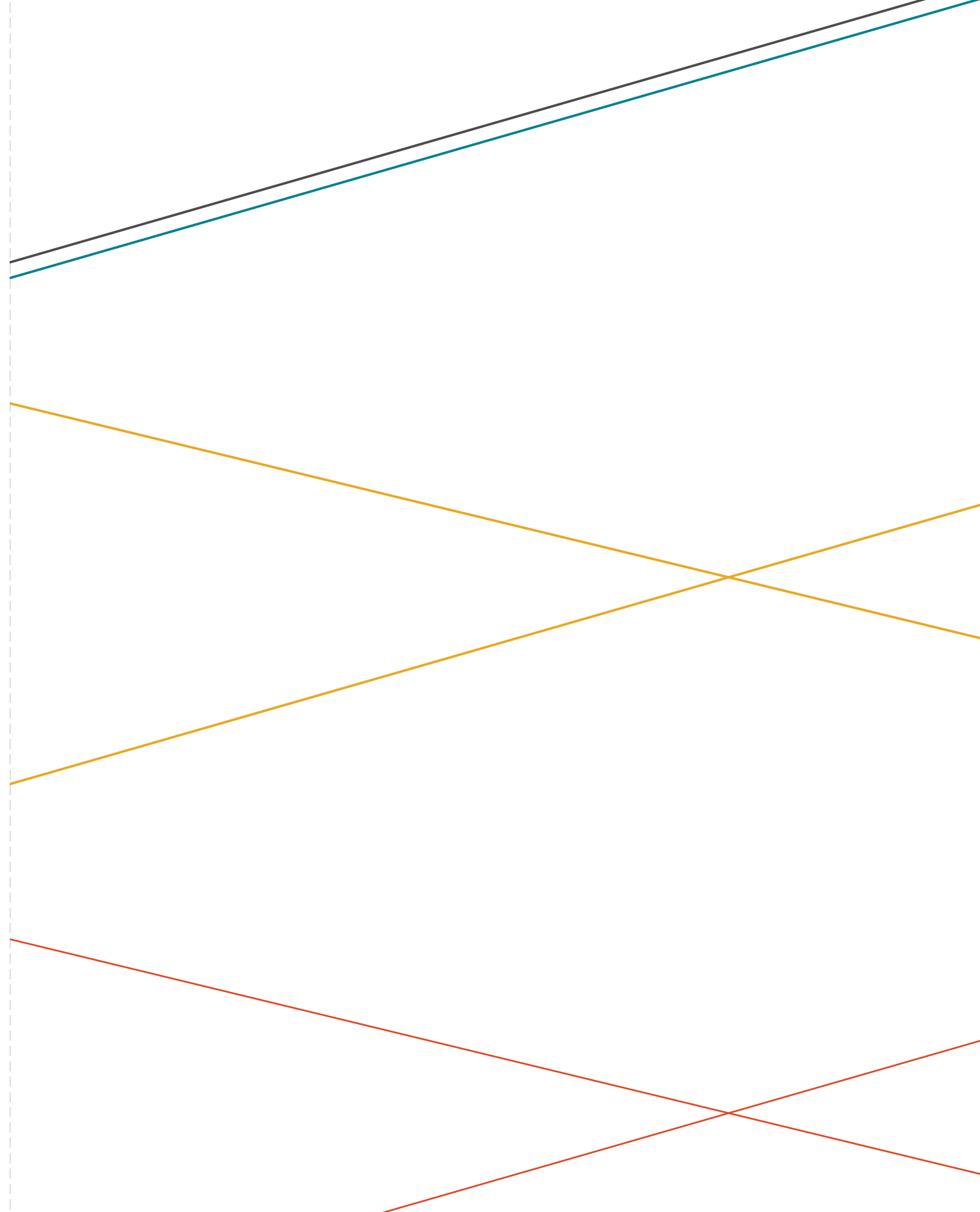
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The journal Ma and its circle appeared in Hungarian cultural life in the Budapest of the First World War and the Revolutions, between 1916 and 1919, as the real institutional embodiment of an imaginary movement. Lajos Kassák and his fellow-artists regarded themselves as the creators of a 'new culture' whose ideology they transmitted through more than just issuing manifestoes. They set out to create a new and multifaceted institution. Through a presentation of four themes, the exhibition explores the cultural and social ambitions of Kassák and his circle and the communication techniques by which they attempted to mark out their position in the Hungarian artistic scene in the early twentieth century.

**2.**

Imagining a Movement - MA in Budapest  
Petőfi Literary Museum-Kassák Museum, 2016  
[kassakmuzeum.hu](http://kassakmuzeum.hu)

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### Seeking precursors and creating a context

The Hungarian avant-garde is usually looked on as an attempt to break with the past. Kassák and his associates oratorically proclaimed the death of traditions, but they quite often also talked of movements that could be continued or at least revised. There were two reasons why the Ma circle displayed attachment to old and new artistic phenomena: firstly, by pointing to precursors that were important to them, they could legitimize their presence and their ambitions in the intellectual milieu of Hungary, and secondly, by marking out a certain cultural context, they could orient the public towards an appropriate interpretation of the art of Ma.

### The self-definition of the Ma group

The artists grouped around the magazine regarded themselves as members of a movement, and not merely as authors. This was a mentality that set Ma apart from other Hungarian journals and brought it much closer to the foreign



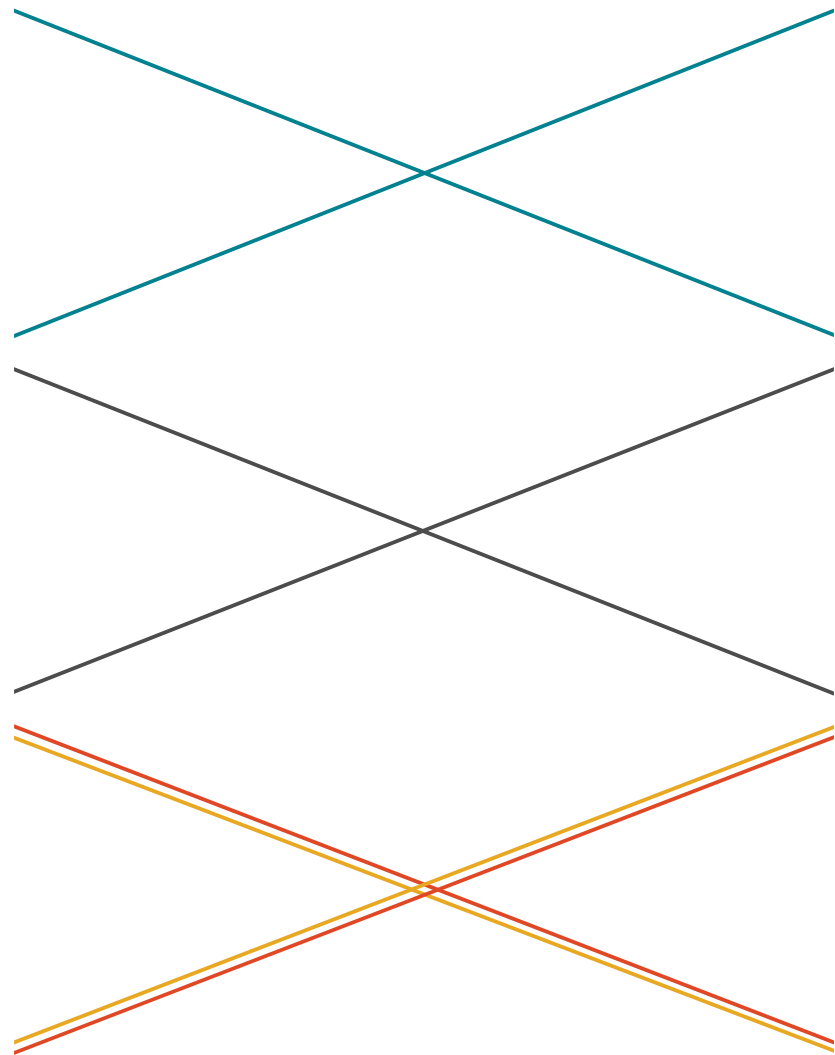
avant-garde magazines of the time. The ultimate message of presenting Ma as a movement was that the artistic conception and worldview of the magazine's contributors rendered them capable of changing the order of artistic life in Hungary and, in the long term, of having an influence on social issues.

### Ma as an institution

Emphasizing the group character of the Ma circle were statements, manifestoes and articles described as 'collective' and usually signed by every member of the 'movement'. The visuality of the magazine and its associated publications and posters also radiated this coherence. To evolve into a true institution gradually emerged as the true goal of Ma. Kassák launched a programme of communication that embraced a broad range of public channels available at time. He and his associates set up a publishing house, a gallery and a free school, and organized public performances. Another novelty in Kassák's vision was his wish to create an alternative system of institutions modelled on 'companies formed to make a profit' so that avant-garde artists could have their own independent forum.



The exhibition was curated by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi and designed by Klára Rudas. Research consultant: Márton Pacsika.

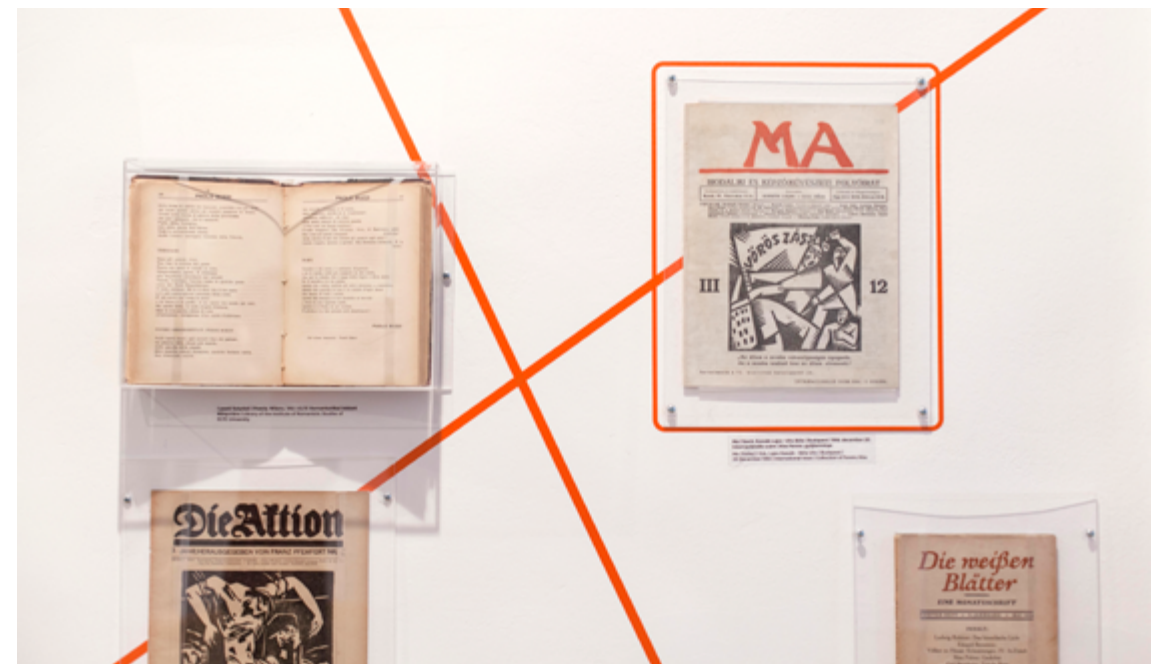


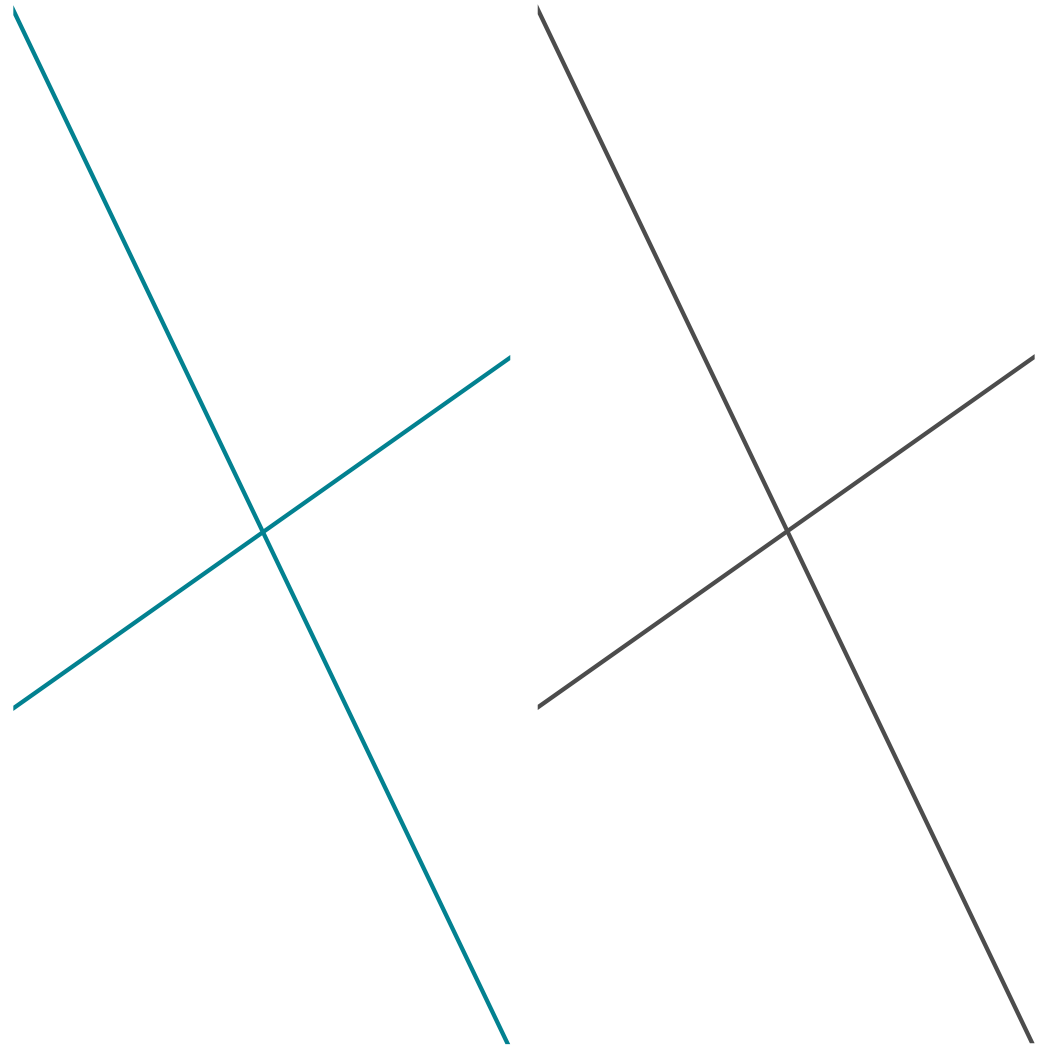
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### Politics and the avant-garde

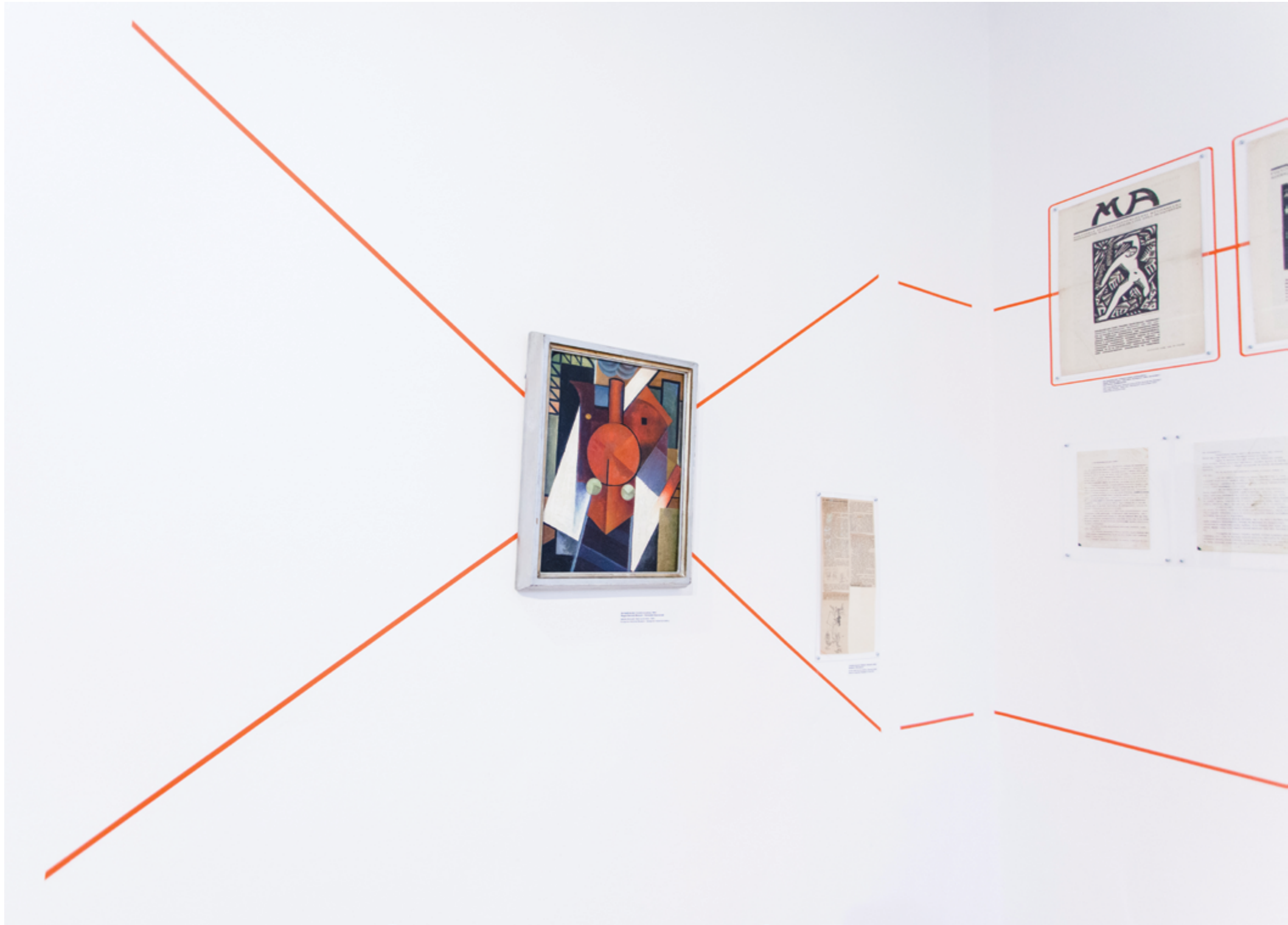
Ma initially appeared with the subtitle 'literary and artistic journal'. As it shifted towards politics and the avant-garde, the subtitle changed in 1918 to 'activist artistic and social journal'. The Kassák circle reacted vigorously to the revolutionary changes and interpreted them as political acts. In spring 1919, it defined its own activity as activism. The Ma circle had sharply divergent relations with the two successive revolutionary authorities of 1918 and 1919. The group was critical of the bourgeois democracy led by Mihály Károlyi almost from the start, but had a direct influence on the cultural policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, partly from official positions. For Kassák and his associates, it was evident that activists had to create the lyrical and visual idiom of the art of the 'new world' that would follow the proletarian revolution. This engendered confrontation with the communist leadership, who – like previous critics – attacked the avant-garde for its 'unintelligibility'. The exhibition follows the dispute chronologically and in all of its complexity.

- Seeking precursors and creating a context
  - The self-definition of the Ma group
  - Ma as an institution
  - Politics and the avant-garde
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► Politics and the avant-garde

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The exhibition focuses on the journal MA, published by Kassák in Vienna between 1920 and 1925. The exhibition explores the way Kassák integrated his work into international avant-garde networks, becoming one of the pioneers of new art.

The exhibition's central narrative is formed by the covers of MA's 33 Vienna issues, presented along a timeline that runs clockwise around the exhibition space. Some of the more paramount issues are supplemented by case studies featuring further documents. These shed light on the divergent aspirations and relations of Kassák's movement. We explore the story of Kassák, the MA journal, and the new art in the early 1920s from four different directions. The sections under **Art/Politics** examine the changing relationship between Kassák and the various political forces of the Left. The case studies under **Network-building** illustrate Kassák's connections to the international Avant-garde. In the section **Avant-garde Canon**, we explore the way Kassák tried to posit himself as one of the leading figures of the new art's international canon. The **New Art** section introduces the radical shifts that had an impact on the art of Kassák and MA in the early 1920s. In accordance with the avant-garde idea of the total work of art, also epitomized by MA, we show Kassák's literary and visual art works alongside each other. We also aim to demonstrate how the audience at the time, somewhat averse to modern art, reacted to the strange world of "senseless" poems and "objectless" paintings.

### 3.

New Art - The Vienna Edition of MA in the International Networks of Avant-Garde (Kassákism 1.)  
Petőfi Literary Museum, 2017  
kassakmuzeum.hu

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Concept: Merse Pál Szeredi, Curated by Edit Sasvári and Merse Pál Szeredi, Design by Klára Rudas

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### Network-building

MA in the international network of avant-garde journals

Besides expressionist and Dadaist journals, MA soon came into contact with further periodicals representing new artists and new "isms"; its network spanned from America through Europe all the way to Japan. Kassák needed this strong network for the international positioning of his journal, and he also advertised other kindred periodicals on MA's back cover. At the time, these journals were the most complex media outlets for avant-garde thinking and also the primary platforms for self-presentation. They played an important role in the formation of new networks in the chaotic economic situation that followed WWI. Through these journals, the transnational idea of the Avant-garde was able to cross geo-political and cultural borders, ignoring the hierarchies of centrum (the West) and periphery (Central and Eastern Europe)—at least this is what these publications suggested.

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### AZ AVANTGÁRD FOLYÓIRATOK NEMZETKÖZI HÁLÓZATA >>





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## New Art

The theory and practice of Picture Architecture

From 1920 onwards, developments in international avant-garde art inspired Kassák to begin his own visual art experiments. His goal was to create the visual equivalent of his numbered poems, and he found the language of geometric abstraction to be the most suitable for this task. The main inspirations for Kassák's early works were Schwitters' Dadaist experiments, Der Sturm's Abstract Expressionism, and the Russian avant-garde works that Umansky showed to the "MAists". Kassák defined his own visual art as Picture Architecture, because he was striving to "build" a new world on a flat surface. Picture Architecture, according to art critic Ernst Kállai, "is activist art reduced to its most condensed and most simple format: ACTION. It is creation, staking the infinite and amorphous space with the landmarks and triumphant projections of a community-to-come".



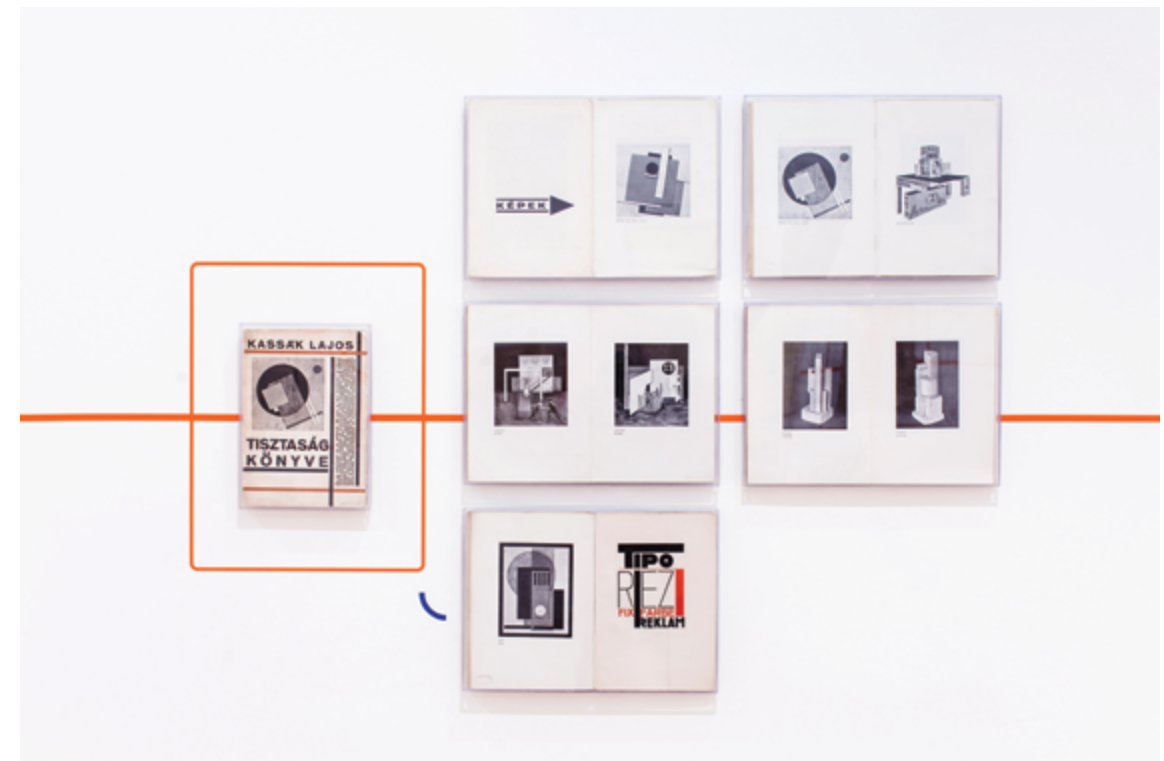
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## New Art

The Book of Purity: Kassák's résumé from 1926

Before his return to Hungary, Kassák spent a long time working on *Tisztaság könyve* [The Book of Purity], an anthology to introduce the "new Kassák" in Budapest. Published in the spring of 1926, it was the first book since the collapse of the Soviet Republic that, instead of reaching Budapest illegally, was granted official permission for circulation. The anthology comprised of Kassák's numbered poems (and their translations), short stories, manifestos, and other critical writings that he wrote during his emigration. Kassák's aim was to provide a representative cross-section of the constructivist program developed during his five years in emigration. As illustrations, he also included some of his visual art works, such as collages from various materials (wood, metal, paper), stage decorations, sculptures, and most importantly, two reproductions demonstrating the practical application of Picture Architecture: the advertisement kiosk and the poster design on the last page. After 1924, Kassák found that advertisement design and modern typography were the most innovative ways of applying the visual language of Constructivism: upon his return to Budapest, he started designing posters for numerous renowned Hungarian and international companies.

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Concept: Merse Pál Szeredi, Curated by Edit Sasvári and Merse Pál Szeredi, Design by Klára Rudas

The exhibition entitled *The New Kassák – The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away* explores the figure and origin story of “the new artist”. *A ló meghal és a madarak kiröpülnek* [The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away], Kassák’s most well-known and most often quoted autobiographical poem, takes center stage in the exhibition’s narrative. The poem was written in 1920-1921, when Kassák, inspired by international “isms”, reformed the language of his poetry. It tells the story of Kassák’s 1909 trip to Paris and the process of his transformation from a simple steel worker into a new poet. Beyond a lyrical account of Kassák’s personal development, the exhibition also sheds light on the unfortunate contradiction between the international acclaim for Kassák’s Dadaist poetic universe and the rejection it had to face in Hungary. The exhibition also reflects on the history of the poem’s canonization.

The exhibition approaches the poem from three different directions:

1. The first section explores the story told by the poem, Kassák’s journey through Western Europe in 1909. The microsite we developed provides an interactive adaptation of the poem, utilizing previously unpublished documents, photographs, and letters, Kassák’s lesser-known early works, and his autobiographical novel to reconstruct the process of becoming a poet and the stages of his vagabond life and personal development.

#### **4.**

*The New Kassák – The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away*  
(Kassákism 2.)  
Petőfi Literary Museum–Kassák Museum, 2017  
[kassakmuzeum.hu](http://kassakmuzeum.hu)

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A LÓ MEGHAL ÉS A MADARAK KIRÖPÜLNEK



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2. The second section focuses on the circumstances of the poem's genesis, exploring the text's avant-garde characteristics and Kassák's artistic revolution in 1920–1921 that resulted in the reformation of his poetic language. Besides the story of the poem's origin and its publication, we also discuss its precursors and analogies: emblematic poems of the era that most probably had an impact on Kassák.

3. The third section explores the way *The Horse Dies* and *the Birds Fly Away* became the widely popular, canonical work that we know today. The poem's history is far from straightforward: we follow its vicissitudes from the 1940s until today.



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Concept: Merse Pál Szeredi, Curated by Judit Galácz, Merse Pál Szeredi, Design by Klára Rudas

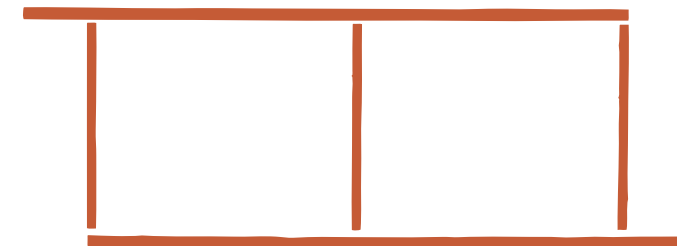
The exhibition presents the Kassák circle's lesser-known theatrical activities. From early on, theatre played an important role in Kassák's journals and the movement surrounding them. This exhibition introduces the Hungarian avant-garde's early theatrical experiments through four thematic blocks, starting from the Budapest period, followed by Jolán Simon's Dadaist shows in Vienna and their mechanic-constructivist experiments, culminating in an avant-garde theatre piece that triggered the most vehement reactions: a 1925 performance by Zöld Szamár Színház [Green Donkey Theatre] in Budapest.

Besides visual arts, early 20th-century avant-garde movements also devoted special attention to theatre and performing arts. From the very beginning, Lajos Kassák considered it important to discuss issues of theatre in his journals. In his theoretical writings, János Mácza explored the possibilities of theatre's revival; the MA circle established its own drama school, and organized performances and matinees in Budapest. During the Viennese emigration, MA also featured articles on theatre written by figures of the international Avant-garde, which enhanced the journal's international character. Kassák regularly organized performances in Vienna, presided over by Jolán Simon, who developed her own method for the recital of contemporary avant-garde poems. At the same time, the younger generation in Budapest also experimented with laying the groundwork for a new kind of performance art. The leading figures of these initiatives were Ödön Palasovszky and Iván Hevesy, who established the Zöld Szamár Színház (Green Donkey Theatre) in 1925 in order to provide a theatrical context for their experiments.

## 5.

New Drama, New Stage – Theatrical Experiments of the Hungarian Avant-Garde (Kassákism 3.)  
Gizi Bajor Actors' Museum, 2017  
kassakmuzeum.hu

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In 1924, Lajos Kassák published MA's international special issue on music and theatre, a collection of ideas, works, and artists that, akin to Kassák's own ideas, aimed to create a synthesized work of art on stage. The special issue was prompted by the International Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik [International Exhibition of New Theatre Technology], organized by director Friedrich Kiesler in the Vienna Konzerthaus that same year. In a way, Kassák intended to compete with the catalogue of this exhibition. The show played an important role in the history of early avant-garde theatre, as it was the first event in the region to bring together the most important theatrical works and technological experiments of avant-garde artists. Kiesler's Space Stage debuted here, F.T. Marinetti and Enrico Prampolini organized a futurist performance, there was a screening of the experimental film Mechanical Ballet, produced with the contribution of Fernand Léger, and stage designs and scenographies by Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Oskar Schlemmer, and George Grosz were also on display. This prestigious list of artists also proves that theatre was an important platform of the new art in the early 1920s. Besides MA, other avant-garde periodicals also released special issues on theatre, such as the Romanian *Contimporanul* and Prampolini's *NOI* in 1925, and the American *The Little Review* in 1926. The latter one was prompted by the second instalment of Kiesler's exhibition on new theatre technology in New York.

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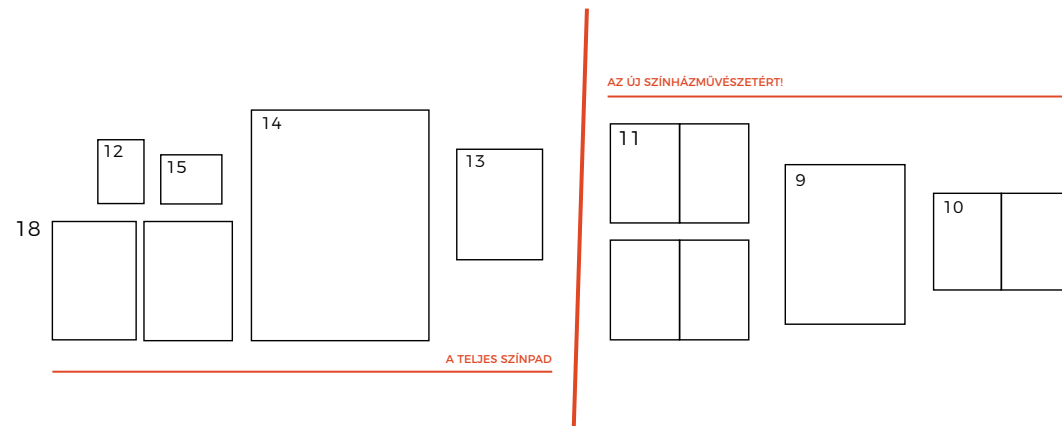
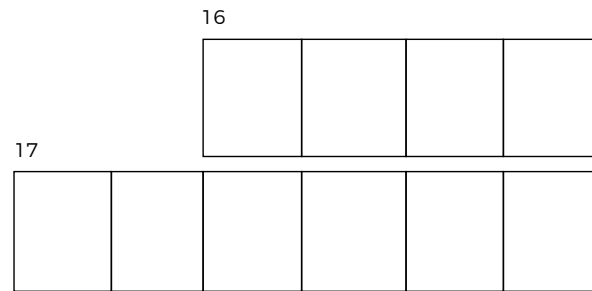


TOTAL STAGE

FOR NEW THEATRE ART



THE NEW STAGE »

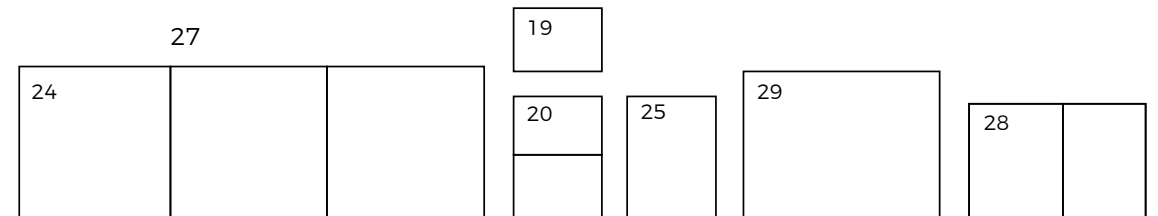


9.  
Lajos Kassák  
Stage design, 1926  
collage, carton  
Private collection (Galerie Le Minotaure,  
Paris)

10.  
Lajos Kassák: Stage designs  
Tisztaság könyve [The Book of Purity]  
Horizont, Budapest, 1926  
KM

11.  
Lajos Kassák: Az új színházművészetért  
[For new theatre art!]  
Tisztaság könyve [The Book of Purity]  
Horizont, Budapest, 1926  
Facsimile, KM

12.  
János Mácza  
Photography (c. 1930)  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences,  
Research Centre for Humanities [MTA  
BTK]



A MECHANIKUS SZÍNPAD

23.  
László Moholy-Nagy: A nagyváros  
dinamikája [Dynamic of the Metropolis]  
MA, vol 9 nos 8-9 (15 September 1924)  
KM

24. [tablet]  
László Moholy-Nagy  
Dynamik der Großstadt [Dynamic of the  
Metropolis], 1924  
Reconstruction by Walter Lenertz and  
Andreas Haus, 2010  
Movie, 8'

25.  
Alexander Tairov  
Das Entfesselte Theater [The unleashed  
Theatre]  
Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, Potsdam,  
1923  
Ferenc Kiss collection, Budapest

26.  
Pál Sánta: Az új dráma és új színpad [New  
drama and the new stage]  
MA, vol 8 nos 9-10 (1 July 1923)  
KM

27.  
Farkas Molnár: A mechanikus színpad  
[The mechanical stage]  
MA, vol 8 nos 9-10 (1 July 1923)  
PIM

28.  
O. Schlemmer – L. Moholy-Nagy – W.  
Molnár  
Die Bühne im Bauhaus [The stage at the  
Bauhaus]  
Albert Langen Verlag, Munich, 1925  
KM

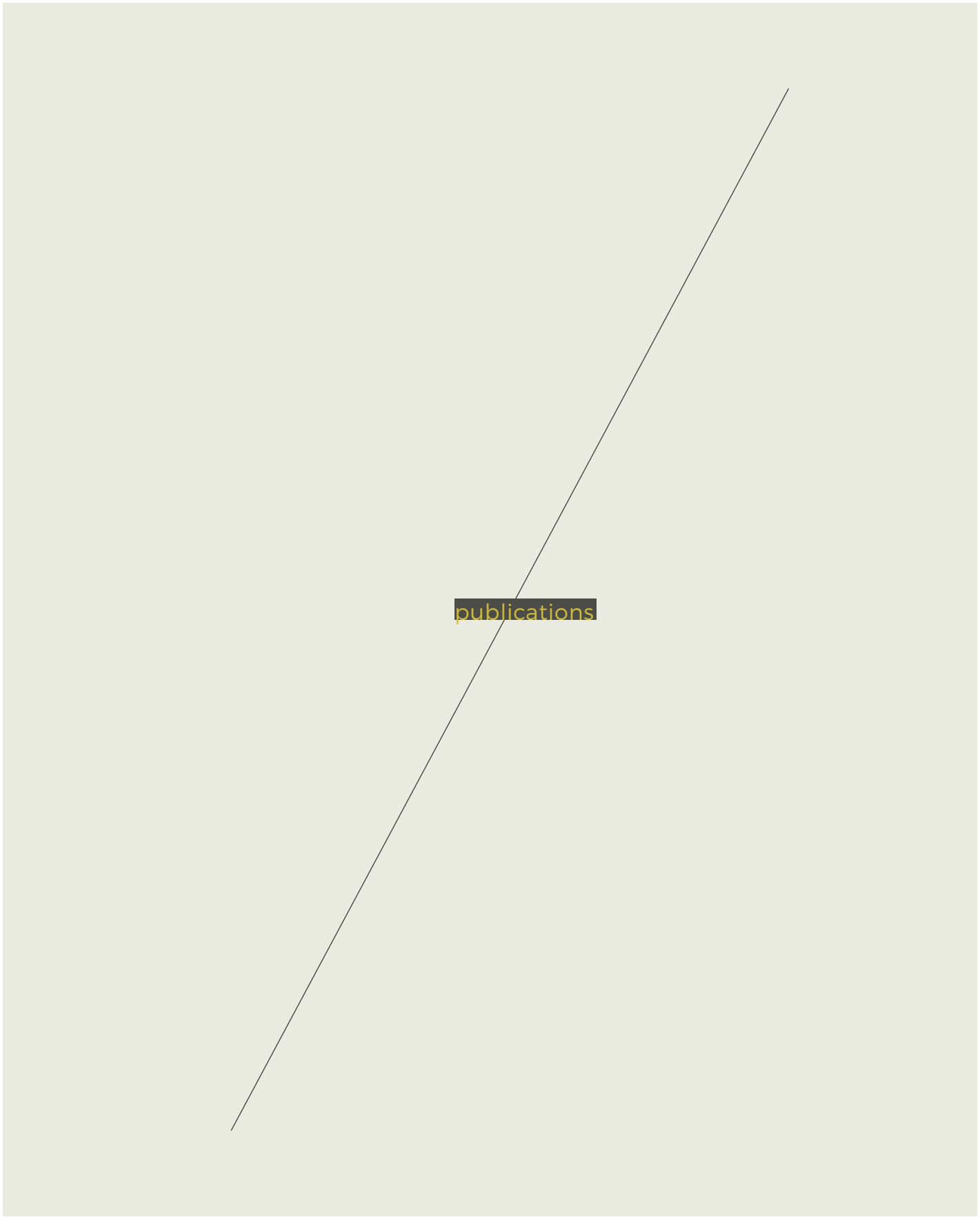
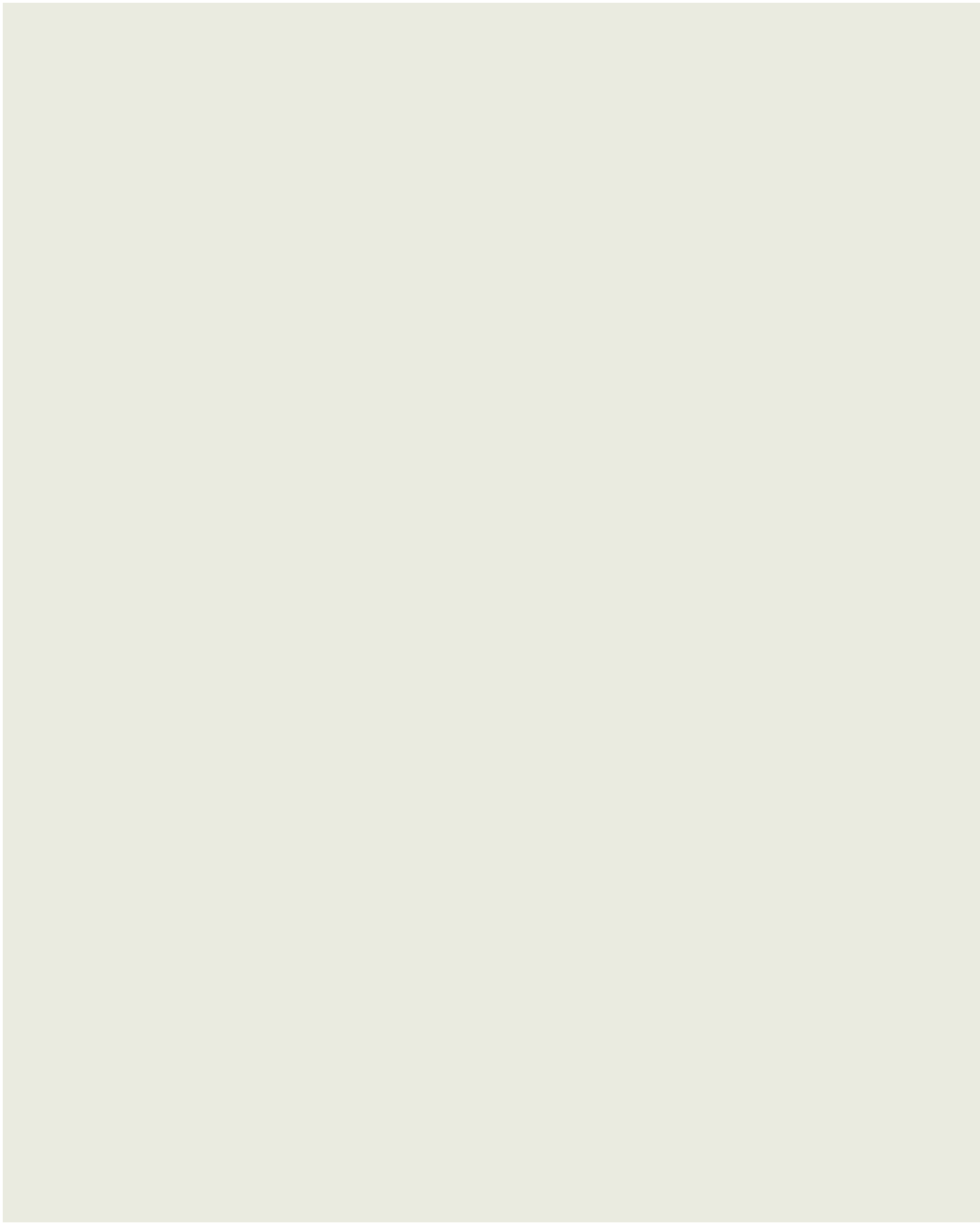
29. [tablet]  
Kurt Schmidt – Georg Teltcher  
Mechanical Ballet, 1923  
Reconstruction by Theater der Klänge,  
1987  
Choreography: J. U. Lensing  
Music: Hanno Spelsberg  
Video: Bauhaus Dessau, 2009  
15'

AZ ÚJ SZÍNPAD



A MECHANIKUS SZÍNPAD





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**“The Role of Abstraction in the Strategies of Exhibiting Avant-Garde Journals”.**

Klára Rudas, Merse Pál Szeredi, Gábor Dobó in: ‘Museums – Places of Authenticity?’. Conference Proceedings, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum/Leibniz-Forschungsinstitut, Mainz, 2018

**Signal to the World. War, Avant-Garde, Kassák**

(The Avant-Garde and Its Journals, vol. 1). Eds. Gábor Dobó, Merse Pál Szeredi, Kassák Foundation, Budapest, 2016.

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**Art in Action – Lajos Kassák’s Avant-Garde Journals from A Tett to Dokumentum (1915-1927)**

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