

Marcell Esterházy

“That the Unutterable should remain in public and everyman form”
(Dezső Tandori: Seymour, Buddy, Zoey)

An important commonality of Marcell Esterházy's exhibited works is that each work has a different medium. While *atelier_bp* is a photographic series, *Orthodromie* is a photograph-based lenticular work and *The circle is not round* is a picture that represents the scanned images of objects. Although at first sight these differences are not so great, nevertheless they are important ones: they indicate that Esterházy selects the mediums for his works. The intentional choice of medium serves generally to ensure that a given work is produced or brought to life in such a manner that the “aim” of the work is achieved to the fullest possible extent.

A particular reticence is another frequent attribute of Esterházy's works. His works are generally lacking in distractions; their mode of operation is characterised by an intense compression, which can make them difficult to understand. This enigmatic feeling, however, stands in sharp contrast with the mostly everyday and human-scale goals of the works: a picture of friends, understanding one's family heritage, surviving divorce. This contradiction is explained, on the one hand, by Esterházy's working methods, the essence of which is to rotate and condense the basic – albeit sometimes extremely diverse – material of the given problem and then to clarify and simplify its various aspects until a crystallisation point is reached, and until he has eliminated the chaos of his work table – which everyone can see in the series *atelier_bp*. One should note that this elimination does not relate to the cosmos of categorisation, but rather to breaking free from everything that is superfluous and that may represent material distraction. This radical elimination of potential distractions ensures that the result is not banal art even when the topics addressed are ordinary ones. Meanwhile, the everyday topics and the “everyman figure” ensure that the enigma – the (perhaps) unspeakable or at least inexplicable – does not make a captive of the work and render it incomprehensible. Ultimately, this is what renders productive the contrasting of enigma and the ordinary.

A third feature of the exhibited works (a feature common to other works by Esterházy) is that they touch upon the situation in which the artist – as a human and as an artist – finds himself and which he must address as a human and as an artist. Touching upon situations and giving feeling to sensitivities may describe what we see in Esterházy's works because, on account of their reticence and their compressed and crystallised nature, they record and transmit in an almost tactile and not only visually perceptible fashion the dilemmas and realisations that the artist has experienced in his work.

Perhaps it is in *Orthodromie* that we see the most intense experience of an awareness of the medium, density, a wrestling with the situation, ordinariness and the Unspeakable. This work makes use of a peculiar feature of lenticular – winking – pictures: they show the spectacle from different points of view. The usual method is to cut images of various spectacles into narrow strips, which are glued alongside each other at different angles and then integrated into a specific surface, which unites the image strips lying at the same angle into one picture. Depending on the angle at which we view a lenticular picture, we will see one of two (or more) pictures. In this work, Esterházy cut up two large pictures and glued the strips alongside each other: viewed from the left, the picture shows the artist's paternal grandfather,

the young Count Mátyás Esterházy (aged 16) with a sword and in Hungarian ceremonial dress; viewed from the right, the picture shows the same individual in a similar pose, but as an adult in exile. These pictures record two extremely different segments of the grandfather's life. They are life situations and differences that fundamentally affected his subsequent fate, influencing what he became: the professional translator and head of the family who cared for his own but, for a period of 25 years, reported on his friends as a secret informer. The most important consequence of Marcell Esterházy's merging of the two life situations by means of the lenticular technique is that viewers of the work – and thus of Mátyás Esterházy – see a figure of uncertain form whose real nature can barely be inferred. They see someone who cannot be defined or categorised as good or bad, guilty or innocent, upstanding or tainted. They see someone whose “shapelessness” is understandable in causal terms, but who is unfathomable in terms of the reality of the time.

The work *The circle is not round* is the result of a completely different compression. Whereas the artistic problem or dilemma of *Orthodromie* is how to transmit a complex family-historical realisation in the most direct and minimalist fashion by means of two family photographs, the task of *The circle...* is to render ten years of co-habitation into something concrete. But how can ten years of love and pain, of living together and of separation, be compressed into a single tableau? How can order be created of the ten years and how can one show this in a picture? What does the order of the picture say of the meaning of these years? Where, indeed, should one search for meaning: In our faces? In the children? In the dwelling places? But these are formed by so many other things: there is no single event or tragic offence that would serve as a basis to construct the complexity of the life lived and the incomprehensible announcement of its end. Esterházy's solution is the following: he selected objects from the ten years of co-habitation for his tableau. These are not memories, but material objects: although, of course, the objects remind him of places, moments, movements, gestures and feelings. We too can relate to these objects, since all of them – keys on a ring, a pack of cards, milk teeth of the children, a whistle, a plastic giraffe, pliers – could even be our own. These objects are like family photographs: almost everyone has them and they are often similar. These scanned objects do, indeed, manifest elements that are shared with family photographs; in their haphazardness, they portray universal things (or, at least, things that can be universally understood). Their arrangement in a circle indicates the conclusive nature of the story, to which the title adds a commentary: the circle is not round (or complete). It is not round or complete because we do not remember what happened yesterday or last year by looking at family photos; indeed, we do not remember at all, because all of this is not a family picture. The objects are what remain of the family (photos), their common elements, recorded by means of the most impersonal and almost industrial technique. Esterházy's choice of medium is ruthless: by scanning the objects, he leaves no chance of the ennoblement of these everyday objections, or of their transformation into embellished memories. He arranges the banal and harmless objects rather awkwardly in his picture, creating a “showdown” with the past that facilitates a new beginning.

The third exhibited work, *atelier_bp*, differs in many respects from the previous two: it is relatively verbose, as it is a series of several dozen pictures and the medium is classical photography. Moreover, there is an absence of the personal affectedness that pervades the works dealing with the family. Still, these differences are smaller than we may think at first.

Firstly, *atelier_bp* also touches upon the situation, as does *Orthodromie*, but whereas the latter concerns what it meant to be an Esterházy in the 1940s and 1950s – or, indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s – the material for *atelier_bp* is taken from the contemporary art scene.

Second, whereas the medium of the pictures is self-evident, this cannot be said of their genre. Although the photographs appear to be pictures of studio interiors, they might equally be regarded as portraits, for each of the pictures/studios is tied by a thousand threads to its owner, whose recent departure can almost be felt. With a cool dispassion, the pictures together manifest the artistic scene of the younger and middle generations in Budapest, doing so with a scrutiny that would befit a sociological work. Even so, in almost all the photographs there is at least one motif – *punctum*, as Roland Barthes would say – that provides an exit from the passionless state: two “Unicum” labels, a small pink lamp among the grey computer objects, or an electronic guitar. Such details break up the *stadium*, rendering the photographs of what are personal spaces more random and thus more authentic and, ultimately, more personal. Of course, the series is indeed of sociological interest, for it clearly reveals the artistic practices that have been transformed in recent decades and what now is needed in a studio (invariably, a computer). It also says something about whether a studio is even necessary. We may even ask what, apart from the painters, is the difference between a study-room – or, indeed, an *office* – and a studio? And what, for that matter, does this difference/resemblance tell us of artistic practice – in this instance, of Esterházy’s own work? Clearly, artistic practice as medium and as the object of the works is linked in this particular series.

And thirdly, even though the series is more verbose than the other two in view of its very nature, there is still no room for distractions. By compressing the “portraits” of his friends and acquaintances into a series of studio photographs, Esterházy once again achieves a concentration. And it is this compression that allows us to view the work from a sociological standpoint (where is art produced?), from an art philosophical standpoint (what is this art that is being produced here in this manner?), from a personal standpoint (who are Esterházy’s artist friends?), from an institutional standpoint (who belong in the circle that can be presented in such a series?), and, of course, from an artistic standpoint (how can a picture be taken of a person without him or her being present?)

Awareness of medium, a touching upon place/situation/identity, and compression: these were the qualities and attributes that I identified in the introduction as the common elements of Marcell Esterházy’s exhibited works. I would like to add a fourth motif, which – similarly to the above – does not only link the works in question, but is also a further essential characteristic of Esterházy’s art. I am thinking of the generosity and playfulness – ultimately, the poeticism – with which Esterházy treats the material of his art. It is this poeticism that prevents what is ordinary from becoming banal or from remaining an unutterable enigma. It is also this poeticism that enables one of the brightest artists of contemporary Hungarian art to produce works of perceptible concentration.

Attila Horányi