

GYULA MUSKOVICS

THE DREAMWORLD OF TAMÁS KIRÁLY





Previous page: *Boy's Dreams*, fashion show
in the Petőfi Hall, 1986, Budapest
Photo: courtesy of Iliász Dávid Király

◀ Scene from *Király Dreams*, 1989,
Petőfi Hall, Budapest
Photo: courtesy of Iliász Dávid Király

In a social reality where the conditions for an “undisturbed” art practice include political neutrality and respect for the compromises dictated by the state, any kind of deviation from the norm is of special significance. Tamás Király’s imaginary world, with its absurd fashion creations, had a shocking effect even beyond the stage and the catwalk. His spontaneous performances occasionally popped up like vivid bursts of color in the grey streets of 1980s Budapest. His fantastic visions conjured up a world beyond the limits of the era’s fashion and, from time to time, used this same energy to break down the confines imposed by the last decade of the socialist regime. Almost anyone in the right place at the right time had the chance to take a glimpse into Király’s dream world populated by extraordinary characters, costumes, and sceneries. What went through the minds of people crossing the Elisabeth Bridge on a day in 1984, when they saw huge bubbles cascading down from Gellért Hill, after Király poured soap into the waterfall to celebrate his friend’s birthday? What impression did it make upon shoppers in Budapest’s downtown boutiques when Király’s models turned up in cocktail dresses made out of bin bags and badges cut out of mirrors? He had a way of unnoticeably turning everyday life and the city’s boring streets into evanescent scenes of pleasure, love, and play. Király’s world thus remained completely enigmatic to those who tried to look for reason in these experiences, which were meant to be felt and lived through.

The intangibility of fashion and the variety of genres employed by Király’s staged visions of avant-garde constructions made it difficult to categorize his works and provided a way out of the cultural desert of day-to-day life controlled by politics and the authorities. Indeed, a performance or a fashion show, especially in public space, was not something that could simply be banned or shut down like an exhibition. Moreover, the design of Király’s garments proved to be an abstract, unknown form of expression in the eye of the era’s cultural politics. There were, however, several paths of censorship one had to walk along if they were to publicly show their works, even though it was a proudly stated principle that there was no censorship



◀ Variable dress, 1980s
Photo: courtesy of Iliász Dávid Király

▶ Scene from the backstage
of a fashion show, 1987
Photo: Jonathan Csaba Almási

in Hungary. One of the conditions was to obtain membership of the Hungarian Fine Arts Fund, without which an artist was considered an amateur, could not participate in official events, and was not eligible for financial support either.² Király used a letter of rejection received from the Fund as the background to the poster of his 1987 show titled *Animal's Dreams*. The letter clearly reveals that Király's works did not fulfill any of the criteria for admittance, but, considering that lack of membership had in no way inhibited his activities before, the author of the letter wishes the best for Király's further career. Another factor that determined the work of Király and other underground artists who fell into the "tolerated" category³ was a scarcity in materials and the limitedness of available resources. This was an obstacle caused by the socialist economy on the one hand, but an inspiration for the artists to explore new forms and solutions on the other.

An earring made from a pheasant's leg, a vest made out of tarpaper: these were some of the items on sale at the New Art Studio, also known as "the punk boutique" in Petőfi Sándor Street, where Király and his two friends sold various special treasures and rarities in the 1980s.⁴ A "DIY attitude", i.e., using materials for something other than their intended purpose in order to create special forms, remained a recurring feature of

his collections. His shows featured paper, glass, nylon, bank notes, golden cables, and plastic discs re-fashioned with nail scissors, sometimes attached with double-sided or electrical tape, their glitter visible from afar. On the stage, unusual models he picked up in clubs or on the streets – plump ladies, girls with strange noses, feminine men, body-builders – paraded Király's large-scale, otherwise completely unusable fashion creations he assembled from geometric shapes and sometimes braced with sheets cut out from suitcases. Király's early works are a strange blend of "creative substitution",⁵ departures from tradition – that is, the reduction of known forms to basic elements and their subsequent reassembly –, and a desire to confront social norms as well as the categories of "useful" and "useless". It is not only his forms and methods that set him apart from the norm, but also the unusual stories unfolding during his shows.

GONG – THEN JE T'AIME – FROG-CROAKS, SPLASHING – SLUSH, SQUELCH – LIGHT ON THE RUNWAY
4 body-builders from the audience bring a huge, wet frog to the front of the runway /+SPOTLIGHT/
The beautiful princess appears on stage in a bridal dress. She runs up to the frog. Starts kissing it. She caresses it, she is very gentle. Her hug becomes more and more sexual.





◀ Model from the *Boy's Dreams* fashion show, 1986, Petőfi Hall, Budapest
Photo: courtesy of Iliász Dávid Király

▼ Tamás Király in El Kazovsky's series of performances titled *Dzhan Panopticon*, 1983, Young Artists' Club, Budapest
Photo: courtesy of the El Kazovsky Foundation

*SLOWLY, A PORN EFFECT COMES INTO THE MUSIC Love scene. The princess fondles the frog with passion. The prince enters the stage on a white horse. He gallops to the front of the runway. He observes the mating. He dismounts from the horse and touches the princess. She doesn't even pay attention to him; keeps cuddling the frog. The prince jumps back on his white horse and gallops away, across the stage. Suddenly, he appears again, this time without a horse. He hurries to the princess, takes her in his arms, and runs away with her. With her arms still open, the princess is screaming for the frog. The body-builders take the frog out across the stage.*⁶

Animal's Dreams, which is also the source of the quote above, was an episode in a series of shows organized in Budapest's Petőfi Hall, in which Király introduced his dream world to the public. He realized four large-scale fashion shows in front of thousands of people between 1985, the Hall's grandiose opening, and 1989. *Animal's Dreams* of 1987 was the third event after *Baby's Dreams* (1985) and *Boy's Dreams* (1986), while the series' final installment was entitled *Király Dreams* (1989). The shows, co-directed by writer and director Marianna Padi, who lived in Amsterdam at the time, featured up to a hundred garments each, with musical accompaniment by Hungarian new wave bands. These genre-defying, cross-disciplinary and multimedia events brought Király's grandiose visions to life and presented them to the alternative youth of the time who were desperate for something new. The performances, populated with witches, sphinxes, mythological animals, transvestite vampires, court jesters, and fallen angels, employed surreal sound and light effects to showcase Király's fashion sculptures made out of metal, plaster, hair, and plastic bags. These served as scenic backgrounds to his characteristically geometric spatial dresses and collections combining black, white, and red colors, assembled from arches and acute angles creating a sense of disharmony.

In Király's work, exaggeration, visual hyperbole, and passionate, radical imagination are meant to relay a vision rather than voice a concrete claim. Sensual experience is given a more prominent role than the concept itself – this is the case even in performances like the one where Király and his models walked the streets of Budapest in 1989 with a hat that resembled the Parliament's dome with a red star on top, posing for photos in various locations (e.g. in front of the Parliament and the first McDonald's in Régi posta Street). The distinguished role of experiencing the moment while subverting political symbols becomes even more obvious in the photographs of a group of young people, wearing Király's crazy fashion creations, chasing each other amongst socialist realist statues. In Király's fantasy

world, serious things regularly become the subject of parody and rules turn into something to be subverted, while everything that is normally deemed beautiful, aesthetic, and fairy tale-like transmutes into a perverted nightmare. His ironic gestures, however, only transmit this new, visionary way of seeing to people who are themselves capable of an aesthetic perception of the world. They are the ones who are ready to receive whatever Király offers them as a gift, and who would not be taken aback if black musicians served them black food and drinks lit by black light in Király's boutique – that is, if he had one.⁷ As Susan Sontag explains in her essay on camp sensibility, it would be a waste to scrutinize such an exceptional vision: "To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble"⁸. In our case, it is much more interesting to examine the categories that are dissolved in Király's dreamlike empire.

The prioritization of visual and formal solutions over function subverts the century-long history of fashion design, which had primarily strived to control the human body through various, invisible means. In other words, the function of dress was to present the gender and social class of its wearer as though it was something naturally given. The most obvious way of critiquing this phenomenon is to emphasize the relativity



and artificiality of attire. This primarily postmodern standpoint has been an important element in the work of many fashion designers from the late '70s onwards, including Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood, who began their career roughly at the same time as Tamás Király. Punk style, which was then becoming increasingly widespread, also aimed at confusing the normative categories of appearance and social status through jumbling cultural references, using unusual materials, and presenting an androgynous look. It is therefore not a coincidence that Westwood was inspired by street style,⁹ or that there were several overlaps between the world of subcultures, clubs, and the runways of Gaultier, who put amateur models and strange characters in the limelight, much like Király did. Beyond the irregular designs that communicate asymmetry, excess, and fragmentation, highlighting the constructed nature of fashion, Király also employs a number of theatrical effects to emphasize his idea. A good example is the scene in *Király Dreams* where a fleet of toy airplanes spray paint all over the white dress of a model standing on the catwalk – a scene reminiscent of Alexander McQueen's famous performance, *Spray Painted Dress*¹⁰ from a decade later, in which two industrial robots cover a ballerina's dress in yellow and black paint. A similar point is made by a female character in *Boy's Dreams*, who wears an evening gown made out of plaster, and then suddenly sheds the form molded on her. Or think of Király's 1986 show in New York's East Village, where he arrived with four variable costumes, presented as thirty-two different garments in eight rounds, constantly changing shape on stage.

Király's shows deconstruct gender stereotypes in a variety of ways. On the one hand, they employ non-conventional models whose look contradicts society's image of the ideal man or woman. In another scene of *Animal's Dreams*, for example, boys with curly hair appear on stage; one of them, a peroxide blonde with a piercing and an androgynous body, holds a lamb in his arms. Another man goes up to him, touching the lamb first, but then the scene – fortunately for us – takes a different turn then the one with the princess and the frog: it is the two men who start fondling each other, eventually dancing a little dance around the lamb and kissing.¹¹ This is a powerful moment, partly because beside women, now also men appear on the catwalk as figures to be embellished, transformed, beautified, or feminized – the revolutionary significance of which is also pointed out by commentaries on Gaudier's early fashion shows from the same era.¹² It is also important to emphasize that in socialist Hungary, homosexuality was definitely a taboo on both a political and a social level, although it was officially not persecuted from 1961 onwards. The fact that such performances were not penalized by the authorities is a sign of the gradual softening of a regime that was about to come to its end. A lack of sensitivity towards gender issues could be another reason why such subversive and progressive visions did not trigger any professional discourse in Hungary for a long time. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the underground scene formed a counter-culture that mirrored hierarchies present in the wider society,¹³ including heteronormative assumptions about gender. This is also emphasized in an interview by the Russian-Hungarian poet, performer, painter, and set designer, El Kazovsky,

whose art, which often analyzed his transsexual gender identity, is difficult to place within the largely male-dominated context of the Hungarian underground.¹⁴ As Király was also a unique phenomenon in the history of Hungarian fashion, it might be worth comparing certain aspects of the two oeuvres, especially the stage performances. A distinguished moment of El Kazovsky's life was an encounter in 1975,¹⁵ which he commemorated almost every year between 1977 and 2001 by staging his performance series *Dzhan Panopticon*. The performances re-enacted Ovid's story of Pygmalion and Galathea, with only the set design changing over the years. The artist, who identified himself as a homosexual man born into a woman's body, took on the role of Pygmalion, and attempted over and over to animate on stage the perfectly feminine male body. It was often friends who featured in the performances, including Tamás Király on a few occasions.¹⁶ Although their paths did not cross at the most significant points, they did cooperate in the creation of set designs for stage,¹⁷ and Kazovsky was a regular participant of Király's fashion walks on Váci Street in downtown Budapest. Apart from the regular use of red and black, the mixing of acute angles with loose materials, and a love for eclecticism, a shared feature of their oeuvres was the aspiration to relativize social categories, gender divides, ideas of "right" and "wrong", and "public" and "private", while allowing the viewer to take a glimpse into their own, private universes.

*A big, beautiful woman screams from the top of a toilet: I want a man, a man!*¹⁸

In the quoted scene of *Király Dreams* and in many other shows, man is objectified and turned into a toy by a woman, who practically chokes him with her strong and raucous character, as if she was clutching him with her claws. The deconstruction of gender stereotypes reaches a new level when roles are reversed within the culturally fixed power relations between man and woman. In a figurative sense, a similar motif appears in Király's collection shown in 1988 at the *Dressater* in Berlin. His refined garment sculptures, assembled from geometric shapes and covered in black velvet, were presented on a suspended steel catwalk in Hamburger Bahnhof, amongst collections by seven other outstanding avant-garde designers.¹⁹ The show climaxes in the scene where a stern-looking woman descends the stairs sideways in a black spherical dress, which, when viewed from the front, is split in half by a red cavity: the hole seems to suck in and engulf the expectant, voyeuristic gaze of the audience. Király's Berlin collection is also remarkable because it goes beyond the issue of fashion's constructed nature: the abstract spatial forms expand the limits of the female body, making it malleable, and liberating it from the confines of social expectations. The need to transform the body and endow it with new skills has been present as a lifelong mission in Király's work. A few months after the Berlin show, already in the year of the regime change, he explained in an interview the new possibilities he saw in this field:

"I try to follow society's mood swings with my garments. People's lives are increasingly harder in this country, and I am trying to incorporate my visions about this into the garments.

A surge in violence, for example, is to be expected, therefore I create hats out of hardy materials, I line coats with a thick layer of foam, I make vests out of metal: in other words, I am presenting a line of defensive clothing."²⁰

The whole decade preceding this statement appears to be a constant preparation for the failure and eventual collapse of an unimaginative system with a "one-size-fits-all" logic that provided no space for everyday creativity. With his cross-disciplinary fashion shows and performances, Király, as a herald of change, brought some color to daily life in Budapest. Although his fantastical vision was in many ways related to that of his Western contemporaries, the limits imposed by the socialist system, within which Király's dream world came to life, also contributed to the subversive nature of the alternative reality he created. His work was unique within the region, but there are interesting parallels with Moscow's "alternative fashion", which was shaped by similar social and political forces during the Perestroika years. Here, a group of innovative designers reinterpreted Soviet symbols they rummaged at flea markets, a gesture that was to inspire the fashion style of various subcultures.²¹ Garri Assa's playful fashion performances, or his "dead-spy outfit" that reinterpreted men's clothes sold by widows of Soviet spies at markets, also speak of an increasingly strong desire to escape the constraints imposed by the system.²² In his *War* collection, mixing cosmic style with Soviet military wear, Gosha Ostretsov practically banishes communism to another planet.²³ Katya Filippova's punk outfits, based on fashion from the czar era and featuring several red stars and Lenin portraits, also present a blend of irony and joy felt over the obsolescence of political symbols. In a boring world, having fun and entertaining others has a demonstrative character, and it brings a touch of novelty into a stuffy gray world that is desperate for change. Smuggling love and tenderness into the forlorn corners of a society ravaged by dictatorship is not naive sentimentality, but a political act. There is nothing that can remain neutral in an oppressive system; every gesture is interpreted as either support for, or criticism of the regime.²⁴ Tamás Király's sensual, overflowing, and carefree world is decidedly revolutionary in the sense that instead of encouraging people to take part in everyday activities, it teaches them how to dream.

1_Király and his friend, the painter Péter Hecker, prepared this surprise for the 40th birthday of their friend Gizella Koppány, a costume designer. As stated by Koppány in an interview conducted by Gyula Muskovics on 2 August 2017 in Budapest.

2_József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek. A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Alternative Registers. Cultural resistance in the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde) (Budapest: Typotex, 2006), 80.

3_In Kádár era Hungary (1956–1988), a work of art, a book, or any other cultural project was either supported, tolerated, or prohibited by the official cultural policy. The majority of underground artists in the 1980s fell into the "tolerated" category.

4_New Art Studio, located at downtown Budapest, was opened by Gizella Koppány, after she graduated as a costume designer in 1980.

It was run by her, Tamás Király, and Nóra Kováts until 1988, when Koppány moved to West Germany. See in the volume: 38-45.

5_The expression refers to techniques aimed at compensating or circumventing the scarcity that characterized the social and economic situation of the time. Cf. Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 24.

6_Tamás Király and Marianna E. Padi, "Animal's Dreams—Image 5", Budapest, 1989, manuscript, the estate of Tamás Király.

7_A large music venue in Budapest.

8_Anikó Návai, "Király rebellis," *MAX*, no. 1 (1997): 82.

9_Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'", in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin, 1983), 106.

10_SEX boutique, run by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren between 1974 and 1976 in London, was a major source of inspiration for the punk movement's fashion style. One of their shop assistants was Sid Vicious. The boutique changed name several times and is currently operating under the name of *Worlds End* at 430 Kings Road as Vivienne Westwood's shop. Király and his friends' New Art Studio was a similar meeting point for the underground scene in Budapest, serving the fashion needs of new wave bands and the city's progressive youth.

11_No. 13, spring/summer collection 1999. Shown 27 September 1998 at the Gatliff road Warehouse in London. Gatliff Road Warehouse, London.

12_Király and Padi, *Animal's Dreams—Image 5*.

13_Barbara Vinken, *Fashion Zeitgeist. Trends and Cycles in the Fashion System* (Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 120.

14_Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 40.

15_"I grew up with a stylized male consciousness dating from the last century", Melinda Kalmár's interview with El Kazovsky, in *Látáscsapda. Beszélgetések El Kazovszkijjal*, edited by Katalin Cserjés & Gabriella Uhl (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2012), 55.

16_Kazovsky first met János Can Togay, who was seven years her junior, at a theatre performance organized at Péter Halász's apartment. Kazovsky claimed that for him, this meeting embodied the perfect love.

17_1983, Fialat Művészek Klubja (Young Artists' Club), Budapest; 1984, Kossuth Klub, Budapest

18_The *Marriage of Figaro*, directed by János Szikora, 1984, Szigligeti Theater, Szolnok; *'Tis a Pity She Is a Whore*, directed by Gábor Zsámbéki), 1984, Katona József Theater, Budapest.

19_Tamás Király and Marianna E. Padi, "Animal's Dreams—Image 3", Budapest, 1989, manuscript, the estate of Tamás Király.

20_The *Dressater—Dressed To Thrill*, 1988, Berlin, Hamburger Bahnhof. Participants: Tom Adams, Marc Audibet, Rudi Gernreich, Yoshiki Hishinuma, Francis Montesinos, Claudia Skoda, Vivienne Westwood.

21_Katalin Bogyay, "Divatellenes divattervező" (Fashion Designer against Fashion), *Új Tükör*, 27 January 1989.

22_Misha Buster and Irina Meglinskaya curated an exhibition on the emergence and history of "alternative fashion" at the Garage Cultural Center in Moscow: *Alternative Fashion Before Glossies, 1985–1995*.

23_Misha Buster and Elena Fedotova, *Alternative Fashion Before the Glossies 1985–1995*, exh. cat. (Moscow: Garage Center for Contemporary Culture), 23.

24_Ibid., 26. Reference to Ferenc Fehér, Ágnes Heller, and György Márkus' book, *Diktatúra a szükségek felett* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1991), 298. Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 39.