

THE ART OF VISUAL POETRY IN CENTRAL EUROPE: KASSÁK & SCHWITTERS BETWEEN DADA AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

MARIAN MAZZONE

Ohio State University, Columbus, OH,
U.S.A.

European Dada of the first quarter of the twentieth century has traditionally been a difficult an unwilling participant in art historians' attempts to fix and stabilize a coherent history of avant-garde art. This is not surprising given the Dadaist modus operandi of disruption of, attack on, or even refusal to be included in what was perceived to be a corrupt bourgeois social order. Nevertheless, order has prevailed, and art historians of subsequent decades have struggled with the task of determining a coherent stylistic category for Dada, and incorporating Dada into a progress-based history of art. The results of this process have been neither entirely neat nor satisfactory. European Dada history has generally been divided into two trends. One grouping is the Dada that began in Zurich among artists such as Tristan Tzara and Jean Arp, moved to Paris, and culminated with the passing of such values as chance and the attack on logic to Surrealism via primarily Andre Breton. The other major camp is German Dada centered in Berlin, which most agree had a more political character than the Zurich-Paris group, but untidily does not mesh easily, if at all, with Surrealism. To establish a connection with Surrealism it is necessary to include Max Ernst's activity in Cologne. This version of Dada history has produced at least two unintended results that are of concern here. The first is that in the process of establishing a lineage between Dada and Surrealism, one effect has been the decidedly less attention given to a number of artists' engagement with the theories and activities of both Dada and International Constructivism, at times simultaneously.¹ The second factor, a more general observation, is that the art historical models so far established for dealing with Dadaism do not provide a way to account for the activities and concerns of many artists working in Central and Eastern Europe. In a history centered on Zurich, Paris, and Berlin what is missed is the quite interesting, dynamic and fluctuating engagement with Dadaism and International Constructivism that regularly took place outside the mainstream groups on the periphery in Central and Eastern Europe. This essay will discuss some aspects of the complex theoretical and artistic practices occurring in this other part of Europe through an investigation of two artists working in this milieu: the German Merz

artist Kurt Schwitters centered in Hannover, and the Hungarian avant-garde's primary representative and promoter Lajos Kassák, working in Vienna. There are a number of similarities between Schwitters and Kassák, which provide grounds for such an exploration of Central and Eastern European artists and their relationship with Dada and International Constructivism. First, these two artists have not been well served in much of the scholarship concerning Dada to date, as they do not fit into the two traditional streams of the Dada history outlined above. Additionally, classification of their work has been difficult, as it is simply not just Dadaist, nor only Constructivist. In fact, both are artists whose theories and works have not been comfortably contained within any of the standard categories or Isms of early twentieth-century art history.

In attempting to determine why this might be the case, three salient characteristics shared by Schwitters and Kassák seem to be crucial in preventing their complete and successful integration into many art historical accounts. One is the context of the loss World War I and the resulting social and political chaos in Central and Eastern Europe. Both Schwitters, a citizen of the vanquished Germany, and Kassák, a refugee of the destroyed Austro-Hungarian Empire, suffered through wrenching political changes, failed revolutions, and wide-scale social misery. It is these very political and social issues that engaged the Berlin Dadaists as well, and makes them at times such an uneasy fit with the Parisian branch of Dada. Such a disrupted social context demanded the attention of artists in this part of Europe, and however variegated their responses might have been, such was not the case in the milieu of Parisian-based Dada. Further, Schwitters and Kassák were working on the periphery of the major artistic capitals and movements in this period. Although both were particularly aware of events in Berlin, Schwitters was never a fully-accepted or participatory member of Berlin Dada, and centered his individual Merz activity in Hannover. Kassák and many of the other Hungarians were exiled to Vienna, certainly by the early 1920s no longer an important center of modern visual art activity, and have been further marginalized in Western-based art history by virtue of their being Eastern Europeans. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, both Kassák and Schwitters were simultaneously creators in the visual and verbal fields, both being significant poets as well as visual artists. Thus the breadth and variety of their activity has made it difficult to place them fully into either a literary or artistic camp. Not only does this frustrate professional classification, but in fact both purposefully blurred or melded the visual and verbal together in a way that frankly prevents a singular system of classification. Understanding how, and perhaps why they did this, and the subsequent inability of art historical scholarship fully to account for their activities forms the basis of this study.

Initially the route of both Schwitters and Kassák to Dadaist activity in both the visual/poetic spheres began in a rather unlikely place — Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*. As the center of German Expressionist publication and exhibition, the

Sturm group was a favorite target of the Berlin Dadaists, who wished to separate themselves from Expressionism in Germany and establish Dada as something quite different.² Clearly the activities of the Sturm group were also outside of the Dada matrix that developed in Paris. Thus the artists at the center of this study from the beginning did not feed into the two streams of Dada that are defining centers of the movement as the histories have been written. What then are we to make of Schwitters' and Kassák's interest in Expressionism? And how was the move negotiated between Expressionism and Dada by these two? Answers to these questions can be generated by noting where their interests in Expressionism coincided, and one such site was the poetry of the German Expressionist August Stramm.

The poetry of August Stramm was central to Herwarth Walden's vision of German Expressionism as propagated in the pages of *Der Sturm*, Stramm being published more extensively during his lifetime than any other poet contributing to the journal.³ Stramm's death on the battlefields of World War I was mourned on the cover of the September 1915 issue of the journal, and his example inspired a host of followers and imitators, many subsequently published in *Der Sturm*.⁴ As the literary and stylistic components of Stramm's poetry lie outside the scope of this essay,⁵ we will instead focus on where engagement with the work of Stramm impacts the poetry of Schwitters and Kassák, and how this plays out in their work.

Schwitters joined the Sturm group in the spring/summer of 1918. Undoubtedly he was aware of Stramm, as Stramm's work continued to be published by Walden following the poet's death in 1915. In fact, Schwitters at a later date did acknowledge the importance of Stramm to his own poetry, particularly its form.⁶ As recognized by most scholars, what was interesting about Stramm's work to Schwitters was not so much the literary and grammatical models that Stramm was challenging in his highly expressive, original and innovative verse, but instead the form of the poems, the material aspects of the words in terms of their manipulation as neologisms and in sentences, and how they were arranged on the page.⁷ The results of such interests as evidenced in Schwitters' poems such as "Nächte" (1918) and "Grünes Kind" (1918) have variously been described as nonsensical parodies of Stramm's style, willful play with the grammatical possibilities opened up by Stramm's style, exercises in the poetic/anti-poetic dichotomy typical of Dadaists, or a combination of all of these. What is fairly certain is that Schwitters did not intend to be personally and emotionally expressive in the way that Stramm did. This has resulted in discussions about whether Schwitters was merely parodying Stramm's style, whether he was unable to sustain the vision of Stramm, or whether his literary purposes were far more complex.

My purpose is not to settle that literary issue here, but instead to suggest that Schwitters as a visual artist (as well as poet), was equally captivated by the material/visual aspects of Stramm's style. Looking at the two Schwitters poems men-

tioned above from 1918, one is struck by their similar list-like arrangement on the page, their high number of one or two-word lines, repetition of words, and the visual nature of the words in terms of their evocation of colors and sensations, all hallmarks of Stramm's style. If we look to Schwitters' most famous poem, and the one that is usually identified as a Dada poem, "An Anna Blume" of 1919, a number of elements that seem to derive from this interest in Stramm are continued. These include the list-like presentation on the page (which is most apparent in Schwitters' English version of his poem),⁸ the odd use of punctuation such as exclamation points and question marks, and the heavy frequency of pronouns and words connoting color. More immediately discernible than the meaning of the poem, is Schwitters' act of arranging the poem on the page out of elements such as separate word units and swatches of color. In a sense Schwitters constructed this poem out of highly-charged bits of material (words), by breaking language down into material form, and then arranging the pieces on the page as a poetic equivalent to his Merz collages of discarded materials, ticket stubs and colored swatches of scrap paper.⁹ The visual effect of the poem on the page is important, as is the process or experience of visually picking through the material when reading the poem. The words of the poem do not flow in a coherent poetic sense, but instead prevent such a continuous reading through grammatical and syntactical disarrangement, strings of disconnected personal pronouns, repetition of certain words, and various spacings and punctuations that interrupt the visual processing of the eye, and therefore physically affect the reading of the poem.

I agree with John Elderfield that in content "An Anna Blume" can be read as both Dadaist in its nonsensical and banal qualities, and Expressionist in its sentimentality and latent romanticism,¹⁰ but I would like to register this combination on the visual level of the poem as well. There is much of the *look* of Stramm's poetry in Schwitters' work, controlling how the eye moves across the textual material, and how ultimately it is perceived and understood (or not). If Schwitters thought about his own poetic work as assembled or designed,¹¹ Stramm would have been an important precedent in terms of plotting a poetry of a radically different composure, both within its grammatical and syntactical structure and on the page. In sum, the visual substance of the poem is Expressionist in style, but the disruption and fracturing of a sensical reading of the poem can be identified as Dadaist. The material of language (the world) is used to subvert or at least disrupt meaningful order – visually (in the process of reading), and again in terms of meaning. For Schwitters this move began in Expressionist poetry, and then was carried forward into a Dadaist attack on sensical order, a line of trajectory not typical of Dada poetry. Schwitters himself traced this process from Expressionism to Dadaism, thus: "Ich begann in der Dichtung im Jahre 1917, mit einer Gestaltung, ähnlich der äußeren Form August Stramms. Bald gewann ich eine eigene Form, in meiner dadaistischen Zeit. Sie kennen ja alle mein Gedicht an Anna Blume."¹²

We now need to turn to the other poet/painter under discussion, Lajos Kassák. Kassák was the editor of the literary and art journal *Ma* (1916–1925), which developed into the primary platform for the Hungarian avant-garde in the 1920s.¹³ Although he did not begin producing art seriously until 1920, and still today is better known within Hungary as a poet. Kassák, too, was both a poet and artist. His journal was published in two stages; from 1916 to 1919 in Budapest, and after forced political exile, from 1920 to 1925 in Vienna. In the first period of *Ma*'s existence in Budapest, Kassák and the other writers and artists gathered around his journal became well acquainted with Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*. Begun in 1910, *Der Sturm* was a leading German Expressionist organ at the time when Kassák was publishing in Budapest and continued throughout the entire run of *Ma*. *Der Sturm* not ceasing publication until 1930. There were early contacts between the two journals, beginning in the years 1917–18, when *Ma* began advertising *Der Sturm* publications, and *Der Sturm* published its first work by a Hungarian artist in June of 1918.¹⁴ Looking at the cover design and layout of these two journals in this period, one could also argue that *Ma* took several cues from *Der Sturm* in terms of designing a modern literary and art journal. The *Der Sturm* cover's style of masthead, typography and prominent featuring of a single art reproduction that varies every number was incorporated by *Ma* (Figure 1).¹⁵ The page layout was also quite similar, with text generally run in two vertical columns per page, and individual elements separated by crisp black bars. *Der Sturm* provided an important model for Kassák and his journal as to what a modern literary and art journal should look like, and the look of such a journal was adopted by Kassák to fit his own purposes.

As the Hungarians working around *Ma* were observant of Walden's *Der Sturm*, they could not have missed the poetry of August Stramm and the importance that Walden placed upon him as a prime representative of German Expressionism. Four of Stramm's poems were published in *Ma* in Hungarian translation,¹⁶ as were many other German Expressionist poets who were also published in *Der Sturm*. There are early examples of Kassák's poetry that certainly suggest a familiarity with Stramm's work, such as "Hirdetőoszloppal" [At the Advertising Kiosk] of 1917.¹⁷ The form of the poem on the page is the same long, list-like presentation typical of Stramm, although some of Kassák's lines are slightly longer, as were Schwitters'. The poem also includes single word lines, often repeated, and a single dramatic punctuation mark at the end. Also like Stramm, Kassák was particularly adept at combining words and using language that creates imagery on a primary level, such as the fourth line which reads: "mint kékvörös tűznyelv" [like blue-red firetongue]. Of course Kassák's word style and disrupted syntax did not come entirely from Stramm, but I do believe that in using this format Kassák was consciously evoking Stramm. Kassák was working within the Stramm mode, and that meant both a consideration of the visual form of the poem on the page, and the forms or images created by a shaping within

and amongst the words as well. By evoking Stramm, Kassák was acknowledging the relationship between material form and the word, and how the visual/material form of the poem helped produce a disjunctive experience of modern life. This clearly was a conscious adaptation on Kassák's part, because by no means do most of his poems maintain this style. Rather, this was an experiment in terms of the effects produced.¹⁸

Many German Expressionist poets and as noted above artists were published in *Ma*, and often the same that were published in *Der Sturm* by Herwarth Walden. Thus the Hungarians around *Ma* were well familiar with German Expressionism, and I would argue, this occasional incorporation of a clearly identifiable mode of Expressionist poetry indicates both their sophisticated knowledge of what was happening in Germany, as well as the intentional adoption of one manner as opposed to another. That the engagement with the poetry of Stramm was particularly centered on the issues of material and form is demonstrated in a critical appraisal of his style and that of his followers by János Mácza, published in *Ma* in 1919.¹⁹ Entitled "August Stramm és a német expressionizmus" [August Stramm and German Expressionism], Mácza was particularly critical of the German followers of Stramm (such as Lothar Schreyer), because they simply adopted the outward form of his poetry without incorporating the expressive power and meaning that Stramm attempted to make that form produce. Mácza's essay is on fact a rather sustained criticism of the failings he perceived in German Expressionism in general and the German followers of the Stramm cult in particular. According to Mácza, their manipulations of form without a concomitant production of new meaning resulted only in changing the outward elements of life without engaging man's inner self, and thus prevented real, revolutionary change. This reading of Stramm and German Expressionism by Mácza has to be understood as coming from a Hungarian deeply concerned with impending politics on the eve of Hungary's short period of Communist rule in 1919, within a journal that was engaged in attempting to revolutionize man's spirit in preparation for affecting considerable social and political change. What is crucial to point out at this juncture is that the dynamic relationship between form and how it does or does not produce meaning was interesting to the Hungarians publishing in *Ma*, and that German Expressionism (such as practiced by Stramm) was one site where discussion of this issue was focused.

The move from engagement with issues raised by Expressionist poetry to those of Dada and International Constructivism occurred in Kassák's work after his relocation to Vienna in 1920.²⁰ Within this first year Kassák established contact with two different manifestations of Dada through letters to Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters, thus establishing a link with both Zurich/Paris Dada and Schwitters' Dada activity in Hannover.²¹ Throughout the next couple of years Kassák would publish in *Ma* a wide variety of essays, poems and art works from many Dadaists, but a consistent and long-range interest was maintained in

Schwitters' work. This interest in Schwitters occurred at the beginning of the journal's most intense period of Dada engagement (1921/22), and was initiated by Kassák. It is likely that Kassák and the other Hungarians involved with *Ma* first encountered Schwitters' work via the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm*, apparently carried this interest with them to Vienna, and made early efforts to establish contact in Hannover. Secondly, Kassák was himself both a poet and a visual artist, and it is quite possible that the dual nature of his own activity was influential in establishing the course that Dada experiments would take within the *Ma* group. Given these factors, the primary interest in the works of Kurt Schwitters within *Ma* from the beginning of the Dada period begins to make sense as a choice predicated on the concerns of Kassák and the particular elements of Dadaism that would prove interesting for his own work in visual poetry.

A concentration of material concerning Schwitters was published in *Ma* in January of 1921, inaugurating the year of the journal's publication that would most fully demonstrate this group of Hungarians' engagement with Dada. Included in this issue was article by Christof Spengemann on Merz painting, which appears to be similar to, if not a condensation of, a review that Spengemann wrote in 1919 on Schwitters' work.²² Also included was a section from a Schwitters essay on Merz theater,²³ and a short essay apparently requested by *Ma* from Schwitters entitled "Miképen vagyok elégedetlen az olajfestéssel" [In What Way I Am Dissatisfied with Oil Painting].²⁴ Arranged on the pages with these texts are three examples of Schwitters' Merz compositions, and rounding out the Schwitters material, is a Hungarian translation of "An Anna Blume".²⁵

As the selection of Schwitters material published in *Ma* indicates, the primary interest of the Hungarians focused on Schwitters' poems and other texts, not the visual art of the Merz collages. The three Merz compositions published in January of 1921 were the only Merz pictures that *Ma* ever featured, whereas in subsequent issues *Ma* published three more poems by Schwitters, another text on Merz theater and his "Causes and Outbreak of the Great and Glorious Revolution in Revon".²⁶ I want to suggest that the greater importance given to the texts of Schwitters in *Ma* is a key to understanding the nature and quality of (particularly) Kassák's involvement with Dada in this period, in that it reveals where the initial interest lay in Dada, and the root of how that interest would play out within the pages of the journal. Primarily the Hungarian interest in Dada is first tied to Dada texts, such as poetry, proceeds to experiments in the visual forming of texts through typography, and transfers the attendant concerns with form and meaning to the realm of International Constructivism.

The works of Kassák presented in *Ma* are integral to following this development, as Kassák was the editor of the journal, therefore making the decisions in terms of what material would be featured in the journal and how; and was additionally the self-appointed leader of this group of the Hungarian avant-garde, establishing policy and generating the primary theoretical statements of the group.

To trace this entire process, we now need to analyze several of the major poetic works of Kassák in the 1921/22 period.

Although Kassák had been publishing poetry for a number of years, in the early 1920s he began presenting very different works that incorporated typography as an integral element within their composition. I will concentrate on several of the most accomplished examples in the following in order to focus on the dynamic relationship between the form of these works (their typography and layout) and how they construct meaning (how they communicate sense).²⁷ Perhaps the most well-known visual poem by Kassák is "Este a fák alatt" [Evening Under the Trees], which appeared in *Ma* in January of 1922 (Figure 2).²⁸ As noted in previous studies, this work seems to be composed of four self-contained poems that coincide with the four columns of their layout on the page.²⁹ Although the four poetic units vary in internal length and word number, Kassák balances them on the page by varying the weight and size of the typography, and their spatial arrangement. Attempts have been made at interpreting the meaning of these four units in terms of poetic sense, and as suggested are most likely Kassák's rather abstract references to the failure of the 1919 Communist government of Béla Kun and the forced emigration to Vienna of those who were associated with it.³⁰ However, rather than trying to read this work in a linear manner for cohesive sense, here the approach will be to take into account the visual form of the poem, and to appreciate how that form shapes our reading of the text, and ultimately communicates meaning. In general the poetic units are composed of discontinuous elements, which vividly evoke feelings or certain images, but do not adhere together in a linear progression. As representative examples, we will focus on the second and fourth columns of the composition, and analyze the units both of reading and looking at the text, taking note of how the visual arrangement of the words controls their reading and produces meaning.

The second column begins with the lines: "le hát a háló sipkákkal/elmult a 19 nap" [off then with the nightcaps/the 19 days have passed]³¹ most likely a reference to the events of 1919, and perhaps a farewell salute to those days by removing the hats. The following lines express the sadness and futility of Kassák with the failure of 1919 and subsequent events that had led him away from Hungary: "Mária átölelte fiát/és könnyeket virágzott/de ez sem ért már semmit/elröpültek/a madarak/elusztak/a halak" [Mary embraced her son/and tears bloomed/but this already was worth nothing/the birds flew away/the fish swam away]. The first lines of this poem express Kassák's conflicted emotions concerning Hungary's revolution. He and many of the *Ma* group no doubt had substantial expectations of a social and political revolution in Hungary in this period, but Kassák was quickly disabused of such notions when *Ma* became a political target of Béla Kun, and was labeled a "product of bourgeois decadence."³² The threat to artistic freedom that a political regime could pose was a lesson hard learned by Kassák in 1919, and one that would influence his position on the relationship between

politics and art well into the 1920s.³³ Much of the remainder of this poetic unit continues Kassák's theme of sadness, waste and painful memories, ending with the line: "én éhes/vagyok/te éhes/vagy/ő szin/tén/éhes" [I am hungry, you are hungry, he too is hungry]. The typography is throughout the unit integral to how it is read. The beginning words "le hát" [off then] are placed on an incline as if mirroring the angle of physically removing a hat. The next change in typographical weight is the heaviness given to the number nineteen in the line "a 19 nap" [the 19 days], thus marking a time frame. These two elements also function to fix the boundaries of that text block, as the next block of text is in a different typeset. Within this first block of text, one's eye is lead not in a linear manner, but instead begins at an angle, is bumped back and forth by the various starting points of the words, and even has to circle back to pick up the article "a" [the] for the night-caps, which is tucked up under "le hát." The next two blocks of text are bounded on the left side by a vertical line of words "a sövény mellett" [next to the hedgerow], wherein these words duplicate the separating and bounding action of a row of hedges in their function in the textual layout of this poetic unit. An equal white border of space is maintained on both sides of this "hedgerow", and the left margin of the two blocks of text to its right are determined spatially in relation to this line of words.

This second block of text, that bordering the word "mellett" evokes a poignant image: "s a harangozó/örökre/elaludt a kötélén/elaludt/szegényke/kivilágított/városok fölött/de ez is csak két fabatkát/és három gombot ért" [and the bell-ringer/forever fallen asleep on the rope/fallen asleep/poor thing/above the illuminated towns/but this too is worth just two pins and three buttons]. Kassák has placed the bell ringer, the *harangozó*, off to the far right of the poem and emphasized his loneliness and separation by disconnecting him from the flow of the rest of the text of the poem. Here he is separated and physically above the next that describes his actions, much as he is described within the text as acting in solitude above the illuminated towns below. Thus the visual placement of the word separated from the main body of the text makes physical his separation from the subject of the text, thus the form produces meaning.

The bottom third of the poem is divided into two separate block of text by varying the size of the typography and the use of black lines. One part of the text describes an action performed by the narrator, prefaced by the word "én" [I], whereas the other section of text to the left describes the inner state of the narrator related in third voice. Thus the weight of the lettering, as well as the black lines, visually work to reinforce the different voices relating the poetic text, and also function to physically separate the two states of the human being, the one actively speaking, the other whose interior suffering is being described. To the right the text reads: "én/az öregasszony/batyuját átvit/tem a patakon" [I carried the old woman's bundle across the stream], while the text to the left reads: "de az em/ber tenge/reket és le/roskadt hadakat cepel a szemeiben/a hiába hogy valaki

homlokunkra kente/a csillagot [but the man heavily carried seas and collapsed bridges in his eyes and in vain somebody smeared the star on our brows]. Thus on one hand the text may refer to exile through the image of carrying the bundle across the stream, whereas the alternate text describes the inner sadness and futility felt by the Hungarians who were forced to flee after the collapse of the communist government of 1919.

Clearly Kassák emphasizes the star [a csillagot] in the poem, by the heaviness of the lettering and the two lines tipped by arrows that point to it. Perhaps the star is meant to be understood here as the symbol of communism. Within the poem are several units of text that disrupt what little narrative cohesion one can try to fashion for this poem, and escape its signifying processes; such as "Isten szeme mindent lát" [God's eye sees everything] and "szamarak nem mernek vizbe/ereszkedni a sózsákokkal" [donkeys dare not descend into water with the salt bags]. They have been identified as old parables or sayings that would have been familiar to a Hungarian reader, and attempts have been made to fit them into the sense of the poem.³⁴ Instead, they strike me as examples of text units from other sources that have been spliced into Kassák's work, as if taken out of the context of popular culture or other textual sources and inserted in an arbitrary manner into his own text. This seems a very Dada method of composing a poem; one thinks of Tzara instructions for creating a poem from snippets cut from newspapers and advertising pulled at random from a shaken bag, or Schwitters' prose poem "Aufruf" published in *Der Sturm* in 1921, which mixed together lines from "An Anna Blume" and political clippings from newspapers.³⁵ A mixing of the various codes of the language of texts seems to be what is at work here.³⁶ As Schwitters spliced together the Expressionist language of a love poem with newspaper lines about daily political events, a fundamental disruption and reconfiguration of signifying codes is produced. Such disruption and reconfiguration, playing on the border between sense/non-sense is a mode of Dadaist engagement with the prevailing culture, and I suspect that Kassák is doing this as well in "Este a fák alatt". Also noteworthy is that both Schwitters and Kassák are making reference to and incorporating the difficult political events being suffered in Central and Eastern Europe in this period.

Throughout Kassák's work the events are described in a personal, expressive tone emphasizing loss, lamentation and the psychic effect on the writer of the text; in other words, in terms of the effect on the *spirit* of the poet, in a way that is reminiscent of Expressionism. At the same time, the non-linearity and non-cohesion of the sense units within the work disrupt, even often prevent a traditional reading of the poem. As in "An Anna Blume," here too Expressionism and Dada are being combined, and the seeing and understanding of the poems is affected. Additionally, through the manipulation of typography, Kassák makes the reader account for the physical size and placement of the words on the page, drawing our attention to the material form of the words, making reading and un-

derstanding the text a more complex process. The text is no longer a neutral element that is to be read and apprehended in a one-step process, communicating to the reader what the writer wishes to express. Instead the reader becomes aware of and involved in the material form of the text, visually taking into account the typography and spatial disposition of the words, recognizing elements incorporated into the text from outside sources, and at times struggling to make sense out of what is read. In other words, the material form of the text is part and parcel of its production of meaning (sense or non-sense), and the reader is mentally and physically incorporated into this process.

To continue this exploration of the material form of poetry, we next turn to the fourth column of Kassák's "Este a fák alatt." By far the shortest poetic unit in terms of word length, Kassák gives the short text the equal weight and presence of the other columns through typography and the addition of the large black circle above the word *sír* [cries]. In expression the column continues the tone of loss and lamentation that characterizes the entire cycle, reading: "Anna, Anna dear the man appeared above the water and bitterly cries." What is particularly interesting here is the incorporation of the geometric element of the large black circle. In a hand-drawn version of "Este a fák alatt," which was published separately as a *Ma* picture-book in 1922, the poem ends not with this black circle, but with a geometric composition including two squares, a circle and two rectangles (Figure 3). The pages of this book alternate between a page of text and a page containing an abstract composition (Figure 4). These compositions reveal in strictly visual form the mix of both Dada and International Constructivism: some compositions in their linear repetition and word play displaying a Dadaist inspiration, others incorporating pure geometric forms into such compositions, and a third group which are strictly geometric. Clearly these latter compositions, as well as Kassák's separate visual works produced in this period, reveal an interest in the geometric, abstract formal language of Constructivism. What we see in the two versions of "Este a fák alatt," is Kassák as a poet and a visual artist working with both the language of poetic texts and the geometric language of International Constructivism, seeing both simultaneously in formal terms as material to be manipulated visually, and to be apprehended visually. Also significant is that this recognition of and working with these two modes occurs in the period of simultaneous engagement with both Dada and International Constructivism. The fracturing of cohesive narrative sense, the visual manipulation of words through typography (including illustrations that play with lines and letters), and the incorporation of vernacular elements into the aesthetic realm of poetry, i.e., those things which we identify as Dadaist, are being worked with at the same time that Kassák is also engaging with the geometric and constructive possibilities of International Constructivism. Within this mix it is material form and its visual apprehension which becomes dominant.

Such a mix of Dadaist literary style with elements that are typical of a Constructivist visual style is also apparent in Kassák's poem, which is frequently identified as his most Dadaist – "A ló meghal és a madarak kirepülnek" [The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away] of 1922 (Figure 5).³⁷ The lengthy poem relates his youthful journey on foot to Paris and return to Budapest. Just as in "Este a fák alatt" it contains a number of lines and snippets of text that appear to be pulled randomly from outside cultural and textual sources. This discontinuous and densely convoluted Dadaist text was originally published in a highly controlled format: entirely in small case letters with occasional single words in capitals, a solid body of text with line breaks marked by black asterisks, and interspersed with full-page illustrations and a title graphic that are starkly geometric in character (Figure 6). Here the discontinuities and irrationalities of the verbal language are tightly encapsulated in a rigid visual framework that is at odds with the freedom of the verbal language, and highly impacts our visual apprehension of the poem.

The visual look of the poem is forceful and strongly controls our eyes' apprehension of and reading of the text. It could be argued that the visual element is here exceeding or even defying the verbal spirit of the poem. I detect the same ascension of the visual over the verbal (although greater in degree) in Schwitters' poems such as "Cigarren" and "25," both reproduced in *Ma* as well (Figures 7 & 8). In these examples, letters and numbers, both material elements from other signifying systems, are used as formal elements to construct a visual object that insists on being seen as an objet and now resists attempts at verbal interpretation. This ascension of an interest in the visual is also embodied in Kassák's shift from being primarily a poet into being both a poet and an accomplished visual artist in this period of 1921/1922 and the conversion of *Ma* from a literary journal to primarily an art journal during the first years in Vienna. I am not simply suggesting here that Schwitters was somehow an influence on Kassák, or even that either was consciously aware of the full nature of this process. The connection is that both produced works simultaneously as poets and visual artists, and in these "poems" we can see the process of exploring the essence and limits of the textual and visual modes of communication that were an integral part of their work. Neither stopped producing poetry. For example, Kassák was writing poetry of the more familiar kind during this period, and continued to do so throughout his career. But at this moment in the early 1920s the dual interest in words and the visual intersected in the work of both men at the site of visual poetry, at the point of interest in both Dada and International Constructivism.³⁸

The future of both involved a growing interest within their visual work in the geometric principles of International Constructivism. In 1922/23 Schwitters' paintings began to fully show a more conscious and clear incorporation of the principles and compositional formats of this variety of Constructivism.³⁹ In 1921/22 Kassák developed and propagated his own version of International

Constructivism, called *Képarchitektúra* [Picturearchitecture].⁴⁰ Although it is not my purpose here to fully discuss Kassák's evolution as a Constructivist, I would like to suggest that some of the ideas contained in his manifesto outlining *Képarchitektúra* have their root in the textual/visual concerns discussed above. For example, his belief that geometric art was creation on a primary level, not derivative of nature or the product of the emotions of the artist, reflects his understanding of material form and how it creates objects that are not reducible to mimesis or narrative. It is interesting to note that Kassák faults Schwitters' Merz pictures in his manifesto on two counts – they transfer emotions into pictures (thus not creating on a primary level), and they have titles which betray their narrative function, attempting to tell us something, through a picture, about something outside of the picture. Kassák's belief that primary form could recreate man's inner self, and therefore could bring about a new world is the same belief that was Mácsa's basis for faulting the work of Stramm's German followers. Certainly too the weight of philosophical and social significance that Kassák believed this geometric art could articulate, reveals his understanding of it as signifying system capable of producing meaning. That the visual art produced could "say" all that he theorized it could is a question for another essay.

By focusing on the examples of Schwitters and Kassák, my purpose was two-fold. One was to follow a different track that began in Expressionism and circled through and among Dada and International Constructivism, but never did end up in Surrealism as so many of the histories of this period have predestined that it should. Certainly some paths did lead into Surrealism, but quite a few others did not, and art historical narratives have in large part not taken this fully into account. Second, my shift from the major centers of Dadaism to what was happening in places like Hannover and Vienna, suggests the complexity and sophistication of artistic experimentation occurring there. It is away from the centers, among Central and East Europeans in places like Zagreb or Bucharest, Vienna and Krakow that I suspect the engagement with Dadaism and the variants of Constructivism was at its most dynamic and complex,⁴¹ and it was not quite like what is available in the histories that focus solely on Paris and Berlin. Finally, what I have presented here is one way of approaching this material, that focused on issues concerning texts and visual art. That there are other avenues of approach, and that this does not purport to be the only way I hope is obvious. What is clear is that there remains much unexplored on the border between Dada and Constructivism, and on that border between Western and Eastern Europe.

Notes

1. For more on this issue, and critiques of how the history of Dada has been handled, see the essays by Andrei B. Nakov and Dawn Ades in *Dada-Constructivism: The Janus Face of the Twenties* (London: Annelly Juda Fine Art, 1984), 7–45, passim, and John Elderfield, "On the Dada-Constructivist Axis," *Dada and Surrealist Art*, no. 13 (1984): 5–16. I use the term International Constructivism here to distinguish a European-based, yet international manifestation of Constructivism as opposed Russian Constructivism. The most helpful discussions on the differences between various types of Constructivism can be found in the introduction in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking Press, 1974; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1990), 25–49 (page references are to reprint edition), Elderfield cited above, and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 2–3, 237. In general Russian Constructivism is defined for the purposes of this essay as materials produced by Russian artists for Soviet society, with political and social purpose within Russia's Soviet context, as produced for example by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Klutssis, etc. International Constructivism was more aesthetically based rather than production based in origin, not tied to any specific political ideology, and its primary activity was the creation of utopic projections for a future society based on geometric form and its attendant principles. Artists practicing this kind of Constructivism include Hans Richer, Theo Van Doesburg, Moholy-Nagy, etc.
2. For a more complete discussion of the complex relationship between German Expressionism and Dadaism see Richard Sheppard, "Dada and Expressionism," *Publications of the Goethe Society*, n. s. XLIX (1978–79): 45–83. In terms of how this conflict particularly affected Schwitters' relationship to Dada and the primary German Dadaists, see John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 35–42.
3. Malcolm Jones, "The Cult of August Stramm in *Der Sturm*," *Seminar* 13, no. 4 (November, 1977): 266.
4. *Ibid.* The above article in fact discusses the followers of Stramm as published in *Der Sturm*, outlining this 'cult' of Stramm developed within *Sturm* circles.
5. As the literature on Stramm is somewhat extensive, here I want to indicate those studies that have been most helpful to this paper: Patrick Bridgwater, "The Sources of Stramm's Originality," in *August Stramm Kritische Essays und unveröffentlichtes Quellenmaterial aus dem Nachlaß des Dichters*, ed. J. D. Adler and J. J. White (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1979), 31–46; Patrick Bridgwater, "the War Poetry of August Stramm," *New German Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring, 1980): 29–53; Richard Sheppard, "The Poetry of August Stramm: A Suitable Case for Deconstruction," *Journal of European Studies* 15, no. 4 (December, 1985): 261–294; John White, "Aspects of Typography and Layout in August Stramm's Poetry," in *August Stramm Kritische Essays und unveröffentlichtes Quellenmaterial aus dem Nachlaß des Dichters*, ed. J. D. Adler and J. J. White (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1979), 47–68.
6. Jones, 263. The author quotes Schwitters from *Merz* 20 of 1927 as presented in Ernst Schwitters, ed., *Kurt Schwitters Anna Blume und Ich* (Zurich: Peter Schiefferli Verlag, 1965), 42. The line reads: "Ich begann in der Dichtung im Jahre 1917, mit einer Gestaltung, ähnlich der äußeren Form August Stramms."

7. See in particular Jones, 263–65 Philip Thomson, "A Case of Dadaistic Ambivalence: Kurt Schwitters's Stramm-Imitations and 'An Anna Blume'," *The German Quarterly* XLV, no. 1 (January, 1972): 47–56. Elderfield, 96 goes so far as to discuss an "... assertively constructional character of Sturm poetics.."
8. Both the German and English versions are available in Elderfield, 37–8.
9. For an additional study that deals with issues concerning the importance of both the verbal and visual in Schwitters' work see E. S. Shaffer, "Kurt Schwitters, Merzkünstler: art and word-art." *Word & Image* 6, no. 1 (Jan.-March, 1990): 100–118.
10. Elderfield, 39.
11. See Elderfield, 44 for Schwitters' thinking about the fusion of poetry and painting in his work.
12. As quoted in Ernst Schwitters, ed., *Kurt Schwitters Anna Blume und Ich* (Zurich: Peter Schiefferli Verlag, 1965), 42.
13. Although *Ma* is recognized as the most significant journal of the Hungarian avant-garde, Kassák also produced a number of other journals, including *A Tett* (1915–1916); *Dokumentum* (1926–1927); and *Munka* (1928–1939).
14. Although Hungarian literature had been published in *Der Sturm* prior to this date, this was the first work of Hungarian art featured, a woodcut by the Transylvanian artist János Máttis-Teutsch, who was featured frequently in *Ma* in this period.
15. Others have noted some of the visual similarities between the two journals, for example see Júlia Szabó, "»A címlap fontos«: Kassák Lajos kiadványainak címlapjai, 1912–1934," in *Kassák Lajos 1887–1967*, exhibition catalogue (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 1987), 84–5.
16. *Ma* III, no. 5 (May 1, 1918): 56. All page references to *Ma* are based on the facsimile reprint of the journal, published in Budapest in 1971 by Akadémiai Kiadó.
17. This poem appeared in *Ma* II, no. 12 (October 15, 1917): 182 and reappeared in a volume of poetry, also entitled *Hirdetőszloppal* in 1918. The poem can also be found in *Kassák Lajos összes versei I.* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1969), 23–4.
18. That this was a mode adopted by some Hungarian poets in this period is indicated by examples other than Kassák, such as the poem "Én" [I] by Árpád Szépal, which is even more clearly an adaptation of Stramm's style, published in *Ma* in February of 1919.
19. *Ma* IV, no. 2 (February 26, 1919): 23–4.
20. For a purely literature-based analysis of the issues of Dada and Constructivism in Kassák's work, which differs at times from my reading as an art historian, see relevant sections of Pál Deréky, *Ungarische Avantgarde-Dichtung in Wien 1920–1926* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1991).
21. A selection of these letters can be found in Ferenc Csaplár, *Kassák az európai avantgárd mozgalmakban, 1916–1928* (Budapest Kassák Múzeum és Archivum, 1994), 18–23. Kassák apparently established contact with Schwitters through Christof Spengemann. Spengemann was a Hannover art critic and publisher, who wrote frequently on Schwitters, and was also a friend of Herwarth Walden.
22. *Ma* IV. No. 3 (January 1, 1921): 28–9. The original review appeared in *Der Cicerone*, 11, 18 (1919): 573–81.
23. This is an early essay by Schwitters on Merz theater, which was originally published in *Sturmbühne* no. 8.

24. The first line of Schwitters' text notes that the journal *Ma* wrote to him asking why he was dissatisfied with art up to now. Schwitters apparently took this question to refer particularly to painting, and answered in that vein.
25. The Hungarian translation, entitled "Annvirágnak", modified the line structure of the poem, and also changed the layout of the dashes within the poem, in large part probably due to translating the text into a different language.
26. The poems include "Die Welt", the letter poem "Cigarren" and the number poem "25."
27. I want to stress at this juncture that by focusing on these visual poems of Kassák, I am also aware of other texts published in *Ma* that incorporate typographical experimentation that betray in particular a familiarity with Berlin Dadaism. One could cite for example Sándor Barta's "S zöldfejű ember" in *Ma* VI, 3 (January 1, 1921): 22–3. We also know that the Hungarians were well aware of the typography and collage work of Dadaism through Dada periodicals such as Tzara's *Dada*, the German *Der Dada* and Schwitters' *Merz*. I agree with Krisztina Passuth, who has noted the importance of the typography of Berlin Dada to the Hungarians (especially Kassák), but also maintains that Kassák developed his typography further, and in rather different ways because of his simultaneous interest in [International] Constructivism. See Krisztina Passuth, *Magyar művészek az európai avantgarde-ban: a kubizmustól a konstruktivizmusig 1919–1925* (Budapest: Corvina, 1974), 112–13. I must emphasize here my discussion of Kassák's typography is but one way to tell the story, and does not claim to be the only route of analysis available.
28. *Ma* VII. 2 (January 1, 1922): 18–9. The Hungarian term for this kind of poem is képvvers [picture-poem], but I will use the term visual poem.
29. János Brendel, "The *Bildgedichte* of Lajos Kassák: Constructivism in Hungarian Avant Garde Poetry," in *The Hungarian Avant Garde: The Eight and the Activists*, Arts Council of Great Britain (London: Hayward Gallery, 1980), 33. The author notes that this cycle of poems was first published in the book entitled *Világanyám*, where it covered seven pages and was not so clearly divided into these four parts. For additional interpretations of this work see also Esther Levinger, "Hungarian Avant-garde Typography and Posters," in *The Hungarian Avant-garde 1914–1933*, ed. John Kish (University of Connecticut, Storrs: The William Benton Museum of Art, 1987), 112–22. Although the following observations concerning this work are mine, some may or may not coincide with previous analyses of the poems.
30. Brendel, 34–6.
31. The translations from the original Hungarian are those of the author.
32. Kassák's response to the attack by Kun on *Ma* is expressed in "Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében" in *Ma* IV, 7 (June 15, 1919): 146–48. Kun's charge had been published in *Vörös Újság*, as is related in Ilona Illés, *A Tett (1915–1916) Ma (1916–1925) 2 x 2 (1922) Repertorium* (Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 1975), 106. *Ma* was banned shortly after this exchange.
33. Kassák's refusal to tie *Ma*'s artistic and editorial policies to Communist party politics became a major source of contention between him and several of the former *Ma* group throughout the 1920s, most notably with Béla Uitz, who left *Ma* and began publishing in the Communist journal *Egység* in 1922.
34. Brendel, 35.

35. My attention was drawn to this text by Annegreth Nill's brief discussion of it. See Annegreth Nill, "Weimar Politics and the Theme of Love in Kurt Schwitter's Das Bäumerbild," *Dada/Surrealism* no. 13 (1984): 17.
36. My understanding of the importance of texts in terms of Dadaist intervention into cultural practice was aided by essays by Stephen C. Foster and Timothy O. Benson in *Visible Language* 21, no. 1 (1987) and in connection with the material nature of typography and its signifying processes, by Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1910–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
37. The poem was originally published in 1922 in Vienna in the only issue of the journal *2x2*, of which Kassák was co-editor with Andor Németh. Although reprinted a number of times subsequently, it is difficult to find in its original typography and layout. For a reprint of the original version, and translations into a variety of languages see György Somlyó, ed., *Arion 16: Nemzetközi Költői Almanach* (Budapest: Corvina, 1988), 59–68.
38. That this was the period of simultaneous engagement with Dada and nascent International Constructivism for both artists is supported by their interest or participation in both the Düsseldorf and Weimar congresses in 1922. Although Kassák did not attend either, he was informed of events by Moholy-Nagy. *Ma* also issued a statement in response to the first congress, and reprinted many of the group statements as they had appeared in *De Stijl*. Both Kassák and Schwitters also had a professional relationship with Van Doesburg (Schwitters more so), who himself was both a poet and visual artist, and reflected his interest in both Dadaism and International Constructivism in his *Bonset/Van Doesburg* split.
39. For a description of how this played out in Schwitters' visual production see Elderfield, 125–28.
40. For a more complete (and different) discussion of this version of Constructivism and the theory developed by Kassák see Esther Levinger, "The Theory of Hungarian Constructivism," *Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September, 1987): 455–66. A translation of the *Képarchitektúra* manifesto into English is appended to the following: Oliver A. I. Botar, "Constructed Reliefs in the Art of the Hungarian Avant-Garde: Kassák, Bortnyik, Uitz, and Moholy-Nagy, 1921–26," *The Structurist* no. 25–6 (1985–6): 96–98.
41. This has been suggested previously, see Nakov, 13. Nakov notes a number of collaborations among artists both Dadaist and Constructivist, and reading the list one is struck by the conspicuous absence of anyone from Paris. Nakov mentions Eastern European sites as important because the fusion of Dada and Constructivism could happen there "more easily." I am not entirely sure what he means by this, is it because of geography? a time element? a greater willingness to experiment? but it certainly merits further study.