

# *The Survivor's Shadow*

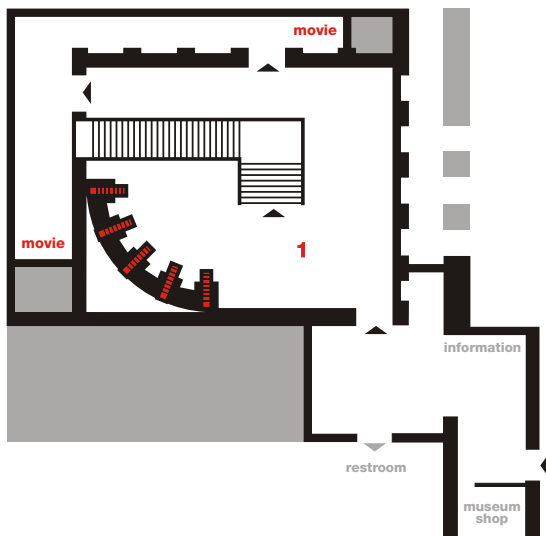
## THE LIFE AND WORKS OF EL KAZOVSKY

A túlélő árnyéka – Az El Kazovszkij-élet|mű



MAGYAR NEMZETI GALÉRIA  
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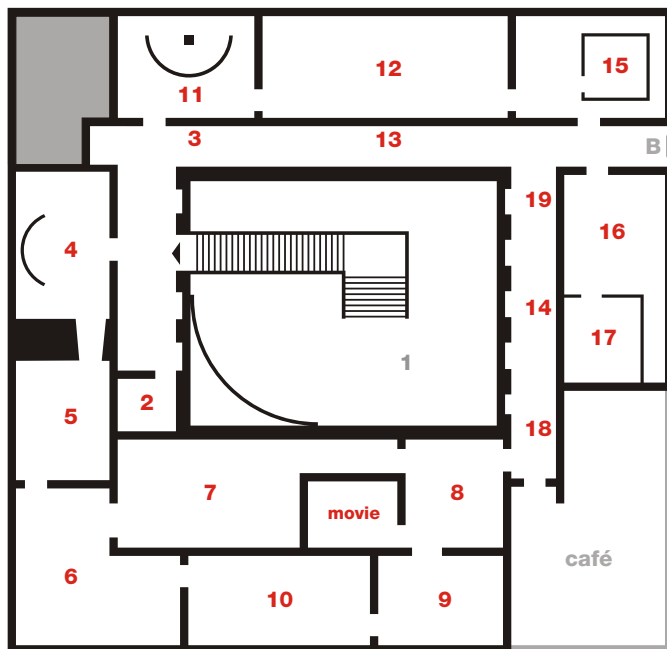




## ground floor

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## first floor



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# The Survivor's Shadow – The Life and Works of El Kazovsky

Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, Building A  
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El Kazovsky (1948–2008) left behind one of the most extraordinary and significant legacies in twentieth-century Hungarian art. As indicated in the exhibition's title, El Kazovsky is important not only for his enormous corpus of works, but also for his life as a whole.\* His personality was in many respects exceptional, yet nevertheless exemplary, for the man was open-hearted, sensitive, immensely brave and irrepressibly honest. The first part of the title refers to the long shadow cast after his painfully early death. It was inevitable that El Kazovsky would become part of the predominant canon, but this happened too soon; he entered the pantheon of immortals even before we had looked him fully in the eye. One consequence of this is that he is barely known outside his own generation. There is much yet to be done with his vast legacy, not only in terms of scholarly research, but primarily in spreading fresh knowledge of him. It was with this latter motive in mind that our exhibition was planned. The bold focuses and evocative settings are intended to generate new interest, stimulate thoughts and spark debate about the life and works of El Kazovsky.

The exhibition is divided into 19 numbered units, each with a different title and subject. There is no set route for viewing the rooms, but visitors can find their way around the labyrinthine space with the help of the map and the guide.

## El Kazovsky – Brief Biography

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1948      | born 13 July in Leningrad (today Saint Petersburg, Russia)   |
| 1951–1964 | lives with grandparents in Nizhny Tagil, West Siberia  |
| 1964      | moves to Hungary in summer, lives with his mother  |
| 1964–1968 | attends Radnóti Grammar School in Budapest   |
| 1968      | associates with the No.1 group, exhibits with them on several occasions  |
| 1970–1977 | studies painting at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts,<br>taught by György Kádár and Ignác Kokas  |
| 1976      | member of the Studio of Young Artists  |
| 1977      | debut performance of the "Dzhan Panopticon"  |
| 1978–1982 | member of the Főlöspéldány group   |
| from 1981 | receives regular commissions for theatre stage and costume designs   |
| 1982      | wins the Smohay Prize  |
| 1980–1983 | awarded a Derkovits grant  |
| 1989      | receives the Munkácsy Prize  |
| 2002      | given the Kossuth Prize  |
| 2008      | dies 21 July in Budapest   |
| 1975–2008 | participated in countless solo and group exhibitions in Hungary<br>(notably Budapest, Székesfehérvár, Győr, Kecskemét and Szombathely)<br>and abroad (most importantly Amsterdam, New York, Paris, Berlin,<br>Rome and Saint Petersburg) |



\* Note on the use of pronouns in our exhibition and in this guide: El Kazovsky was a transgender person, born into a female body, but self-identifying as a man. Without wishing to oversimplify this complex matter, the English texts in this exhibition use the masculine pronouns (he, him, his) when referring to El Kazovsky.

# [1] The Hall of Celebration

## or the *Dzhan Panopticons* (1977–2001)

The first room offers a monumental and celebratory sculptural ensemble of El Kazovsky's enormous œuvre; it also gives an indication of how the artist's mind always operated on a grandiose scale. The box-like, enclosed spaces, the perspective grids, the gigantic stairways and the semi-circular arcades and loggias are recurring motifs in his images – a selection of those is also presented here.

The ground-floor installation constitutes a single thematic unit that deals with the spectacular performances that constitute a regularly recurring leitmotif of El Kazovsky's artistic career: these were the *Dzhan Panopticons*, a series of shows with a unified structure and symbolism. These performances, which became emblematic of his work, were born out of a troubled romantic liaison

[2] :it is not without good reason that El Kazovsky's monographer Éva Forgács, called them a "love letter in the genre of performance art". El Kazovsky himself regarded them as a kind of ceremonial celebration, similar to Christmas, and almost every year between 1977 and 2001 – with some brief interludes – he would put on a performance to commemorate the "event".

The location would be chosen opportunely, either in connection with an exhibition or by invitation of some kind – his arrangement of the physical space and the number of performers, varying between 4 and 22, would be adapted to suit the venue.

The performers were all amateurs, and El Kazovsky himself would regularly step on stage, acting as the master of ceremonies and wearing his trademark tiger mask. He would usually invite his close friends, acquaintances, and later their children, to participate in the performances. A few of them were faithful members of his company for many years. Later, the amateur participants would sometimes have to go through a kind of casting process – where they were judged purely on their appearance. Before the performances, El Kazovsky himself would dress everyone in costume and give them instructions. There were hardly ever any full-scale rehearsals.

The performances followed a precise script and choreography, but they were never repeated mechanically. Each year, the same excerpts would be read out from the works of Paul Claudel, Diogenes Laërtius and other authors, and there would nearly always be accompaniment from some of the great romantic orchestral works (by Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Berlioz, etc.). The order of the ceremony, its "compulsory" sections and its spiritual message were recorded and published by El Kazovsky right at the beginning, and he would observe these tenets till the very end of the series.

The performances generated significant interest from their inception: at first, the venues would be filled with the regular crowd, numbering a few hundred people, made up of members of the unofficial, (semi-)underground art scene at the time and El Kazovsky's extensive circle of friends. From the mid-1980s, the scope and size of his audience expanded, and after the fall of the communist regime, he reached his largest audience ever on television. His performances were widely reviewed, mostly positively.

*“... the Dzhan Panopticon was a celebration I established, celebratory games, for the commemoration and ritual celebration of a specific event. It was like a sacrifice to the gods, or a Christmas celebration, which I held repeatedly every year starting in 1977 ...”*

*“Dzhan is an ancient Persian word, originally meaning ‘soul’, but later taking on the meaning of ‘darling’. In today’s Turkish language it is a name given to both boys and girls. In the tableaux of the Panopticon ... I don’t show specific people, but living people who embody certain cultural schemas. Together, the two words of the title also refer to the person we think of as our ‘beloved’.”*

*“The Panopticon is a ‘game about objectification’. An idol is born, and perhaps given a soul, but then it is slowly worn out and destroyed, after which a memorial is erected to it, which becomes a new idol. Essentially, it brings to life the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. The process could also be played out in reverse, with a living person placed on a pedestal. There is always a ‘puppet’ and there is always a Pygmalion – I take the role of Pygmalion.”*

The stage in the first room is a precise reconstruction of the set for the performance titled *Dzhan Panopticon XXXV, or the Dream of Arcesilaus XV*, held in the grand apse of the Kunsthalle, Budapest on 14 March 1995.

*“... in the theatre I already sense a stupendous intensity, which derives from the flesh-and-blood presence of living people.”*

*“The true theatre goes on in the wings, behind the scenes. It is not on stage where the madness of people turning into material occurs, but at the rehearsals, in the canteen, the corridors, the dressing rooms, the actors’ lives.”*

*“It was not easy for the players to put up with appearing as simple bodies in public view. There were some who reacted by not saying hello to me for two years. ...even though I explained everything in detail, they didn’t know what they were taking on, how others would look at them; and meanwhile they cannot escape the looks, they cannot even look back and defend themselves with their eyes. The decider here was incapacitation ... after all, a statue doesn’t communicate, it is just there, beautiful.”*

*“A celebration, being ritualistic and sacred, is never merely pleasant, and it is definitely not relaxing. There is always something tragic in pathos, even if only because of its exaggeratedness and its intensity.”*

In the first room we have erected the “migratory animal”, measuring almost five metres in height, commissioned – in accordance with El Kazovsky’s design – by Róbert Alföldi, then director of the Hungarian National Theatre, and set up in the theatre’s entrance hall in September 2008, after the artist’s death.

In the corridor beneath the arcade we present a compilation of the documented *Dzhan Panopticon* performances.

In the projection room, viewers may watch the central piece of the *El Kazovsky Trilogy*, directed by András Éry-Kovács, which is a 30-minute television recording of the performance titled *Dzhan Panopticon XXXVI, or the Dream of Arcesilaus XV*, held in Budapest’s Merlin Theatre on 12 February 2001.



## Dzhan Panopticon, or Game about Objectification

### Inventory

5-6 “object”-players (a small selection of female ideals from European culture):

- 1 The package, Sleeping Beauty
- 2 Galatea, the most optimistic myth
- 3/a Coppélia, the dancing doll
- 3/b The muse
- 4 The monument
- 5 The odalisque, the oriental woman

+ 2 human players: a reader “me” (recollector, cogitator, systemiser, etc.) and a doer “me” (fetish constructor or dismantler)

### An outline of the order of the game

I Construction and decoration of the fetishes. Placing in the exhibited objects the items required by the ideals dictated by the role of cultural norms and by the second nature. Idol creation.

II Tableau lasting 2-3 minutes. The actual panopticon, the demonstration. The ideal that has been mastered and objectified by man, as a manifested spectacle. The celebration.

III Experiments with making contact with the object, and failures to do so. Since the object, such as it is, cannot be approached (absolute passivity makes it unattainable), the idol can only be taken apart, damaged, destroyed: it is in effect impossible to master.

IV Conducting the inventory – theoretical mastering. Clearing up the accessories into appropriately numbered boxes (collection). After every act of destruction and clearing up, the idol construction begins anew.

Excerpt from El Kazovsky, “Some Motifs for the Game”,

*Mozgó Világ*, October 1978

## [2] The “Primordial Event”

An extraordinarily important role in the life of El Kazovsky was played by a brief love affair he had with Can Togay, a young man of Turkish origin who was barely twenty years of age, and seven years younger than El Kazovsky. Though their relationship ended after just a few days, the symbolic date of their meeting later became a starting point, as it were, from which El Kazovsky counted time, and was fetishised as a kind of “primordial event”. It is no exaggeration to state that his monumental, tragic oeuvre was born from the memory of this exceptional apogee of happiness.

1975. I. 15.

*“I frequently celebrate this event, just like many people celebrate the birth of Jesus every year at Christmas. Because it was a wonderful, idyllic experience: that infinitely elusive happiness, which I had always longed for so badly, and which I’d already given up on. ... And everything was just as I’d imagined, just how I’d lived it out in my fantasies... For it to happen was impossible, yet in my soul I experienced requited love, getting everything that radiated from this young, tender female consciousness, total acceptance... To touch a face like that is heaven, even if nothing else takes place. ... It really doesn’t matter if events happen in reality or just in the soul, and I do not need to exercise dominance over another in reality, physically, if I can experience in my soul that he is sacrificing his life completely for me, that he is there for me, and was born for me... That is paradise, true happiness.”*

*“This is no dull flatland, but absolute life, the peak of a moment.”*

From this point on, his art was kept alive by innate loss, insatiable longing and the need to confront the unattainable. In his works, he would do nothing but continuously denote, indicate and identify himself and the Other, and respectively relate, retell and repeat their common story *ad infinitum*. Whatever suffering his unquenchable thirst for creation had sprung from, El Kazovsky not only felt his pain, but also interpreted it. He escaped from the narcissistic trap of self-pity and melancholy through recognition and understanding: he did not waste away vainly licking his wounds, but, through acknowledgment, he found a new lease of life. His loss never eased, but the torture was soothed: even in non-being, the survivor is enriched by the lost one.

In this small room, we have displayed the documents of this affair, including El Kazovsky’s portrait painted as a college student in 1973, and a video recording of Can Togay today, recalling their original meeting. It is our undisguised objective to contrast the banality of the event with the cosmic dimensions of the artistic myth constructed around it.

## [3] Cast Shadows

### [Sors bona, nihil aliud]



*Sors bona, nihil aliud (Black Artemis)*, 2001  
Oil on canvas. Private collection

Towering over the middle of a wild, eerily darkening landscape is the slim figure of the virginal yet boyish goddess, the Black Artemis: standing on a tall pediment, she dominates the scene unapproachably. At her feet, rearing up towards her, a myriad wild animals huddle together longingly: they have fallen victim to the goddess of hunting through the power of her beauty. Whether as a living body, a fetish object, a beautiful statue or a monument, she keeps her distance from the world – her unapproachability is as cosmic as the sun, moon and stars around her, as the cycle of nature, as time itself.

The apparition is made ghostly by the long, aggressively cast shadows. El Kazovsky was never interested in the painterly play of light, yet he would always stick closely to the motif of shadow. He had a precise understanding of the metaphysics of painting: every picture is a priori a silhouette, a shadow-image, a substitute for life, a cipher for absence.

### [The Legend of the Cast Shadow, or the Birth of Imagery out of the Spirit of Love]

Cast shadows are distinctive and profoundly meaningful motifs of El Kazovsky's imagery. The way they lie, clearly outlined, along the ground in his barren, moonlike landscapes, stretching out at a sharp angle from the base of every sky-scraping tree, post and idol, evokes a sinister reality. El Kazovsky was not concerned with picturesque plays of light; all he was interested in was the motif of the long, outstretched, black, powerful shadow, for he understood precisely the metaphysics of painting: every picture is a priori a silhouette, a shadow picture, which – despite serving to conjure up some kind of illusion of the presence of the one portrayed – always had something to do with absence, the transience and memory of a moment, and – in the final analysis – absolute mortality.

As suggested by the ancient legend, the art of painting originated from the need for memory: when the daughter of the clay modeller of Sicyon called Butades learns that her lover must leave the next day, she uses the light of a lamp to draw the outline of his face on the wall. The drawing serves to immortalise that rapturous moment when the Other *was still there* – to preserve the memory, even when the Other is away. The rapid art of drawing is inspired by the fleeting moment and is given rise by the *pain* of the abandoned one.



The portrait is the image of the Other: to draw it, to behold it, to meditate on it, to continue dialogue with it – in the space filled by absence. The silhouette makes His absence present – and by taking His place, it exhorts a reckoning with the actual situation.

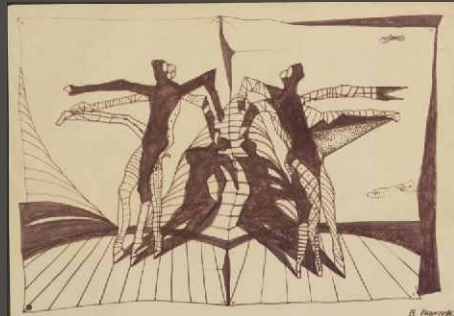
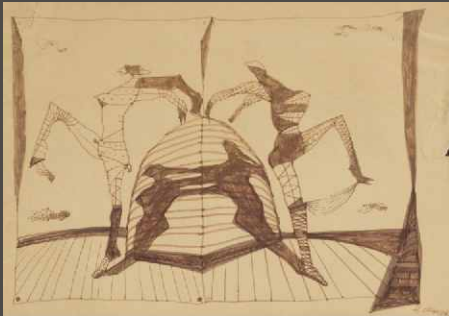
*"To leave a trace, that is the only thing of interest. In art too, I do not want to settle in, only to leave a trace. A temporary trace of a temporary existence – that is my human maximum."*

*"... in the mean time desire builds itself a perfect torture chamber in the memory."*

The nostalgic power of the once-upon-a-time moment and the hallucinatory yearning after the presence of things link El Kazovsky to the tradition of Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst and the French Surrealists, the only movement in art history to exert a genuine influence on his imagery. These painters were the ones who most noticeably realised that the more sharply the shadow is detached from the body – of which it is a projection – the more powerful its presence seems. They therefore commonly used this effect even when depicting the most bizarre of their surreal creatures – this increased the magical potency of the scene. Although El Kazovsky also initially experimented with photomontage and with constructing body hybrids, of all the tools borrowed from Surrealism, the cast shadow became the enduring motif in his imagery.



*Venus Voyeur, 2001*  
Pen and ink on paper. Collection of Gábor Hunya

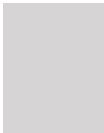


*Pas de deux IV,*  
1978  
Felt-tip pen on paper  
Collection of  
Imre Nagy-Baló

## [4] The Room of “Greek Bodies”


In his public interviews, El Kazovsky often recalled how, as a young child in Leningrad, he was filled with sensual joy looking at the ancient Greek statues and Roman copies on display on the ground floor of the Hermitage. He regularly accompanied his art historian mother to the museum, where he could see them and admire them at close range, and also study the collection of Greek vases, whose figural decorations taught him early on the main stories from Greek mythology. This early imprinting turned him into a life-long enthusiast for ancient and early classical Greek sculpture – to such an extent that many of its basic motifs (the torso, the Parcae, the Sirens, etc.) were later incorporated into his own art.

From the very beginning, El Kazovsky was interested in the art of sculpture not for itself, but for the erotic charge of beautiful bodies.



*“My relation with sculpture as an object is very intense. I would willingly touch every statue I like. ... For as long as I can remember, I’ve been in love with Greek statues ... even today I creep around them until I can get my hands on them. ... Greek marble is so utterly special to touch... the infinitely erotic experience of sculpture.”*

Further analogies of this ideal are the white plaster cast made from a live model by his classmate, the sculptor Ildikó Bakos, who gave it to the artist around 1988–1989, and which El Kazovsky kept in his home for nearly twenty years; and also the series of photographs which the artist took in the second half of the 1970s of a naked male model with his face covered. Both these objects are evidence of his fetishistic admiration for the beautiful male body.



*“A leg, an arm, a chest, the hips, the neck, the curve of the neck, the shoulder, that’s an incredible experience in itself.”*

## [5] Pygmalion’s Studio

According to the narrative by Ovid from two thousand years ago, Pygmalion, the king of Cyprus, carved a beautiful body which he fell in love with, and which Aphrodite, by her grace, brought to life as Galatea, to be his companion. The “story” of Pygmalion and Galatea has long provided a fruitful metaphorical framework for the arts, inasmuch as it addresses the complex relations of the ages-old “love triangle” of artist, model and work. In western art traditions, the connections between the real thing and the imitation, the living and the artificial, the mortal and the eternal – or

in general: “life” and “art” – is an “eternal” question (or at least one that stretches back many millennia). In Ovid’s classical interpretation, in the blessed state of a loving embrace, at that apogee of ecstasy, every difference and distance between artist, work and model ceases to be.



*Dzhan Panopticon X*, 1979, Szeged, JATE Club

As an artist, El Kazovsky was tied to the presence of the living, breathing human body by a quite peculiar bond. “The poses held by figures and my connections with the models were always important to me. The poses themselves were so strange and sharp that I hardly needed to map them out at all. This was one of the precedents leading to me staging the *Dzhan Panopticon* [1].”

*“For somebody who works alone in the studio, it’s really something special to suddenly be able to paint not just with a brush, but with a person. In the theatre it’s possible to work with people the way I work with a brush.”*

During his ritual game, El Kazovsky would turn the happy ending of the taletragically upside down (instead of breathing life into inert material, he solidified living beauty into a fetish or monument, thereby resulting in its destruction), and he also subjugated his painting to this idea. What took place in his “studio”, on his canvases and in his drawings, was not a sensual, painterly representation of the beautiful, flesh-and-blood body or of requited love, but quite the opposite: reflection, the marking of absence, two-dimensional abstraction, cipher formation, sheer reminiscence. It is for this reason that, in these pictures, the “Greek bodies” [4] turn into flat silhouettes, fragments of objects erected on tables or pedestals, figments of the imagination of the inquisitive and watchful “migratory animals” [8] and the disembodied “lost heads”. In an interview he said, “The torsos ... are not human creatures, but objective objects, fetishes ... the idols raised by the soulful being, the poor ‘animal’”.

Instead of the “apogee” of blissful togetherness [2], what is expressed here is the despair of an artist surveying the distance and his objective situation. Whatever name it is given – taken from some ancient, Christian or other mythology – that is a side issue compared with its secondary and ersatz nature.

But Pygmalion's studio is also a theatre: the eventness and temporality of Galatea's emergence, presence and passing are also part of it.

*"Greek culture focuses incredibly strongly on the momentariness of life, and consequently also on the fantastic, revelatory presence of beauty, its undermined nature and its finiteness. Alongside it is the preordained vulnerability of man ... this preordained rapidity leaves its mark on their entire mythology."*

## [6] The Room of Sexes and Genders

It is well known that El Kazovsky was – to use today's parlance – transgender. Even at a very young age he resented the fact that he had been born with the body of a woman. As a little girl, he was fond of dressing up as a soldier. He felt most comfortable taking dominant, traditionally male roles, and this led him over time to develop a masculine identity. In his twenties, he replaced his feminine Russian name with the more manly-sounding one. He found it unbearable to follow what were regarded as typically "female" patterns of dress and behaviour. (Another section of this exhibition deals separately with the influence of Russian culture [17]. El Kazovsky was raised in this atmosphere, in which the clichés of "nineteenth-century stylised male consciousness" were particularly strong.)

*"My case is quite special, and in many respects the life I was born with is built around the fact that I am transsexual. ... Transsexuals who feel that they are women are perfectly visible, striking even, because in our culture 'womanhood' always makes a display of itself. ... My situation is different, because I am a man living in what for me is a peculiar female body, and to complicate matters even further, I am a homosexual man who is attracted to very girlish-looking young men, whom I in fact see as women, and whom I love as women."*

The artist dealt with his particular quandary of fate not only obliquely, through his art; he was also uncommonly candid when speaking about it publicly. At the same time, he made strict demands of those around him to respect his identity and to treat him in accordance with how he regarded himself: as a proud and sensitive being. This room was therefore named the "room of genders" not only because it deals with the topic of sexuality and gender, but also because of El Kazovsky's struggle against social prejudices and constraints.

For many thousands of years, the norms of human sexual behaviour in our culture have been governed by the binary code of *male* and *female*, which has long been regarded as nature's way. Although western modernity has moved a certain distance towards greater flexibility in such interpretations, the commonly accepted view is still that people are born *either* as a boy *or* as a girl. This biological determination leads, almost inevitably, to people having to learn the social roles that have traditionally been associated with their gender, and having to conform to the

readymade models for masculinity and femininity. This is the reason why, even today, the state of being transgender is something that is virtually incomprehensible to the majority of people.

One of the defining aspects of El Kazovsky's art was the boldness with which it confronted the constraining order of this *either-or* paradigm. The essence of the problem is clearly summed up by a work from 2003, exhibited here, which has a monstrous, two-headed migratory animal at its centre: its heads face in opposite directions, while a symmetrical inscription on its body reads: "VÁGY-VÁGY" ("DESIRE-DESIRE"); at the creature's legs, the roads that lead to the left and right can be seen eventually to meet up on the infinitely distant horizon of the desert.

Pointing in different directions, the community of *desires* (VÁGY-VÁGY) overwrites the forced *either-or* (VAGY-VAGY – in the Hungarian language, an accented or non-accented vowel in a word will change the meaning completely; El Kazovsky's wordplay is obvious in Hungarian) of gender differences.



Vágy-Vágy, 2003. Oil on paper  
Collection of Gábor Kozák and Sára Stomp

*"Ambivalence is very much a part of me, even in the sense of the Whole. This is also in my pictures, but not simply as an either-or ... on one side there is an either-or, and on the other side too, and the two are facing each other and can be multiplied further – that's infinity itself. One world, whose parts, constantly facing each other, reflect on each other, and can be broken down till infinity both inwardly and outwardly."*

As an artist, El Kazovsky became intensely concerned with the question of sexual identity in the 1970s, during his years at college. Initially, the "feminine" and "masculine" characters mostly appeared as indistinctly drawn figures in stylised "flirtatious" genre pieces, mythologically themed, often ironic duels, frequently in an array of weird hybridised forms. His early works clearly show the influence of the bizarre phantasmagories of the body produced by the classical Western Surrealists

[3]. We frequently see grotesque bodies that have been truncated, or are mechanical, or else, like a puppet, have been jerked around, propped up by supports, or put on stage like an empty shell – sometimes they have "feminine" attributes (hats, high heels, "dainty" poses), while on other occasions they are invested with "masculine" features, strutting pugnaciously.

It is as though the sexual attributes "identifying" the bodies – both in a biological (sex) and a social (gender) sense – were already playing a major role in turning the body into something grotesque and comical: it is as though El Kazovsky [4, 5] were reserving the quality of beauty exclusively for use with androgynous (of both genders, that is, of undecided gender) human bodies. Bearing this in mind, it is easy to understand why he was such a fan of the androgynous rock star David Bowie and of Sid Vicious, exhibiting an enthusiasm more commonly found among teenage girls. [16] Tilting seesaws, "biased" scales, motifs of dynamic equilibrium, various twin figurations and duplications, the generally multifaceted nature of motifs, the

endless game of turning to face things and turning one's back on things: all these are used to comment on and poke fun at the repressive symmetry of the rigidly bipolar world, the symmetry of *vagy-vagy* (either-or) – in the name of *sem-sem* (neither-nor), or rather, the more energetic *is-is* (both-and). Instead of occupying static positions, there is transfiguration, metamorphosis, [12] intensive pulsation – this is life, creation's living "law of motion".

*"The love life is the important thing ... when it comes to sexuality, what I have is mainly just studies. I don't know the meaning of primary and secondary gender signs – but I do know the meaning of desire. I know that I only need to see, even in a photo, and I know. I know what it is that moves me. The right kind of face, torso or leg appears before me, and I know that's what I want. This is a distinct feeling, which can be expressed in ideal images, because it repeats itself. It can be recognised in the shapes of certain lines, in a movement or in a sentence."*

El Kazovsky was fearless and consistent in the prominence he attached to what is indeed a very real human problem, which the majority of society would prefer to deal with as self-evident "naturalness", although it is by no means that. This attitude – which intensifies contradictions, yet also makes them more condensed and tragically more profound – is manifested in the fact that many visual and thematic components of El Kazovsky's art (self-control and control over the Other [11], victimhood and violence, suffering and rapture, tying people up and playing games, role swapping, theatricality [9], fetishism, etc. [7]) are remarkably similar to the hallmarks of the sexual role-playing that today goes under the name of BDSM (*Bondage & Discipline / Domination & Submission / Sadism & Masochism*).

*"... I am a creature with sadist leanings".*

The essence of seeking pleasure through Sado-Masochism is that the parties involved are free to share out and exchange the roles of "master" (*dom, domina*) and "servant" (*sub*); the former inflicts the (mostly symbolic) violence and the latter takes it, and through this often theatrical, stylised role-play, they cause each other contradictory yet mutual sexual gratification. In his playful BDSM roles – which share the all-important trait of being possible to play out regardless



of biological gender, following the patterns of division deep inside oneself, such as the dominant, greedy predator versus the helpless, defenceless, suffering prey [8] – El Kazovsky may have come to recognise his own restless personal identity. The "ecstatic Sado-Maso" (El Kazovsky's own expression), embodied in the beautiful figures of self-harming, self-decapitating/self-castrating torsos in his paintings, installations and *Dzhan Panopticons*, is a one-person game, in which El Kazovsky – far beyond his own destiny – glimpsed the quintessence of humanity's tragic anthropology.

*"I always see human situations very sharply, and that's how I want to show them Obscurity is disturbing and boring. Obscurity is hopeless, but it isn't tragic."*

*Guardian Angels III*, 1990. Oil on canvas. Collection of Dr Miklós Nagy




In 2004 El Kazovsky created perhaps the most personal and biographical work of his life, a series of digital photomontages titled *Body Tales*. In them, almost every element of his personal mythology – his friends and love affairs, locations and motifs – is given a place and summarised. First exhibited at the Bartók 32 Gallery, the work, consisting of nine pieces and printed in two different sizes, was later remade as four complete series, dated and signed, partly repainted, and inscribed with unique texts and dedications.

## [7] Fetishes


El Kazovsky's relation with the things dear to him (people, objects, arts or artworks) was characterised by a unique fetishistic object addiction. A face, a marble statue, a film, a piece of music or an excerpt of text could enchant him so much that he would cherish it for decades, keep returning to it, and experience it rapturously over and over again. (On the other hand, if he found a particular word or picture repulsive, that could provoke a phobia or a fit of panic.) He sought out, collected, constructed and celebrated his idols with passion: in the end, this tendency provided him with one of the most important themes of his creative career.

The visible, touchable fetish object is a kind of substitute: it stands in for whoever or whatever is inaccessible by virtue of being infinite, transcendent or divine. It is placed on a platform, a podium, a column or a mountain peak, because from there it can radiate its power of attraction far and wide without fear of being approached.



*"The idol ... is the unattainable emotion ... for me, emotional pleasure is raised to the level of an idol, and is so abstract, because it is unattainable. At the same time, there is a connection with the unattainability of faith."*

El Kazovsky understood perfectly that fetishistic subjectivity often settles upon and occupies insignificant objects: indeed, he enrobed himself with the radiant energy that reflected onto him, enthralled him and tormented him, as the divine "allure" of beauty and wholeness.



*"The idol is a symbol of divine power that is created by man, and it radiates divine power manifested in a human way. If human faith runs out, then it becomes an empty idol, but as long as it is filled with faith, we can present it as an icon."*

There is therefore something of profound significance and melancholic irony in El Kazovsky arranging and rearranging his own fetishes in the foreground of his pictures, like some kind of personal knick-knacks. Of course, as he puts it, this is a "piercing melancholy, which cuts till it bleeds, like a shard of glass": the bizarre line-up of still-life motifs points straight towards the brilliant, iridescent horizon of the deep. He keeps them under control, just like the beautiful models in the panopticon – yet the universal infinity of perspective is beyond the scope available to him. This giddy contrast of depth between the close (like a still life) and the distant (like a

landscape) offers an accurate reflection of his troubled destiny: despite the fact that he dominates and surveys everything around him, in the bigger picture, he is the one who is most adrift.



Francis Bacon: *Triptych*, 1982. Oil and pastel on canvas. Private collection, courtesy The Estate of Francis Bacon © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2015, HUNGART



*Landscape with Relic*, 1975. Oil on canvas  
Private collection

*“... this is an aggressive melancholy, a piercing melancholy, which cuts till it bleeds, like a shard of glass. My relation to the concept of melancholy is complicated, for it has many different interpretations that are all quite far from each other: as a sad, veil-like mood – the way it is explained in everyday use – that’s completely alien to me. But I believe that a person with a consciously double life cannot help being melancholy, in the ontological sense of the word. Unless that person is truly a believer.”*

The artist idolised his favourites in a most peculiar way. In his home he kept dozens of books, photos, reproductions, postcards and newspaper cuttings of his favourite classics and old masters (ancient Greek statues, Romanesque sculptures, paintings by Antonello da Messina, Georges de la Tour and Caravaggio), and of works by modern artists, such as Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi and Francis Bacon. On his journeys, he never failed to stop by his usual places of “pilgrimage” and seek out his favourite fetish objects.

In this respect, he was not unrelated to Francis Bacon (1909–1992), who has a sumptuous feel for intensifying the presence of “flesh” in paint, giving it an almost theatrical “rendition”. Bacon’s *Triptych* of 1982, on loan from London, bears an alarming similarity to the early nudes that El Kazovsky conceived as “still lifes” [11]: their emotional intensity, similarly to Bacon’s “cages”, is accentuated by the contrast foil of the abstract background planes.



*"I am very attached to Francis Bacon, whose life, I feel somehow, is completely identical to mine. Even when I was at college I saw that he had made something out of me, a part of me in its entirety ... Bacon has remained a life-changing experience for me, and the sight of a picture of his is an almost sensual delight."*

El Kazovsky also idolised Greek sculpture [4] as well as David Bowie and Sid Vicious [16], but he even responded to his favourite films in the same way.

In the small room that we named "cinema", some brief clips can be seen from a few films that El Kazovsky watched twenty or thirty times and knew by heart. "I like to sit in the front row when watching a film, so that I can be 'in it'," he said in an interview, implying his love for the kind of art that completely absorbed and captivated him.

Finally, as a fetish object, and as a lead-in to the subject titled "Animal Psychology", we have exhibited El Kazovsky's collection of teddy bears and toy creatures.

## [8] "Animal Psychology"

### or the Dialectic of Desire

El Kazovsky liked to identify his own being as a "mixed animal", a "migratory animal", or the "last animal" – this provided him with an easily schematised, multifaceted metaphor which he could use as an incorporeal symbol, and into which he could condense all the internal contradictions that convulsed him.

*"The mixed animal ... is a carnivore, a predator ... this is a self-portrait, and I identify myself with the animal figures, not with the idol or the object."*

By his own definition, this figure, representing "the human subject, the active, soulful living being", is "mixed" because it is simultaneously dog and wolf (or jackal): its instinctive drive allows it both to acquiesce to the constraints of the rules of civilisation imposed on it, and to be at the mercy of its unbridled desires. The hot-blooded, constantly ravenous aggressor is mixed with the pitiful victim who yearns only for love and protection. One moment he pounces, the next he has a knife at his throat: he is a bloodthirsty monster and a pathetic wretch, a baying jackal and a whining tapir in one and the same person. It is also "mixed" because its gender is undecided or interchangeable: it is female and male, both and neither. It is a "migratory animal" because exploration is in its blood: whether sitting, watching for prey, or swooping like a bodiless bat, it never rests and has no home to return to. Its life is temporary by nature: constantly burning in the purifying fire of purgatory. "Does the spirit fly




*Quadrige*, 1984. Oil with cardboard cut-outs, insulating tape, string, plastic strips, plastic netting and necklace applied to wood. Kolozsváry Collection, Győr

away?” he often asks, but he surmises that there is no chance breaking free from this in-between realm. Caught in a frame, like a shadow, as a secondary, tertiary, quaternary projection, like an “image within an image”, it is tossed hither and thither in El Kazovsky’s universe – wherever it is, it is *there*, but it is never *at home* there.

And it is the “last animal”, because its utterly divided identity forces it to the very edge of existence – it is unable truly to identify with any single role.


The title of this section was borrowed from several of El Kazovsky’s works in which he dealt with these fateful contradictions. Because “animal psychology” is not psychology – the famous motif of the “dog”, despite the fact that El Kazovsky now and then applied the title of “self-portrait”, is not the individual identifier of the painter’s true personality and psychological reality. He himself always protested whenever an attempt was made to explain his works by means of his private, spiritual constellational: he insisted that “the pictures are not psychological or sexological descriptions” and that “we don’t have to see the author in the work”. It is also for this reason that the migratory animal almost always appears in the plural: repeated, flipped over into opposing pairs, in a four-in-hand arrangement, or conjugated over and over again in an endless series of frames in a graphic novel.



*“They represent absolute mortality, the state of being thrown into life, suffering creatures. They are encaged, with the rules of human society imposed upon them. The seated form was created from the following sentence: ‘Where are you going, you dumb animal? Sit!’ That’s where the dour, stylised form comes from. But when I see the face of a wolf – it makes my heart melt.”*

First and foremost, “animal psychology” uncovers the dialectic of desire: the “active, soulful living being” is above all else the desirous subject, who suffers at the permanent loss of the object of desire, the beloved Other. The constant lack of satisfaction causes dependence, vulnerability and fragility – but this also engenders boundless vitality, restlessness and volatility. The “migratory animal” is often accompanied by the motif of the speech bubble, borrowed from graphic novels

[11]: here, the silhouettes of the models, dancing girls, statue torsos and monuments – symbols of the absence of the Other – are drawn in the thought and idea bubbles, the memory and reflection bubbles.



*“I am not at all attracted by the similar or the identical, only by otherness. As an older man, I long for a boy. Yet he should also be my mother, and then in this relationship I’m a little child. I desire the physical beauty of the other without experiencing myself as a body.”*

## **[9] In Praise of Theatricality**

El Kazovsky did a lot of work with theatre directors, and designed costumes and stage sets for important performances. In this room, however, the focus is not on these works – which are sadly poorly documented – but on the theatricality that imbued his art in general. Stage floorboards,

curtains, footlights, wildly gesticulating performers, extreme perspectives and sharp contrasts crop up everywhere in his works – from pocket-sized drawings to live performances featuring a large cast. But why?

El Kazovsky would surely have agreed with Nikolai Evreinov, the important outstanding turn-of-the-century Russian theatre director and theoretician, who described *theatricality* as, “the anarchic urge that resides in all of us, which longs most of all for a genuine and insanely brave metamorphosis ... in order to contrast his own world with the one that has been forced upon him”. True theatricality, by this notion, is “the joy of voluntary transformation”: a brave and exalted role-play, the intensification of the phantasmagorical “Ego”. People who are constantly quarrelling with their inborn, ready-made situation may be able to find themselves in never-ending “games” of dressing up, playing characters and making substitutes. This strikes a chord with the aesthetics of camp [16], made famous by Susan Sontag: the excessive, “unnatural” programme of aestheticisation which – from Ludwig II of Bavaria and *Swan Lake* to David Bowie – has mischievously thumbed its nose at the “natural”, the inherited symbolic system of social and sexual roles, and the power of convention and so-called “good taste”.



*Small Purgatory*, 1992. Oil on canvas. Private collection

*“I am attracted by theatricality, for on stage we play out the primeval drama over and over again.”*

Fetishism and theatricality are both ways in which living people defend themselves against the unfortunate situation of being forced, against their innermost urges, to fit in with the existing order of things: they are intensive expressions of the life instinct, eruptions of energy.

El Kazovsky’s art is nevertheless not simply camp: his rebellion is not quelled by radical aesthetics, by the “triumph of style over content”, or the triumph of irony over tragedy. Quite the contrary: since, in his case, theatricality always means that the “Ego” is constantly watching from the outside, as though observing himself from “up in the gods”, as he acts on the public “stage”, he not only identifies with the role-playing subjectivity of camp, but also articulates it, and moulds it as pleasure and as pain. The words spoken by Torquato Tasso in Goethe’s play could equally apply to El Kazovsky: “And if mankind are in their torments mute, A God gave me to tell the pangs I feel.”

It is thus worthwhile interpreting El Kazovsky’s heartfelt attraction towards all that is spectacular, monumental and extreme.

*“My radicalism ... is perhaps an innate talent. For sure I am an impatient type. Radicalism against death is this: the impatience of life, its expansion, the desire to occupy as much space as possible in life – after all, there is so little of it. Life is incredibly short, so it must be spread out as much as possible. Not only in practice, in motion, but also in the conscience, in vision, in thinking. And even in enjoyment.”*

Brought up on Russian culture [17], El Kazovsky was introduced to classical ballet at a very young age, but it was not until much later that it took on an important role in his life. He was not enthralled by the romantic fairytales or the artistry in the movements, but by the spectacular presentation of a beautiful, sensual body. The sight of the dancers, idolised as fetish, acted on him like a narcotic, like an “opiate”. He was particularly captivated by Matthew Bourne’s choreography for *Swan Lake*, presented in London in 1995, in which the swans – in line with the love story’s homosexual reinterpretation – were played by male dancers. El Kazovsky went to see this performance, which was conceived in the spirit of camp, on several occasions, sometimes on consecutive days, and he would later revisit it, almost obsessively, on video and in his works – his poetry and his Panopticons.

## [10] The Room of “Sharp Spaces”

*“I’ve always been interested in spaces. At college, all my designs were larger-than-human-size group statues, which I conceived on a massive scale. What I actually exhibited were really just plastic miniatures, small, scale-model sets. The group and spatial relations were the important thing, not the individual figures. This means they are not really related to classical sculpture, but are actually pictures projected into three dimensions.”*



*Desert Monument III, 1978*  
Oil on canvas. Private collection

The entire oeuvre of El Kazovsky – from live performances, through spatial installations and objects to paintings and drawings – takes place in the arena that lies between living, physical bodies, three-dimensional spaces, and planar projections that have been turned into images [3]. The often crude, wild perspectivism of his pictures, the aggressive rhythms of the intersecting pictorial planes, the scratched edges and pointed angles of the installed planes, all need to be “read together” with the sensual proximity of touchable, strokable human bodies.

*“I very much like sharp and threatening spaces.”*

As viewers, we can only experience what the artist meant by “sharp and threatening” spaces if we are prepared to join in his game with our entire physical being.

The type of picture called “Desert Sandbox” makes up a separate group. The irony in the title is impossible to misconstrue: in majestic, barren landscapes stretching off into infinity, in the foreground of mysterious sandy deserts fringed by distant peaks, “playgrounds”, unthreatening sandboxes, fenced in by sharp contours, provide a safe haven for the migratory animal, the stray dog, to play out his own inconsequential games of self-defence, his rituals of memory, over and over again, in front of the inscrutable, sublime horizon of Creation.



*Desert Sandbox III*, 1988  
Oil on canvas. Collection of Imre Nagy-Baló

*“The cage that surrounds the figure is the entire system of relations, the connective tissue, the skeleton, the support structure; after all, we can describe culture as a whole as a cage system like this, which sets the framework for life, and holds it together. It’s an artificial construct, which sustains humanity.”*

In this section of the exhibition we also present two installations. One is a full-scale reconstruction, deliberately left uncoloured, of the installation titled *Desert Sandbox VII* – the only set of objects that has been preserved in its authentic state. The original, which could not be transported due to its delicate condition, is held by the Janus Pannonius Museum in Pécs. The objects were painted by El Kazovsky himself, and he also personally supervised their installation.

The other ensemble was constructed using elements from the ad hoc installation exhibited in the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest in 1993.

## [11] From “Still Life” to “Graphic Novel”

This room is dedicated to El Kazovsky’s series titled *Vajda Sheets*. Between 1980 and 1986, the artist made a large number of variations based on two pencil drawings from 1936 by Lajos Vajda. Using a variety of media – pen, chalk, felt-tip pen, Indian ink, tempera, collage – El Kazovsky takes the alienated, mechanically reduced and duplicated, drawings and turns them into a stage for his own narratives, populating them with his own characters. He seems almost to violate the innocent, lyrical forerunners: the unique, fragile lines that Vajda made by hand are invaded by El Kazovsky’s brutal contours, jolting contrasts, sharp colours and crude perspectives. The series, with its references to the commercial genre of the “graphic novel” and to the thriving and fragmentary masscultural visuality of the 1980s, is a graphic and original example of the appropriation art of the decade: exponents replaced all spiritual and emotional dialogue with an arbitrary and disrespectful appropriation of artistic traditions, debasing them into what could be described as their own personal “consumer” goods. The “drawings” have been installed to make it clear that El Kazovsky was not entering into constructive dialogue with the great master of Hungarian Surrealism, but was almost covering him up, smothering him with himself, usurping him.

In his appropriation of Lajos Vajda, however, El Kazovsky was not guided by some kind of countercultural urge or avant-garde rebellion. It is no coincidence that the Vajda original that El



*Vajda Sheets and non-Vajda Sheets.*  
*Theatrical Graphic Novel*, undated  
Indian ink, pencil and application on paper  
From the First Hungarian Vision Collection

Kazovsky most frequently reworked into a “graphic novel” was a poetic, multi-perspective still life: it was as though here, in artistic form, he were enacting the conceptual change in his art, which he spoke of at length in his interviews.

The early nudes El Kazovsky made, inspired by Francis Bacon [7], he called “still lifes”: they were driven by the sensual pleasure he experienced while contemplating the bodies portrayed.

*“In my third year at college I started with ‘still lifes’ ... that’s what I called the nudes I made after the live model. I was interested in how I could look at a human without seeing them straight away as a person. I tied up the models’ heads and bound them. ... For me they were precious objects: I liked them tied up, with the flesh bulging through the cords. What I was aiming for was to present them in my pictures like a delicious bunch of grapes ... I painted them out of pleasure, like I would a peach or an apple.”*

The conceptual change consisted in El Kazovsky gradually abandoning the painterly programme of directly reproducing the moment of pleasure, transforming the images into narratives of his own personal “history”, into “graphic novels for reading”. This is why he lifts himself into the picture, or brings himself to the surface – this is his elaboration of the visual ciphers of the “migratory animal”. [8]

*“My pictures turned into graphic novels, and a duplicate of myself appeared in them, because I wanted to ‘play a role’ too, just like I participate in the graphic novels of my life. ...the still life, with its need for a ‘perpendicular’ relationship, was transformed into a ‘story’, a series, a ‘graphic novel’ – this made it possible to describe the positions between the subjects and objects of desire. The picture was transformed into a stage, a quasi-theatre.”*

His *Vajda Sheets* are not graphic novels in the sense that one can progress through the narrative frame by frame: rather, each “frame” is a variation of the same basic system of relations, the unbridgeable distance between the desirous subject and the desired object (the missing Other). [3]

## [12] The Room of Pulsations

El Kazovsky’s paintings are characterised by a bristling intensity, a radiant energy, and a restive, breathless vitality. Whether in his colours, his shapes, spatial effects of the planar patterns, he is evidently attracted to bold contrasts and rhythmic – though not decorative – repetitions. His mode of painting is also distinguished by rapid, sweeping brushstrokes, and by the dynamic flow of gestures.

He has no time for refinements, he disregards details, and nowhere does he linger – indeed, in his haste, his movements seem to spill over, as it were, into the next picture, where they carry on producing further variations. It is as though El Kazovsky did not think in terms of autonomous motifs or separate “whole” pictures, but rather painted in cycles, and was more interested in how



the “stroking” undulations of the painter’s hand gestures could turn a cloud into a swan, the swan into an egg, and then into a fiery crater or back into the cloud. The pulsating painterly energy, overflowing at the edges of certain works, becomes an expression not only of the breathing of vigorous life but, in a way, also of the uninterrupted beating of the cosmos, the world beyond humanity. El Kazovsky himself had something to say about this:

*“It is impossible for us to know whether existence, whose history began – let’s say – with the Big Bang, will scatter about all over the place, or will shrink back, only to start expanding once more ... in such a way the world keeps on pulsating.”*



*Eggcup Grail VIII (Golden Egg with Dead Swan), 2002*  
Oil on canvas. Private collection

“For a whole month I rubbed it in contemplation  
For a whole month I polished the long-nose  
That is why it is so smooth  
That is why it is so curvy

For two years I twirled it and smoothed it  
From palm to palm I rolled it  
That is why it is so perfect and alive  
Sealed so snugly in its shell

Out of sight I keep it and perfect it  
This model of ancient roundness  
That is why it is the equinox  
That is why inclines are inclined”

*Excerpt from El Kazovsky’s poem About the Egg and Words, in*  
*El Kazovsky, Hormokszökőkút, Versek [Sand Fountain, Poems]*  
*(Budapest, Magvető, 2011, 19–20.)*

This provided the justification for us to select the unconventional format of “condensing” pictures that use identical motifs into “clouds”. The painter also made the following statement about what gives a picture its power:

*“The task of a picture is to have enough intensity, enough power, to be an exciting prism that can suck up ‘everything’ inside itself, to have the power to make the viewer stop.”*

*“A picture is an energetic unit, a fabric of intentionally and unknowingly chosen rhythms and proportions. ... what is important for me is not for the viewer to decipher the symbols, but for the picture to have the impact of an explosion, by shifting the energy level.”*

*“... and then you get these pulsations emanating from the actual material, which is not material, but energy... There is some kind of dialogue going on constantly during the act of painting, sometimes between the figures depicted, though sometimes it’s simply the conversation between the material, a certain brushstroke and the figure. ... It’s very odd when a certain paint talks to a certain line.”*

*“I like materials that are easy to mould, because I can impose my own rhythm upon them. When a man draws a line, he can set off in a thousand directions. And that line is material, like everything else.”*

*“Love fosters the exchange of energy, existence in the cosmos ... it is a massive force, but it serves absolutely no purpose.”*

## [13] Paper Frieze II

A good half year before his death in July 2008, fully aware that the end was approaching, El Kazovsky took on the task of painting his last monumental work on the two long walls of the large hall in the Bartók 32 Gallery in Budapest. The work is titled *Paper Frieze II*, and is exhibited here in its entirety and original order. Five years earlier, in the spring of 2002, the artist had already completed a similar series of paintings, applied to a single, broad strip of paper, which was subsequently cut up into what effectively became individual pictures. This time, the generous team at the gallery helped the seriously ill artist to complete the work by Christmas 2007. It took him around three weeks, working intensively for 8–10 hours every day.



The original setting of *Paper Frieze II* in the Bartók 32 Gallery, Budapest, in December 2007. Photo: András Szetey

In *Paper Frieze II*, El Kazovsky summarised the major themes, motifs, picture types and iconic sentence fragments of his enormous oeuvre into 23 fields of differing width but identical height (140 cm). From the early torsos and ballerinas to the swaying boats of his final years, from the boxlike spaces of his enclosed performances to desert mountain ranges, from reeling clouds and winding roads to encoffined twin dogs, he placed everything on show that his imagination, with its fondness for compact forms, had come up with over the decades. He did not execute the works piece by piece, but painted simultaneously across the whole of the area, measuring twice fifteen metres in length. This resulted in the rhythmic lushness of the grandiose series, and its painterly homogeneity: the continuity of the brushstrokes, and the uniformity of the colour combinations, the two-dimensional patterning and the painted surfaces. By compacting the pictures into the narrow corridor, our intention was to give viewers a sense of the physical closeness of painting process.

## [14] Iconostasis

Starting in 1988, El Kazovsky worked on an ensemble of artworks which cannot be described as a series, which he later presented at a number of exhibitions in different arrangements and



compositions, giving them different titles. The first showing was in 1988 in the Budapest exhibition hall of the Iparterv (Industrial Planning) Company, followed in 1990 by his first one-man show at the Kunsthalle, Budapest, then in 2002 in Győr, and finally in 2005 in Saint Petersburg. At each venue he displayed a largish selection of the collages he had made, using mixed media (painting and gluing), on uniformly sized cardboard, measuring roughly 80 × 80 cm.

The tableaux, which combined elements of El Kazovsky's personal mythology in different variations, were given one of two summary titles: *Migratory Animal in the Desert Sandbox*, or *Further Additions to the Story of the Last Animal and the Rumelian Star*. In these poetic titles, the “migratory animal” and the “last animal” are known to have served as the artist's monogram, while his “story” with the “Rumelian star” refers back to the primordial event [3]. Rumelia was the name given to the Turkish areas of the South Balkans, the birthplace of his eternal love.

The collection seen here – the largest assembled to date – totals forty works: we have given it the name *Iconostasis* because whenever El Kazovsky exhibited the ensemble together, he always insisted on installing them close together on a single wall, and he often used the name himself. The arrangement here also follows the principle of the “graphic novel” [11], yet it is also obvious that the artist was striving to achieve an explicitly monumental impact at the same time. Throughout his life he loved to conceive on a giant scale and to think in terms of spectacular “great forms”, but due to the limitations of his studio, coupled with his impatience with technology, he never attempted enormous pictures or murals. Nevertheless, the large iconostasis, composed of numerous smaller elements, grew into one of the main attractions of his solo exhibitions.

## [15] The “White Cube”

This section of the exhibition requires some explanation. The white cube is a technical term used in contemporary art, which first gained currency in the wake of an essay on the “ideology of the gallery space”, *Inside the White Cube*, written by the Irish art theoretician, Brian O'Doherty. It refers to the classic exhibition space (and the elitist approach to art embodied by it), which functions as a separate space, sealed off from the outside world, with bare, white walls offering a perfectly abstract and stimulus-free environment for Painting, with a capital “P”, the idealised eternity of masterpieces which stand their ground regardless of their time and place in history. The “white cube” as a neutral, abstract gallery space is mostly needed to show off the “abstract” formal art of late modernism (such as American Abstract Expressionism), which is associated with philosophical idealism: according to its “ideology”, in order to be able to take possession of the magnificent intellectual experience offered by coming into contact with the pictures, any viewer who is to be worthy of the art must leave behind the social, ethnic, religious, political, physical and sexual aspects of their identity. These days, contemporary art has firmly abandoned this form of navel-gazing “absolute art”, which is only accessible to the enlightened few – instead, artistic cognition varies according to context, and its changing nature is emphasised, taking greater account of place and time, and of local and cultural circumstances.

*"A gallery is built according to rules that are just as strict as those of a medieval church. The outside world is not allowed to penetrate inside, so the windows are usually blacked out. The walls are white. The light comes from the ceiling. The wooden floor is nicely polished so that our footsteps echo clinically, or else there is carpet everywhere so that we tread soundlessly, resting our feet, while our eyes are busy with the walls. Art, they say, can take on 'a life of its own'... It brings about the modernist transfer of perception from life to formal values."*

*"This clear, white, pure, artificial space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics. Here art is eternally exposed to public view ... there are only 'periods', but no time. Eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status; to be included there, we first have to be dead ... our own body seems superfluous, intrusive: the space suggests that while the eye and the soul are welcome guests, the body that occupies the space is not."*

Our exhibition is intended to cast the spotlight on El Kazovsky's art in a number of "contemporary" contexts: from the anthropology of fetishisation [7] and theatricality [9], through the socio-political aspects of sex and gender [6], to the historical genesis, the Russian origins [17], and



*The Odd Egg. Columbus's Egg II,*  
1992. Oil on canvas  
Kolozsváry Collection, Győr

a presentation of the Hungarian avant-garde and subcultural background [16], we have attempted to show the artist's oeuvre in a variety of widely differing cross-sections. By inserting this isolated "white cube" among these heterogeneous contexts, and installing it as an exhibition object, we intend to draw attention not only to the fact that El Kazovsky's works can indeed be seen and appreciated even from the point of view of "absolute painting" and from the aesthetic high ground of "museal art history", but also to the truth that today, no single taste or concept of art can claim to be representative of what "true" art is supposed to be.

It is for this reason that the pictures exhibited in the "White Cube" have been given "classical" museum labels and are illuminated neutrally and evenly; that every work is displayed individually; and that this section deserves attention independently from the rest.

## [16] Camp, Punk Subculture

El Kazovsky began his studies in the department of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest in the early 1970s. Having changed his name to El Kazovsky, he soon turned up at all kinds of alternative and underground art forums (such as the No. 1 group, or the apartment theatre of Péter Halász). The players and audience members of his later performances were mostly members of this subculture. The increasingly prominent question of his gender identity was partly the reason why he was so influenced by the radical countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies, the extreme aestheticisation of the camp style, and the rebellion of punk.

His keen involvement with this *second public* is all the more remarkable when we recall that El Kazovsky later frequently bemoaned the fact that his works were regularly misunderstood by his fellows: his common motif of being tied down, for example, was seen by them not as a reference to sadistic pleasure [6], but as a symbol of political oppression and restrictions on liberty. His marginality and non-conformity were of a different nature to those experienced by his associates. This became evident in the events that took place over a couple of years in the artistic group of which El Kazovsky was a formal member.

The vast majority of items in these two rooms come from the legacy he left behind at his Budapest home. His apartment studio was the "frame", while the "unique eclecticism" of the collections, montages and collages of objects he amassed there determined how they are displayed here. Holiday souvenirs, Xerox copies, newspaper cuttings, reproductions, photos, costume designs, panopticon details, original artworks – "everything is interconnected with everything". The sources of inspiration appear over and over again, as "migratory motifs" – in all manner of genres – not only here, but in the other rooms of the exhibition as well.

## [Camp]

In 1964 the American writer and essayist Susan Sontag introduced the word camp into contemporary discourse on art, whether that be literature, film, theatre, dance or music. She used the term to signify a kind of assumed affectation, kitsch artificiality, frivolous and profaning eclecticism, which proponents of sophisticated "good taste" and the strict aestheticism of "high art" dismissed out of hand as vulgar, tasteless and artistically second-rate. The camp mode of performance, however, was not just a counterculture: it simply ignored the conventional divisions between "good and bad taste" or "valuable and worthless art". Camp artists express themselves in their own way, naturally free and naive – without caring at all what others may think of their extravagant gestures, glittering sequins and gaudy costumes, as long as it lets them shamelessly satisfy their honest exhibitionism.

Since the *camp* mode of performance serves as a radical expression of otherness, it becomes the natural language for the public showings of sexual minorities, especially homosexuals. The video of *Swan Lake* by Matthew Bourne, shown in the room on theatricality [9], is a typical example of this kind of camp aesthetic.

El Kazovsky was drawn to the world of camp taste in many respects: this can be seen especially in his early *Dzhan Panopticons* [1], which were rather like bizarre costume or fashion shows, and in the borderline surrealist objects he made, such as the assemblage which was presented at the 1982 Biennale de Paris and displayed in detail here, and dedicated to David Bowie.

## [David Bowie | Sex Pistols]

El Kazovsky was passionately drawn to the punk movement, which started out in the United States and United Kingdom in the mid-seventies, but only reached Hungary sporadically.

*"I really like punk music and the whole style ... I was always apathetic towards fashion, but I had so many things in common with the punk phenomenon: utter desperation, inward aggression, unavoidable condemnation. Total collapse, but in a trashy, spectacular way, clinging to the margins with no future, dropping out, dispossessed, outcast, rejects, trash. I always worked with trash I built things out of trash."*

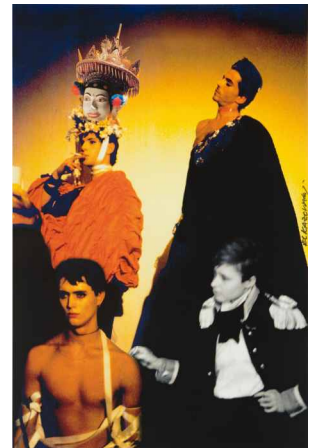
*"For sure it affected me with all its other hallmarks too: its noisy harshness, its ecstatic sadomasochism, its mixed quotation marks."*

He was particularly captivated by David Bowie and by the slim, fragile, androgynous character and explosive energy of the bass guitarist for the Sex Pistols, Sid Vicious: he watched their concert videos endless times, and collected their records, posters and badges. Here we present a selected sample of documents from this relic cult of his, which would put many teenage girls to shame, and which he held as close to his heart as the rest of his fetish objects. [7]

*"The first articles I read about punk – all negative – and the tiny black-and-white photos all hit me with such elemental power, that still today I'd love to put on all my punk leather jackets ... These pictures fitted all my aesthetic criteria, and I still have them: they were beautiful both as an object and as a self-image, and that can't be said for any other fashion."*

As a result of his early awareness of being transgender, his feverish search for his proper role, and his open, communicative nature, El Kazovsky was, throughout his life, characterised by the desire to "stage" himself publicly. He never tried to conceal his tragic personal destiny behind "natural"-looking fake masks: instead he trumpeted it to the world in a spectacular and theatrical fashion [9]. The typical expression of his self-constructed identity consisted of a punk-inspired way of dressing and styling his hair, and his insistence on certain types of clothing, accessories, and so on. His loose-fitting shirts, his backpacks, his baseball caps, boots and bracelets were such inherent parts of his personality that to leave them out of this exhibition – after all, they constituted the fetish of his self-image [7] – would lead to a false impression of the person.

*New Galatea Plantation (Body Tales VII), 2004. Digital photomontage on paper, with personal intervention. Raum Collection*



## [New Art Studio | Tamás Király]

In the first half of the 1980s the career paths of El Kazovsky and Tamás Király crossed on several occasions: as a result of having mutual friends and similar approaches, fusing fashion with elements taken from the theatre and the visual arts, they collaborated in each other's projects a number of times. El Kazovsky was a regular customer at the "punk boutique" called the New Art Studio, which was virtually synonymous with the name Tamás Király. This little shop, which

operated at number 11, Petőfi Sándor Street between 1981 and 1988, was one of the meeting places of the Budapest underground scene. Király would launch his bizarre clothes and accessories on fashion walks along trendy Váci Street – El Kazovsky was an occasional participant, and his blazer would be decorated with the fashion designer's unique badges, which were made by cutting pieces out of a mirror. In “exchange”, Tamás Király appeared in two of El Kazovsky's *Dzhan Panopticons*.

## [The Fölöspéldány Literary Group]

The group known as *Fölöspéldány* (roughly translated as *Surplus Goods*) was formed in the spring of 1979 by avant-garde poets and prose writers (Ákos Szilágyi, Endre Szkárosi, Judit Kemenczky, Balázs Györe, János Kőbányai, Ferenc Temesi). At their literary concerts there would sometimes be performances by the "Hungarian punk" band Beatrice, and the rock star Feró Nagy. A film clip originating from 1979 even records El Kazovsky on stage, scribbling on his own body. It was through him that the self-taught Sándor Bernáth/y, the founding member of the band called A. E. Bizottság, also came into contact with the group. The subversive power of *Fölöspéldány* derived from the fact that it brought together so many independent and autonomous individuals who, in the strictly parcelled-out and hierarchised official cultural sphere, would otherwise never have met in public. All these people were concerned with breaking down the rigid cages in which genres and culture were trapped.

## [17] The Russian Backroom

El Kazovsky (Elena Yefimovna Kazovskaya) was born in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) on 13 July 1948. His father, Efim Yakovlevich Kazovsky, an internationally renowned physics professor, was ten years older than his mother, Irina Sergeyevna Putolova, who was a 23-year-old art history student at the time of the artist's birth. The family only lived in Leningrad for a few years.

Our Russian room reveals a distant world, preserved as though in a capsule. The maternal side of the artist's family came from West Siberia, while his father stemmed from today's Belarus. In the early 1950s, to escape the anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign, Efim Yakovlevich Kazovsky went to China and took up a post as a university professor, but his wife did not follow him. After their divorce, Irina



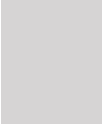
El Kazovsky's family, his great-grandparents and grandfather, Orenburg, 1916

married a Hungarian engineering student, Lajos Skoda, who was closer to her age, and who was attending university in the Soviet Union on a scholarship. In 1957, they moved to Hungary. Until being granted an emigration permit, Irina and her daughter lived with Irina's parents in Nizhny Tagil, a small town in the Urals. El Kazovsky's grandparents were first-generation intellectuals: for more than a decade, starting from the first third of the 1950s, the key people in the young Elena's life were her grandfather, a mechanical engineer who was also a trained musician, and her grandmother, who was a paediatrician. Mature for her age, Elena was surrounded with love, music and literature in the multinational town, which was developing into a centre for the metals and arms industries, and which was suffering the consequences of the extreme contradictions that typified Soviet reality in those days.

After her mother moved away to Hungary, Elena would spend most of her holidays in Budapest and at Lake Balaton. At the age of sixteen, in order to reunite the family, she decided to settle permanently in Hungary, and in 1966 her grandparents followed her. Her much adored grandfather died in Hungary shortly afterwards, and her grandmother passed away ten years later. Their deaths were the most painful losses suffered by El Kazovsky while he was growing up.

He continued to maintain contact with the land of his birth. Until the end of the 1980s, he visited Leningrad and Moscow every year, and kept in touch with his father and other relatives.

Still, it cannot be said that El Kazovsky's Russian origins were a major factor in the formation of his identity. He remained a lifelong fan of Russian literature, reading the works of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Lermontov and Tolstoy in the original, and always writing his poetry in Russian – yet he never felt Russian in the strict sense of the word. Similarly, despite learning to speak the language faultlessly and being intimately familiar with the culture, he also never developed a fully Hungarian identity.



*“... in any case, ‘Russian traditions’ are not typical of me. ... in the Soviet Union I am as much of an impossible and useless dinosaur as I am in Budapest. In the best case scenario I am a curiosum, a museum piece. ... Here they say that I find it so hard to fit in because I lived there, but there they say that all my ‘abnormalities’ must have originated here.”*

Nevertheless, the western traditions of his birth city, as well as the bourgeois-intellectual surroundings and wide-ranging literary experiences he was exposed to in Nizhny Tagil, played a key part in shaping El Kazovsky's personality. The intimate family environment patiently accepted Elena's early aversion to female roles and gravitation towards male characters. Besides the collections in the Hermitage and Greek mythology, the artist was particularly inspired by classical, nineteenth-century Russian novels, whose heroes – as he repeatedly stated in later interviews – provided him with clear social and sexual role models [6]. His later self-evaluation as a dominant (homosexual) male, without which many aspects of his art cannot be understood, was attributed to a “nineteenth-century stylised male consciousness”, whose sources can be found, among other places, in the novels of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. In his teens, he was fond of making drawings and delicate watercolours to illustrate these novels.



*"I always wanted to be an army officer. A male officer, naturally, and what's more, one with the aristocratic consciousness of the end of the last century, of Russia in the last century."*

*"Till I was seven, for instance, I would play the role of Napoleon; there was a little girl next door, and she played Josephine and all his other lovers. I mean, straight away I imagined at least twenty lovers – that's how many Napoleon deserved. My childhood crushes were all girls and women. It never even occurred to me to imagine a boy of some kind. They were never real woman, but characters from literature... I never liked a real woman or girl. The first person I really liked, at the end of primary school, was a boy. But I behaved towards him like Andrei Bolkonsky towards Natasha Rostova, or Othello towards Desdemona."*

Among the Russian sources for El Kazovsky's art, great weight must also be attached to nineteenth-century Russian romantic music (first and foremost the orchestral theatricality and pathos-filled gestures of Tchaikovsky – which was not so dissimilar to the later *camp* style) and – in close association with this – classical ballet, specifically the voyeuristic ballerina cult, traces of which can be found in many other points throughout this exhibition.

Irina Putolova prepared El Kazovsky's poems for publication in 2008-2009, after the artist's death. The volume, titled *Kniga Dzhana* [Book of Dzhana], was published by Tri Kvadrata Publishers in Moscow in 2011.

In the same year, a collection of the artist's poetry was published in Hungarian translation under the title *Homokszőkőkút* [Sand fountain] by Magvető Publishers.



An early book illustration, 1962  
Indian ink on paper  
Estate of El Kazovsky

## [18] Winterreise

In full awareness of his terminal illness, El Kazovsky embarked on painting a cycle of works which are, both in their motifs and in their emotions, clearly imbued with anxiety about the approaching end. His *Winterreise*, painted under the direct influence of Schubert's song cycle with the same title (in fact, while listening to it), is, in a way, the artist's swansong: it is an emotional farewell, a melancholic valediction to life. This is not a brightly burning, large-scale summary of a tragic life, as *Paper Frieze II* was, but a painful gesture of letting go and saying goodbye. A new motif that appears throughout the cycle is the ship – which rides the waters or sways above them, with the migratory animal on board, now simplified to a schematic shadow, all desire extinguished. This is the winter journey of a soul that no longer asks, desperately, if it will rise up again. In the fading light as the



*Winterreise VIII*, 2007  
Mixed media on paper  
Collection of Tünde Horváth

days cool down, Charon's boats float adrift on the waves of the Styx like some drained Holy Grail chalices. The ductus of the painter's hand now traces out the rhythm of infinite undulation, of circular spiralling: his broad brush reduces the sharp edges, softens the angles, and dilutes the depth.

## [19] Supplication

*"Do I believe? I hope. Hope is something I never gave up, even as a child, and in this respect I've always tended away from rationality. Then it turned out, over and over, that an approach that was rational or which was reached through objects would never change me. I could search in vain for it in all the collected cultural treasures, and I would simply find them beautiful. ... I am only really affected by what happens directly, by the elemental, by things that happen to me, and the influence that comes from another person. Which, I can guarantee you, is not from culture, not from a work of art, and not from artistic activity. I had to realise that through thought, I am never going to perceive anything else of the world unless by miracle. I will either be touched by faith or I won't."*

*"If it could happen to me, if in some mystical way I were to be touched by faith, and God would really take mercy on me and share the miracle with me, then I would fly and I would be truly a free bird. I would be so free and so happy that I wouldn't even care that I'd been born into the body of a woman, for it will be different one day ... in the final assessment, every life, even the most terrible one, is miraculous. A believer can tolerate being burned at the stake, despite all the hellish pain, because he can be sure that his spirit will rise up, and that there is a place for it to rise up to."*

*"In actual fact the search for faith constitutes my life. I would very much like to be a believer, and I have constantly worked towards this, but I am unable to say to myself that I am a man of faith."*



*Gates of Paradise IV,*  
no date  
Oil on canvas  
Private collection



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