



The

Vocal

The extraordinary trajectory of **Katalin Ladik** has taken in the avant garde movements of the former Yugoslavia, notorious performance art pieces, and electroacoustic collages harnessing the primal power of the voice. As a new collection of her recordings is released, she talks to **Louise Gray**. Portraits by **Noémi Szécsi**

On “**Water-Angels**”, the work that introduces Katalin Ladik’s new self-titled album for Alga Marghen, there is the voice. It’s a voice that sounds out many things: the shape of words and language; the utterances of a minority tongue and the political issues that arise from this; the secret knowledge encoded in tapestries, QR codes and circuit boards. For Ladik, the voice is an interrogative tool of subtle uses.

Ladik, born into the Hungarian minority of Yugoslavia in 1942, is an artist who resists categorisation. She is an experimental writer, teasing meanings out of words and the folktales that populate Central Europe; she is a sound artist working with words and phonemes, a writer as interested in the sound of the word as its meaning. She is an actor as well as a performance artist, whose works have both resonated and alarmed their audiences. She is a visual artist, whose graphic scores spring out of her early contacts with the works of Schoenberg and Stockhausen, but also articulate political and social questions around the position of women.

And, most importantly, she is a poet, with a fluid definition of what poetry is and what it does. “**Water-Angels**” itself operates on many levels: we hear Ladik vocalise words and syllables in various registers, whispers, rhythmical imprints sometimes at the edge of hearing; sometimes she sounds like a bird, and other times, a chorus of people. On other recordings – for example, the collection of pieces recorded in the 1970s and recently released as *Phonopoetics* (Alga Marghen 2019) – Ladik’s extended vocals are more extreme. Of their reception, of the capacity of the scream, the freed voice, to refuse constraints, she has said: “It’s interesting that women understood me very well, and they appreciated my courage,” in director Kornél Szilágyi’s documentary portrait of her, *Sound Cage* (2015). “I was screaming instead of them.”

Beaming into London from Serbia today via Skype, Ladik is wreathed in smiles. Born into wartime in 1942 in Novi Sad, a city then in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and now in northern Serbia, she describes herself as a poet. After studying economics, she worked first in a bank in the early 1960s (it was here that she began writing poetry), before moving to Radio Novi Sad in 1963. “I always had a job,” she says. “From 18. First a bank and then the radio until 1977; then I joined the Hungarian Theatre in Novi Sad where I stayed as employee until retirement age.”

When the Yugoslav wars started in 1991, she fled to Hungary. Before then Novi Sad had an active arts scene, one that pushed at the boundaries of any political strictures that Yugoslavia’s ruling Communist party might have had, and this fertile ground was being repeated in the nearby city of Subotica. It was there that the arts collective Bosch+Bosch operated from 1969–76, and Ladik, drawn by their multimedia work, became part of it. “Whatever my material, I am always a poet. I am always trying to push out those boundaries into new territories,” she says. Ladik is speaking in Hungarian, with her Budapest based gallerist Róna Kopeczky, who is sitting in on our call as translator.

As with many Central and Eastern European countries, ethnicity has never mapped easily onto geopolitical maps, and Yugoslavia was, in the days before its collapse in 1991 and consequent wars, a container for numerous ethnic groups, cultures and languages. Ladik’s sense of being a member of a minority population within Yugoslavia will come up often in her work. “I embrace my minority situation,” she says, “It’s actually a triple minority, in terms of language, artistic practice and being a woman.” Her solution was an elaboration of, she says, “a metalanguage that could be understood by everyone”. She realised early on in her literary career that writings from the north of the country – that is, Vojvodina, where Novi Sad and Subotica are – wouldn’t be published in Yugoslavia. She did not want to write in Serbian: hence, she conceived a new linguistic and performative practice running in parallel to official culture and, where necessary subverting it from below.

At the time of our interview, Ladik is in Subotica, where she is rehearsing *Szabadkai Szecesszió* (*Secession, or Art Nouveau, From Subotica*), a play based on George Tabori’s *My Mother’s Courage*, a true-life drama about how his mother managed to evade capture in Nazi-era Budapest and deportation to the concentration camps. Ladik plays Tabori’s mother, whom she renders by working from an improvisatory base to create a sprechgesang in the style of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*.

The improvisatory nature of Ladik’s performance here is significant. Her vocalising is a paradox: whatever else is happening in the narrative of the

Minority



Katalin Ladik performance of *Temerin*, 1970

play, Ladik, playing the woman who escaped from one of the death trains, is expressing the inexpressible. Although she very clearly defines herself as a poet, this does not mean that her work is bound by words alone. She began writing in 1962, and her first volume of poetry, *The Ballad Of The Silver Bicycle*, was published in 1969. However, her interest in the textual medium soon shifted towards larger considerations of its performance, its appearance, and most significantly, its sound. Ladik's body of work is substantial and hugely varied – it ranges from performance art and experimental theatre, writing (not only poetry; her first novel, *Can I Live In Your Face?*, was published in 2007) and film work to object-making and soundworks – but it is always defined under the rubric of poetry.

Ladik's written poetry might start in her native language of Hungarian, but in terms of its performances, the Hungarian words are often split asunder into new configurations, to a point where language is deliberately broken apart. For Ladik, this rapid recontextualisation is the job of poetry. She often uses archaic Hungarian or Serbian words drawn from myth and folktale, chosen for the shape of their sound rather than their semantic meaning. Indeed, many of her recorded vocal tracks start out from Hungarian folktales.

Over time, she has gradually left the semantic text out of her work. Ladik has always seen herself as a poet who is embedded in ethnic and geographical culture. It was very important, she says, to show her cultural roots in both Yugoslavia and abroad. In this way, she adds a richly atavistic depth to all her work. Ladik's work is based in a process of turning the familiar into the strange, to look again at it and the questions that are raised about relationships, politics, sounds and listening.

These relationships can be glimpsed in some of

the materials she uses. Over the decades, she has used collage to make graphic scores, performed in experimental theatre and employed ordinary, everyday objects to create new meaning centred around a domestic – and, by extension, feminist – way of life. "It is from my own sensibility and curiosity that I turned my attention to my own environment and the objects that are populating my environment, which are part of my every day, personal life and which somehow bear a message, metaphors."

Ladik's sound poetry is as much about sound as it is about the body and body politic. When performing, her delivery is wrapped in vibratory phonemes, whispers and gasps: the act is poetic, personal, political. The new five track album *Water-Angels* captures the fluidity of Ladik's phonopoetics, to use the title of a 7" single of her poetry released in 1976. *Water-Angels* follows 2019's *Phonopoetics*, an album that came about due, says Ladik, to the enthusiasm of Alga Marghen's owner Emanuele Carcano, which gave her the opportunity to collect and curate several of her earlier recordings, made between 1974–93, at the studios of Radio Novi Sad. "His persistence forced me to gather pieces of work," she says. "I am very grateful." *Water-Angels* is similarly a compilation of works begun some years ago. Its central track, the 25 minute "Water-Angels", began its life containing a splice of "O Fortuna" from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and was first staged in an artificial fog on a lake at the 1989 Spoleto Festival in Italy. "That year's festival had an aquatic theme to it. I was in a boat on the lake, delivering this work," she recalls. Its text was in Hungarian, and the sound composition was by Ladik's first husband Ernő Király. "In 1974, he had invented a new instrument and we used this on the recording, a zitherphone," she continues. "It was based on zithers used in peasant cultures. It was a

wonderful instrument!" The 58-stringed zitherphone, an assemblage of five zithers in a single body, with pick-ups placed on some of the strings, was a huge engine of pentatonic sound that was amplified around the lake. Above its sounds was Ladik's voice – words sometimes, vocalisations, swallowings, bird-like noises, drips. These sounds have an extraordinary gentleness. The effect then, as now, was of a being inside a barely visible, multilayered play, one peopled by shifting boundaries and presences.

While "Water-Angels" is the basis for this new album, it was reworked radically in 2019 at Radio Belgrade's Electronic Studio by Ladik and its composer-in-residence, Svetlana Maraš, using a restored EMS Synthi-100. "I couldn't have done this without Svetlana," declares Ladik. The synth had been restored by Paul Pignon, a founding member of the studio in 1972, alongside the composer Vladan Radovanović, who, influenced by his contact with the electroacoustic work coming out of the experimental studios in Warsaw, Utrecht and Paris, took the opportunity to create a Yugoslav version. Through her relationship with Király, Ladik had contact with 20th century contemporary and experimental music – she remembers, particularly, the excitement of discovering the graphic scores of Schoenberg and Stockhausen, which influenced her own later visual and object-based poetry. The Belgrade studio went on to play a part in Yugoslavia's own vibrant avant garde scene – Ladik followed some programmes instigated by Pignon and Radovanović and was invited to record new works there.

Sound had always been significant to Ladik as a way of accessing memories, feelings and the strangeness of poetry. She has, unsurprisingly, no concrete memories of the devastations of the Second World War as it was prosecuted in Yugoslavia, but

its semblance would return in nightmares: "In my nightmares, I was experiencing war and seeing soldiers, a lot of soldiers." Her family lived on the outskirts of Novi Sad, in a house next to a military base which was later bombed. Nevertheless, she has sonic memories of the period, including metallic sounds and the repetitive noises of machinery. She recalls there was some agricultural machinery in the courtyard by their house. "As a child I was fond of playing with it," she says. "We could make these weird metallic sounds, playing on it. I was using it as an instrument, playing it like a drum and improvising my own songs." The songs were, Ladik remembers, rendered in a rudimentary solfège – notes, as opposed to words.

"I was 11 years old when I was accepted into the youth theatre of Radio Novi Sad. This is when I realised how much content it is possible to add with the voice," Ladik says of the beginnings of her theatrical career. "When I was 20 years old in 1962 and I considered myself to be a poet, and was also considered by others as a poet, this when I met the obstacle of language; I was writing in Hungarian, while not [living] in a fully Hungarian environment of Novi Sad."

A metalanguage – influenced by James Joyce and Kurt Schwitters – was a way of gaining a direct access to a wider audience. The development of what

extended vocals she uses, meanwhile, do not come from any contact with a classical training. When Ladik was first compared to Cathy Berberian, she had to go and look up the singer. "My role model had been [the Peruvian five-octave singer] Yma Sumac, whom I'd heard on the radio in the 1960s... It was only decades later that I encountered other names. I saw similarities and differences, but I was an autodidact."

Ladik's interest in folkloric culture gave her a visual performing means to represent her interest in otherness. *Shaman Poem* (1970) – in which she appeared semi-naked, clad in rudimentary furs – and *Blackshave Poem* (1979) ("A pseudo-nude performance" – she wore white underwear on top of a black body-covering leotard) resonated with feminist audiences. Was performing nude a way of challenging the status quo? "Definitely, yes. This was a way to break through oppression, to look and to sound as an expressive provocation that would rally confront taboos."

Women responded to these images. Ladik's performances of domestic femininity offered these roles up to greater scrutiny. However, it was not only adults who were taking notice. "Children are also very receptive to my performances and understand them. It's because I am using sounds from my own childhood and was inspired by my own son when he was learning to speak, to form sounds. Kids recognise this phase of

Incantation, Novi Sad, 1975





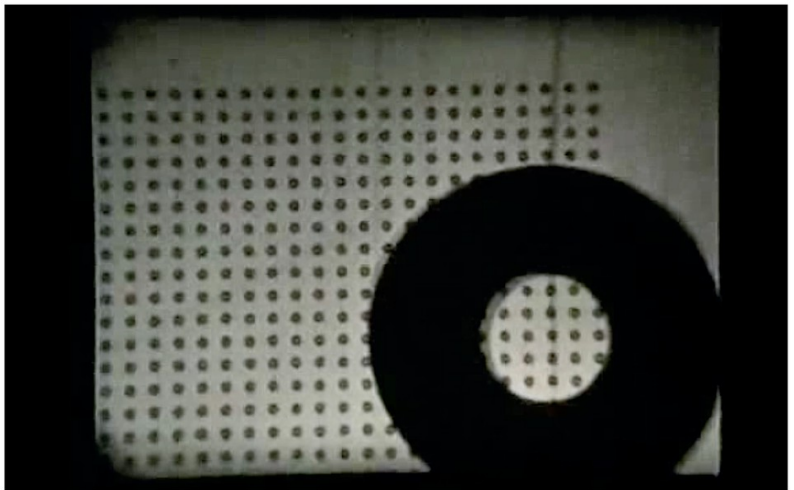
their lives in my performances.”

Infants live in a sound laboratory of infinite richness, I say. “Yes, I totally agree... this idea of a sound laboratory is very precise, and it touches my own way of functioning. Children really enjoy the sounds they are able to make, you can see this if you watch.” Sound-making, she suggests, is rooted in the infant’s discovery of what the throat can do, or how a chest, percussed, can alter the timbre of the voice. It is a magical stage of development. “Through these activities, the possibility of making sounds is infinite. You can use your voice for much more than simply singing or speaking.”

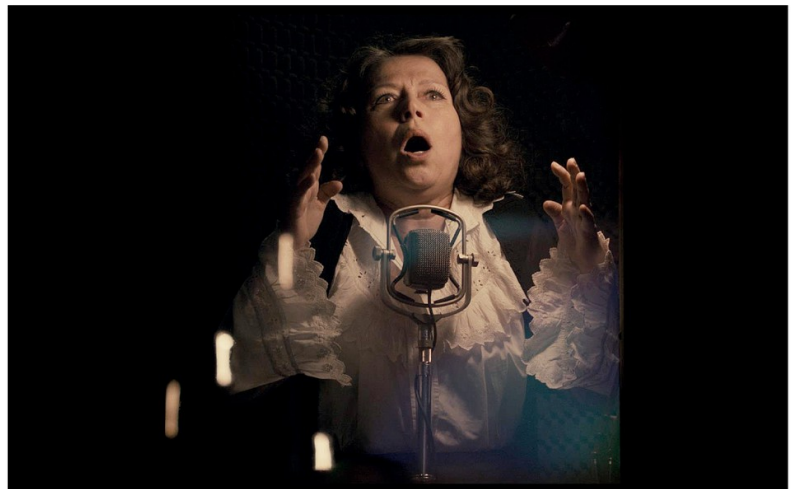
Unfortunately for Ladik, there were some unanticipated reactions to her work. In Hungary, *Shaman Poem* earned her the epithet “the naked poetess”, and this was, several years later, seized upon by the Yugoslav Communist party, which denounced Ladik as immoral. She was threatened with expulsion from the party – a significant threat, as it would have meant the loss of her radio job, her workplace and source of income. “In Hungary, I was stigmatised as this ‘naked poetess’, but, at the time, the Yugoslav reception of *Shaman Poem* was very positive.” This changed a few years later, when Ladik, and her work (and especially *Shaman Poem*), became inadvertently caught up in the convulsions of the party, of which she was a member. “There was a kind of crisis inside the party in 1975–76,” she says. They looked at who was endangering the unity of the party and alighted on her as “a black sheep”. Ladik was thrown out because of this piece she’d performed five years ago. The only reason that she was able to hang onto her job was thanks to a vigorous defence mounted by its editor-in-chief Lajos Vébel.

But for Ladik, the use of the entire body as a performing, sounding entity equates to an honesty that is based on a shared experience. Metalanguage, understandable to all, is an aspect of this. The 1972 experimental film *O-pus*, made with Imre Póth and Attila Csernik, for example, is an opera of noises – erotic noises, emancipatory noises, a multiple adventure around the shape of the letter O. “I have always thought that the only way to work and perform is to do so an honest way, a true way, and not according to expectations,” Ladik says. “I did not realise when performing that I am breaking through [polite conventions]; to be avant garde in some way was not on my mind. My practice must be honest to reflect the social context in which I operate as an artist and an author. I was living in a minority situation; when a minority is oppressed, or when a sexual life is oppressed or controlled, then this provokes or reflects a scream, a howling that will sound as if it is breaking taboos, a provocation but it is, in fact, a reflection.”

Her later appearance in Peter Strickland’s 1970s-set psychohorror film *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) is a good example of the return of the repressed. Ladik makes a virtuoso appearance to voice the sounds of a long dead woman, executed for witchcraft centuries ago. She is elegant, soignée, greeted by the studio bosses as the special talent. Into the sound booth she goes, click go the tape recorders, whereupon Ladik unzips her voice: a guttural, wailing incantation, that circulates through the studio. And then it’s over, but her sound haunts the atmosphere of the film ever



Stills from Attila Csernik, Katalin Ladik and Imre Póth's *O-pus* (1972)



Still from Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012)

after. “Peter wanted me to play both Cathy Berberian and myself. He wanted me to impersonate her,” Ladik says. The film is, in some ways, a film about filming, a soundtrack about recording. “The film also depicts how it is for sound artists to be accepted and exist: the ‘Ladik’ in the film is like me – she has to take on synchro works to live.”

Ladik has contributed to a long list of cinematic soundtracks. “In *Berberian Sound Studio*, I am giving voice to witches who were burnt, but this was symbolic because I have been burnt by the reception of my work and by the party. It is a reflection on my career and the existential challenges I have had to face.”

Strickland had connected with Ladik through the noise group Spiritus Noister, with whom she’d worked. He had designed the cover for the band’s 2003 Hungarian label version of Kurt Schwitters’s *Ursonate*. Ladik points out that Noister’s *Ursonate*

is a very free interpretation of the original, which is for voice alone: here she shares vocals with Endre Szkárosi, in a musical environment including strings and synths provided by Zsolt Sörös and Zsolt Kovács. She launches into some lines from the *Ursonate* – “*Rakete rinnzekete rakete rinnzekete rakete rinnzekete!*” – and then roars with laughter. Voiced, shaped and performed, Ladik imbues Schwitters’ text, his dada metalanguage, with a pulsing communicative life.

As Ladik’s work makes clear, metalanguages are not to be found only in spoken or written language. Anything can be voiced; you just have to find the object. These other languages come in various forms. Two are to be found in circuit boards and the machine-readable languages that QR and barcodes are made of. Ladik’s multimedia performance project, *Alice In Codeland* (2012–18), is, she says, an example of the

“secret knowledge” that fascinates her. “When I was working in the radio, we had these printed electrical circuit boards. I collected them. I was captivated by the knowledge concentrated in these boards.”

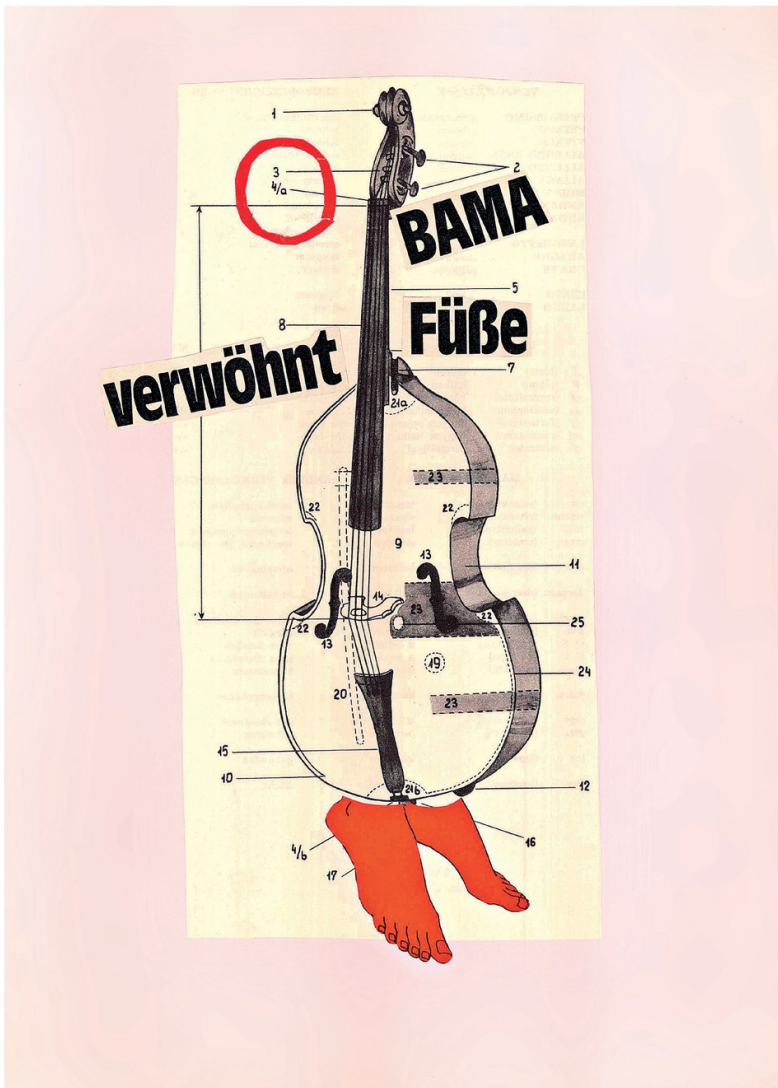
In the 1970s, she photographed them, projecting their patterns and them on walls and performed the circuitry, turning the boards into graphic scores. *Alice* operates on a similar premise. “So much information is concentrated in these tiny squares. I am using my voice to open up this knowledge and to add emotional content.” The barcodes Ladik uses for *Alice* were programmed by her artist partner Josef Schreiner to contain her poems and fragments of text from Lewis Carroll and James Joyce.

These latest works are part of the graphic score work that she began in the late 1960s, her gateway being Ernő Király. A composer working in electronic music and ethnomusicology, he was, like Ladik, of Hungarian heritage. Like her, he was fascinated with folkloric practices but, equally, by the developments of European new music and of instrument building. “Encouraged by these precedents, I began to make scores for my own compositions,” Ladik says. “This writing was, initially, about scoring sound poetry and the elaboration of visual art.”

Humour was always important: it’s on show, for example, in Ladik’s *March For A Partisan Woman* and *Pause In The Revolutionary Work* (both 1979), the latter a series of graphic scores that combine isolated bits of bodies – a violin is given red feet; a woman’s torso clad in a green blouse is given a snatch of notated music for her head, her right arm is replaced by a violin bow. It’s a light-touch dada, more in the spirit of Hannah Höch than John Heartfield, but nevertheless, Ladik’s message struck at the impossibility of acting out two mutually exclusive roles – that of home-maker and revolutionary – simultaneously what the art historian Lina Džuverović has referred to as the “comradess superwoman”.

Ladik’s interest in the manifestation of “secret knowledge” has also taken her to the domestic sphere, as a way of creating value in women’s work and decoding it. “I became very interested in needlework – crochet, sewing, embroidery – and I found in the heritage of my late mother-in-law a lot of such pieces. In these works, I look at both the front of the piece – they are usually framed and hung on walls – and the backside of the work. You see the methods of the work revealed, there is a parallel work, hidden and secret,” she says. “This needlework goes in tandem with the lives of the women who made them. What secrets do the backsides of the pieces reveal?”

Right now, Ladik, alongside Róna Kopeczky at Budapest’s acb Gallery, is working on a large retrospective of her work for the Museum Susch in Switzerland. It follows an earlier retrospective that started in Novi Sad in 2011 and then travelled to the King St Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár, Hungary in 2012. Curated by Hendrik Folkerts, the Susch exhibition is due to open in summer 2022: it promises to be a comprehensive one, comprising sound and image, with complex sonic environments. The linking theme might well be poetry, the ubiquity of language and the necessity to be open to the sonic secrets that objects and words alike are wrapped in. □ Katalin Ladik’s *Water-Angels* is released by Alga Marghen. Thanks to Róna Kopeczky and Lina Džuverović



Score for *Pause In The Revolutionary Work* (1979)



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Jana Rush

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Katalin Ladik

Born in the former Yugoslavia, the uncategorisable experimentalist's multi-decade career has taken in confrontational performance pieces, electroacoustic collage, vocal exploration, and more. By Louise Gray



Aaron Dilloway

The US noise artist and Wolf Eyes co-founder talks to Emily Pothast about a career of horror and transformation. Plus, Robin The Fog takes a look at tape alchemy in the computer age (pg 46)



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