What led you to publishing? How did you begin printing and publishing your books and multiples?

I learned about printing presses and print opportunities because I was teaching at an industry vocational school and was in touch with a printing house. During this time large printing houses were strictly supervised, so there wasn’t much I could do with these, but I did discover smaller print shops that I could use. These were simple offset presses run by one or two pressmen, and at the time offset machines were used for everything—this was before photocopying. I gained access to these small print shops, and they printed my artists’ books at the beginning of the 70s. Needless to say, this had its risks, as we were living amidst such censorship that nothing other than a business card could be published without permission. Eventually I succeeded in making a deal with these press workers, who printed smaller jobs for me at night, in secret, in exchange for a few bottles of red wine. Occasionally, we could also make larger-scale projects, which was how My Unpainted Canvases was made, as well as a couple of other similar books in the early 1970s.

Why did you focus on making printed works?

Printed works were so important because I could integrate them very quickly into the international avant-garde scene of the time. In early 1971, my first so-called illegal, or “samizdat,” piece was a sentence printed on a piece of cardboard, which read: “I was glad to print this sentence.” It questioned the notion of censorship. Though I never expected it to, this piece became a minor sensation in the West. This early conceptual work received positive feedback. Afterwards, I printed a number of flyers, smaller unique pieces, in addition to the two or three artists’ books. None of these offset prints ever reached 500 copies, but I was mailing them to every corner of the globe. I still regard these offset pieces as almost completely original. Many copies were acquired by important museums and libraries across Western Europe—the Pompidou Centre’s Kandinsky Library is perhaps the most important to me.

How did the books relate to your mail art practice?

Besides the aforementioned Beau Geste Press, there was the Yellow Now in Liége, Belgium, Howeg in Zurich, and Galerie Ecart in Geneva, which was especially important to me. This gallery had a small publishing house that issued avant-garde pieces of the time, one after another. Galerie Ecart was headed by John Armleder, who would become world famous later on, and with whom I was in regular correspondence in those years. We had exchanged more than 100 letters, and he published these as a book in Geneva. It was an honest documentation of a mail art correspondence.

It would be an exaggeration to say that I discovered the artists’ book in Hungary. Rather, I would say it was just in the air—so much so that the path to artists’ books seemed very natural to me. As I’ve mentioned, my books made in Hungary were produced in small print shops that were free from serious supervision, so the means of production were available to me.
Was it difficult to receive international mail in Hungary at that time?

I imagine that I received 6–8 letters and parcels from the West on a daily basis, and to my knowledge, I received everything and never noticed any signs of tampering. The postal service was impeccable; I owe them a lot. It was through the post that I could become integrated into the latest avant-garde endeavours in the 70s. I had several exhibitions in the West, even in the USA, and surprisingly, in Poland, thanks to the post. Poland was much freer in the 70s than we were in Hungary. The significance of the post to me was that it made me a completely free person; I could communicate with the entire world. With the help of the post, I could leap over the Iron Curtain. In 1971 I took part in the biennale de Paris, a life-changing exhibition, which was exceptionally important to me because it was the first time that I could leap over the Iron Curtain. Thanks to the post, I could leap over the Iron Curtain. Poland was much freer in the 70s than we were in Hungary.

How did life in Germany change what you were making?

Living in the West, of course, I had better opportunities to make higher quality larger format artist’s books, although once I arrived there in the early 1980s, I barely made any. The reason being that the heyday of this medium was in the 70s, especially the early years. Later I was no longer excited by this genre, and I made only two or three booklets in Germany. Perhaps these were important because I wouldn’t say they were artist’s books par excellence, but they had a very powerful artists’ book character. They mostly featured documented my formerly sent pieces of mail art.

What did your peers and neighbors in Hungary think of your activity? That kind of correspondence must have been rare there at that time.

When I was in Budapest, I lived in such isolation that people whispered behind my back that I was no longer living there, they said that I had defected. They were totally unaware that I was still living in Budapest. My greatest pain was walking around the streets of Budapest with the secret of the intense relationship I was maintaining with the Western world.

In 1971 I took part in the biennale de Paris, a life-changing exhibition, which was exceptionally important to me because it was the first time that I could leap over the Iron Curtain. Thanks to the post, I could leap over the Iron Curtain.
Tót's initial success as a painter brought him into contact with other artists who were interested in promoting an internationally relevant art culture, as a parallel alternative to the prevailing state-approved modes. One key manifestation of this was in the pages of the internationalayer and II exhibitions of 1968 and 69, curated by Péter Sinkovits, which described its program as gathering ‘…young artists [who] have attempted to orient themselves in the present state of the international art world and keep pace with the most progressive ambitions of the avant-garde.’ Accompanied by illegally printed catalogs, and subject to repeated interference by state censors, the layer shows boasted a checklist of Hungarian artists who would gain international recognition in the coming years. Around the same time, artist György Galántai inaugurated a series of under-the-radar exhibitions and performances at his Chapel Studio in Balatonbogdai (1970–73), which became a meeting place for parallel artistic activity. The Chapel Studio served as a node for information and ideas between East and West, often transmitted by mail, as well as an important source of documentation for the tolerated and banned artistic activity of those years. Much of this material would later become the archive of Budapest’s Artport Art Research Center. The beginning of the 1970s marked a profound shift for Tót. Declaring himself to be “Fed Up With the West,” he denounced the medium for what he termed his “Zeroes.” With publishing his artist's book My Unpainted Canvases (1971) as a manifesto to all the canvases he would no longer be painting. This conceptual turn ushered in a prolific phase in Tót's career, as his work moved away from gestural abstraction and focused on books, documents and postcards, echoes of the bureaucratic society in which he lived. Tót's humble medium of mail art, Tót realized his ambition of becoming an internationally-known artist, and his voluminous output reached international mail art and Fluxus networks through the post, one of the only avenues of contact with the outside world available to him. He frequently appears in combination with the Belgian art magazine Erlebnisse für Visuelle Künste (1971–83) and the British art newsletter Artists’ Reasons for Imagery (repeatedly typed slashes). At its heart, the Zeroes are a playful remnant of Tót's earlier “Blackout” interventions into art history as well as his unpainted canvases. As with his previous work, these Absent paintings derive their power from a distinctive set of conceptual Zero Tendency strategies that he first developed in the 1970s, and which sustains him throughout his career—his Gladnecess (‘I am glad if…’), Zeroes, and Rain (repeatedly typed slashes). The foundational strategy of Tót's conceptual oeuvre is this statement: “I am glad if…” first found in a 1971 postcard reading, as noted above. “I was glad to print this sentence,” and then in his early series of photo and video performances. Joys. In Joys, the artist proclaims his gladness at enacting the mundane or absurd—“I am glad if I can take one step,” or “I am glad if I can stare at a wall.” In the context of 1970s Hungary, these Joys were subtly subversive—when Tót's first Joys video performances were screened in the presence of a state censor, the film was confiscated and destroyed for its tongue-in-cheek gladness. In other instances, his unique blend of sincerity and mockery is more pronounced, as in his “I am glad if I can read Lenin,” a text which accompanied a photograph of Tót sitting in a chair, reading a book of Lenin’s writings so closely that it obscures his own face. It is important to recognize the role of photography as not so much creating a photo-object, but de-contextualizing an action which could not be performed in a public setting due to strict censorship laws. While Tót conceptualized and composed the photographs, he worked with a professional photographer, János Gulyás, to realize the technical camera work. In her essay on Tót’s Very Special Gladness series, art historian Orsolya Hegedüs pins this as a distinct Eastern European genre of conceptual art, the “photo performance” as theorized by Milko Šuvaković. This use of photography has something in common with his peers in the West such as Ed Ruscha and Gilbert & George, putting an emphasis on documentation and the perceived neutrality of the camera-eye versus the aesthetic qualities of photographic artistry. A second, less performance-centric sub-series of Gladnesses depicts Tót as doubled, such as I am glad if I can look at each other (1971). Artist Klara Kemp-Welch suggests that these photographs represent the “...self having become subordinate to surface. Both selves are surface.” In the flattening that happens (both figuratively and literally in Tót’s works on paper) he assumes what Thomas Strauss, his collaborator of the late 70s, called his “laughing mask,” a logofied visage of permanent mirth regardless of circumstance. Tót’s international ambitions are clear in his use of English for his earliest Joys, and in fact these works would see wide circulation through features in Flash Art and the Belgian art magazine –r0– in the mid 70s. Gladness finds its maximal expression in combination with Tót’s other motifs, “I am glad if I can type zeros” or “I am glad if I can type rains,” providing a raison d’être for their obsessive repetitions. The Zero in Tót’s work is both counterpart and foil to Gladness, a kind of happy nihilism that pervades Tót’s work of the 70s and seems hero. Later there was no reason to be afraid, so I realized these actions in the streets to tell the people something, but they went away without a word. Their impassivity saved me from becoming a hero.” In other venues Tót’s work received an enthusiastic response, with several solo presentations around Europe and inclusion in Artists Space’s Young Fluxus (1982) exhibition, curated by Ken Friedman and Peter Frank, which brought him on a legendary journey to New York for the opening. The late 1980s signaled Tót’s return to painting, with a series of hard-edged abstractions entitled Layout Paintings and another called Absent Pictures, a nod to his earlier ‘Blackout’ interventions into art history as well as his unpainted canvases. As with his previous work, these Absent paintings derive their power from a distinctive set of conceptual Zero Tendency strategies that he first developed in the 1970s, and which sustains him throughout his career—his Gladnecesses (‘I am glad if…’), Zeroes, and Rain (repeatedly typed slashes).
This compulsive zero writing is reminiscent of the "zero stroke," a disorder diagnosed in 1920s Weimar, Germany, as astronomical inflation compelled patients to write endless lines of zeros. Tót's zeros seem induced by a similar strain of absurdity in politics—the zero symbolizing isolation, voicelessness and the extreme caution of expression under a repressive system.

Along with his own face, the zero would become his totem, the sign of his self-proclaimed Zero Tendency, by which he was recognized in the mail art community, as his ubiquitous Zeropost stamps would attest. Tót's zero lives as a signifier alongside the great conceptual artist logos of the period, such as Joseph Beuys' cross, Julius Koller's question mark, Ray Johnson's bulb, or George Maciunas' Fluxus Aztec. Its iconic nature inspired tributes as far away as San Francisco, where Carl E. Loeffler and Bill "Picasso" Gaglione recorded their own zero sound poem Homage to Endre Tót in 1977. Ken Friedman argues that Tót's importance lies in giving "a discrete and particular voice to the emptiness of the void," a practice in the lineage of Arabic and lndic conceptions of the zero as a key to transcendence. At the very least the zero is the symbol of a universal language, understood across cultures where little else would be.

The third and most enigmatic of Tót's strategies is rain, the repeated typing of the "r" character, often with a built-in duality ("my rain, your rain"), or a distinct character based on the image it overlays or the way the slash symbol is formatted ("inside rain," "isolated rain"). The Rain works' carefully arranged typings are a time-consuming, rhythmic activity that, with their attendant clacking keys, is the sonic equivalent of a rain shower. In Tót's world, anything can be subjected to rain, from Budapest's Heroes' Square (a frequent victim of Tót's downpours, and a loaded site in Hungary's national identity), to world tourist locations and even photographs of domestic interiors. They bear a certain resemblance to his zeros, which sometimes also appear as rain—they can be perceived as zeros collapsed or on their sides, or as even further negations of zero, agents of division.

The rains often emphasize Tót's feelings of isolation from the goings-on of the Western art world. It is hard to determine whether having rain visited upon you is a blessing or a curse—and most probably, it is neither—they are only typed because it makes them glad. Rain may simply be a way of treating and distinguishing differences of time and space, in Geneva it is raining in a certain way, in New York another way, and in Budapest, the sky may be totally clear. This conception of rain echoes Tót's photographic doublings, works that convey the kind of doublespeak artists had to negotiate in order to secure a minimum of creative freedom. In duplicating himself, Tót has an imagined audience, whereas in his Rain, he imagines other climes where his audience may exist. One of Tót's postcards expresses this most poignantly, "I write because you are there and I am here."

Tót's visual strategies create distinctly memorable works, but much of his output remains unclassifiable as typical art objects for display in an exhibition context. Within mail art circles it was acknowledged that these ephemeral gestures derive their primary value in the act of networking, communicating, and performing—likewise, his photo performances were placeholders for want of more public acts. A piece of mail art reaches its full potential only in the act of receipt and opening, and diminishes in power after that; a performed action that rapidly fades to only a memory of its kinetics. Further exhibition of these works is at a diminished capacity, they are primarily prosthetics for the act of communicating, of sending and receiving. However, over the intervening years they begin to accrue peculiar new power as objects that represent these historically significant experimental art strategies of the 60s and 70s and also as examples of the earliest peer to peer networks; networks that have become part of everyday life. The international resonance of Tót's Zero Tendency is proof positive of this, his missives formulated to mean nothing to the casual observer, provoked a response that would daily flood his mailbox with international attention, largely from correspondents who had little direct experience with the repressive circumstances which necessitated his cyphers. With this in mind, Tót's Gladnesses and Rains, perhaps have another potential reading—one of empathy, of bearing the weight of the circumstances of another who may be in the storm, while you are in the sun.

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2. K. Balázs (personal communication, August 14, 2021)
I am glad if I can look at you, 1971–76
Gelatin silver print
7 x 9 1/2"

Gelatin silver print
7 x 9 1/2"

Look! Here’s a giant zero for you!, 1974
Offset printed postcard
7 1/8 x 4 5/8"

Envelope addressed to
Ken Friedman, 1975
Envelope with ink and stamps
6 1/4 x 4 1/4"

Envelope with ink and stamps
6 1/4 x 4 1/4"

Collection of Stephen Perkins

Zeropost Stamps (green), 1976
Self-adhesive perforated paper
11 1/4 x 8 1/4"
Published by Edition Howeg
and Ecart Publications, Geneva
Edition of 1000

Collection of Ecart Archive,
deposit MAMCO Geneva / Archives
Ecart, depot MAMCO Genève
Offset printed postcard
4 1/4 x 6"  
Published by Edition Kelter & Sellem, Köln  
Photo by Herta Paraschin

Amsterdam, September, 1979 Demo
(Works and Words, De Appel), 1979  
Photocopy with marker and stamp  
4 1/2 x 7 1/4"  
Where am I? Where am I going?  
What am I doing? Who am I waiting for? c. 1980  
Offset printed folding card  
8 1/2 x 12"  
Collection of Picasso Gagliano and Darlene Domel
Kölnisch Wasser Regen, 1971–79
60° rain, 1971–79
50% Regen-100% Regen, 1971–79
Typewriting on postcard
4 ⅛ x 5 ⅜" each
Inside Rain, 1973
Typewriting on newspaper
5 ⅛ x 5 ⅜"
--
Courtesy of the artist
and acb Gallery, Budapest
Three postcards from
One Dozen Rain Postcards
Printed postcards
5 ¾ x 4 1/4" each
Published by reflection press,
Stuttgart, West Germany
Collection of Ben DuVall

Spread from TÔTal questions
by TÔT, 1974
6 x 8 1/4"
Edition of 300
Published by Edition Hundertmark,
Berlin
—
Courtesy of Péter Farkas

Zero typing (Accumulatory 2), 1975
Typewriting and stamps on paper
11 1/4 x 8 1/2"
—
Collection of Stephen Perkins

Three postcards from
One Dozen Rain Postcards
Printed postcards
5 ¾ x 4 1/4" each
Published by reflection press,
Stuttgart, West Germany
Collection of Ben DuVall
I am glad if I can read Lenin, 1971–76
Gelatin silver print
3 ½ x 5 ½"
I am glad if I can draw a line (Berlin Wall) from 1/2 Dozen Berliner Gladness Postcards (1973–1978), 1979
Offset printed postcard
4 ⅜ x 5 ⅜"
Published by Edition Herta, Berlin-Schöneberg
Collection of Picasso Gaglione and Darlene Dowel

I am glad if I can stand next to you, 1971–76
Gelatin silver print
4 ½ x 3 ½"
Courtesy of the artist and acb Gallery, Budapest
Dear John,

Thank you again.

Thanks for your last mail. I hope the show will be opened on 16th June for one week later? Well I'd like it to be a very intimate one, in the smaller room of your gallery. - The title of the show is "One Dozen Rain Postcards/1971-73". I.e., the one you already know. I want to exhibit this, nothing else. So it will have a unified conception. I've sent out a few of these postcards so far. They have not been exhibited to get her anywhere! This way the debut will take place at Ecart.

As for me, there's no use to exhibit the original ones, so I only send printed copies. I'd like you to do the arrangement, totally a something more. I would propose to exhibit them in separate rooms. The following:

Audio-Visual Rain

On a sheet of glass, an apparatus type DEK A/2 type, etc., music, and record etc. at the same time the sound of the noise of typing r-r-r-r, the one of the rain/rain, exhibit the typed sheet from the typed noise:

Please do this to me, if it's possible, will you? /see the enclosed draft/

The cards could be photographically enlarged, but then the alternated title would be:

One Dozen Rain Postcards/1971-73

Are we all right this way, John? Please, write me about these soon.

Love again,

P.S. On 5th April - silk-plan & booklet plan, and an evening book on green, on 6th April - new silk-plan, and an April - correction-letter /or SEAY/ and on 8th May - ?/or SEAY/ - game upon.

Endre Tót and John Armleder
Spread from Correspondance avec John Armleder, 1974
11 ½ x 8 ½" x 8 ½"
Published by Ecart Publications, Geneva

Collection of Ecart Archive, deposit MAMCO Geneva / Archives Ecart, deposit MAMCO Geneva
If you feel bored... 1972/96
Offset printed postcard
4 x 6" Offset printed postcard
Published by Edition Kelter & Sellem, Köln
Collection of Picasso Gaglione
and Darlene Domel

Spread from My Unpainted Canvases, 1971
5 ½ x 8"
Self-published by the artist, Budapest
Edition of 100
Cover and spread from Night Visit to the National Gallery, 1974
4 1/4 x 7"
Published by Beau Geste Press, UK

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Courtesy of Péter Farkas
Endre Tót: Gladness and Rain
Edition of 200 copies
Published by Printed Matter, Inc.
Designed by Darling Green
Riso-printed by TXTbooks, Brooklyn
Text set in Supergravity by Hungarumlaut and Atlas Grotesk and Typewriter by Atelier Carvalho Bernau
Printed Matter, Inc.
231 11th Avenue
New York, NY 10001
printedmatter.org

Published on occasion of the exhibition
Endre Tót: Gladness and Rain, curated
by Darling Green at Printed Matter.

September 9 – November 14, 2021
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This exhibition is produced with the additional support of acb Gallery, Budapest.
Dear Linda,

Here I'm again in Germany. After 2 wonderful weeks in N.Y., thank you again for everything!!!

Hope to meet soon again somewhere — here in Germany or in N.Y. ...

Love to all Artists Space and you

Endre Tót

Edition Herta, Berlin-Schöneberg, 1979

Deutsche Zeitung, Berlin, 1979

Printed Matter, Inc.
231 11th Avenue
New York, NY 10001
printedmatter.org