

Sándor Vály: **Crisis on Canvas**
26.01. – 13.02.2011 tm•galleria

Ludvigh Károly:

MEMORIES OF REALITY IN THE STRATA OF OBLIVION

Sándor Vály, the regenerative artist

SPIRITUAL WELLSPRINGS - VOCATION, MISSION

Everyone is born into the world as an emissary from the universe, with creative qualities. In the course of one's individuation and socialization, these qualities gradually dwindle, and by the time one has become civilized – grown up – one forgets his own childhood, when he was still equipped with creative power. We consider it one of the better outcomes, when in the course of our lives we don't slip below the bourgeois lifestyle into that depth where only consumers are found: those who contribute nothing to the world, but only take from it.

Sándor Vály is a geothermally powerful representative of the counter-current to this value-dissipating process. His is a journey continually generating new knowledge and new experiences. This journey toward the individual's self-development – toward historical, art-historical, cultural-anthropological and cosmic childhood and birth – is nothing but a committed life-experiment to realize the lifestyle of the creative person, in truth to realize it anew in the present. A human upgrade, as it were.

Sándor Vály is my brother. I don't mean this simply in the sense that we were both born on Hungarian soil. And I certainly don't mean that we might be brothers in a narrowly understood genetic sense; but on the other hand, in a broader sense – biologically, physically, ecologically and spiritually, in the mystery of Life – we are surely brothers, and indeed perfectly so.

I claim that in principle, every being can say the same about himself in connection with every other being. But he still doesn't say so, and I don't say it either in connection with everyone. Why? Well – *this is the essence and secret of Sándor Vály's life and art.*

The essence of his secret is that with him, life and art do not separate, but are one. The social individual as a civilized being has today become such that he exists in a state of fragmentation and doubt. In this regard, psychology speaks of roles. We are parents, leaders, employees, consumers, husbands/wives, people in authority, petitioners, charitable benefactors, assertive, evil, nature-lovers, urban rats, shrinking violets, aggressors, enthusiasts, poets, soldiers, citizens, and so forth ad infinitum. In vain would anyone ask us: we cannot say *who we are, where we came from, and where we're headed.*

We don't determine ourselves: instead, situations and circumstances form us. A given encounter draws from within us, from within the repertory at our disposal, the behavioral patterns most appropriate to the moment. We are, as it were, a deck of cards: a fairly large deck, but with a finite number of cards, after all. Our lives are not active, but reactive. Sándor Vály is not like this. He is not a follower, let alone one to be swept along, but an initiator.

In this sense there are fundamentally two types of artist. For one type, the role of artist is one of the cards – perhaps a crucial one, equal in value to the King or Ace – in his deck. His works live a life apart from his own, and his art aims outward. By this I mean that while he creates his art, he continually steals glances outward, toward his prospective or existant public; he computes and attempts to measure the projected impression his work will achieve; he calculates with trends and currents. His brush and tools generate the material and the work with an intended result understood as optimal from the point of view of these calculations: his fundamental motivation is the principle of success.

The other type is, with his whole life, a living artist-human human-artist, who is a complete unity, and in whom the roles do not dissociate: his life itself is the artwork; creation itself, with its ten thousand active emanations, is his sole lifelong *performance*, a life-(art)work in the strictest sense of the term. When he creates, he does not squint outward, he doesn't forecast the reception of his work: looking exclusively inward at his creative wellsprings, he searches – throughout all Creation – via the core of his own being. This is his measure of himself; this is the spring that nurtures his art, systematically, uncompromisingly, and radically. Sándor Vály is one of this latter type. And even his art is not a single card from the deck: he is not a painter, not a sculptor, not a musician, not a photographer, not a poet, not a performance artist, but all these together, in a continual whole, with fundamentally synesthetic metamorphoses from one into the other.

When I write these observations, I myself now understand why I so often hear him say his motto, formulated following Beuys and Nietzsche, „*Everyone is an artist*”: because Vály fulfills this principle in his own mode of life.

Once, in Istanbul – I witnessed it myself at the opening of an exhibition – he was chatting with a young woman, on each of whose wrists a tattoo could be read (left wrist: „Ars Longa”; right wrist: „Vita Brevis”). Sándor asked her if he could photograph her. I saw that the girl with her natural courage enchanted him, and I saw how this enchantment enfolded the girl too. The scene itself had become a work of art as well, in which mystery encountered mystery. Never – not in any film, theater, or scientific article – had I seen more clearly that a relationship is of a higher order than its participants, that a relationship writes itself, as long as the actors just give themselves over, with profound confidence in life, to the supra-personal essence of the relationship! The most astonishing aspect of this life-art-creation was that one didn't see in it the strategizing of a male who – with narcissism or conquest on his mind – plays the artist's hand, but rather the complete absorption – in word, expression, voice, scent, movement, without a trace of artifice – of a person experiencing curiosity about another; someone who by means of precisely this curiosity and absorption, his experiential connections to the past, his body of knowledge, and the timeless simultaneity of the premonitory vibrations of a future creation, enters a unity of experience with the girl in the most immediate present: and all in the most complete wholeness. It wasn't a case of one person enchanting another, or vice versa, but the enchantment itself appearing in the present, life, the miracle of being-present, which is the artistic force-field in its strictest sense.

And then there was an incident, when we were strolling together on Helsinki's streets: and I cannot free myself – nor do I want to – from the feeling that with him, I too have become part of an artwork, so persuasively did he point out the result of the rain's slow labors on the iron skin of one of his favorite buildings: the fanciful skein of the rust-streaks. We stared at a twenty-story building – from just one foot away...

I understood my brotherly connection to Sándor Vály in its twenty-fifth year: he lives in the sort of world – as do we all, in principle – that is a creation itself, just as it is. And in this world, he lives his life and experiences himself as a component of this creation, equally when awake as when asleep, when displaying paintings, in emitting sounds, in texts, in flavors, in scents: a communicating mobile statue as an active, productive, creative part of creation, who as part of his responsibility as a *Ding-an-Sich* takes part, via his acts of free will in this sight-sound-taste-scent-movement-touch sculpted Creation.

And if I were to drive this train of thought to its terminus, I would say: Sándor Vály is that person who, consciously and with complete acceptance, took up and in the continuous present takes up the only human vocation: to be part of creation. Vály is the creating human, from whom our sort of bourgeois being can learn about God simply by encountering him...

Vály is humble in the face of all this: *he does not seek to create in place of Creation, but carries the creative will of Creation to its conclusion in his own life.*

ROOTS STEEPED IN MEDIA/MATTER/MATERIAL

Vály infinitely honors the medium in the course of creation and with this attitude, he perfectly inspirits the material (and what is this, if not creation itself?). As a result, processes thought to be completed take on a further life. When the system of perspective, never before seen, appeared in Giotto's paintings, and he „smuggled” time – and with this, in turn, movement – into the image, the process suddenly came to a stop. It is precisely as a consequence of this stasis that Giotto's works can be recognized so immediately. When, on the other hand, Vály, doing obeisance before the Master, transposes Giotto's pictures into perspectival statues, he no longer merely completes, like an builder, the architect's blueprints, but – now he, as once Giotto – immediately adds an extra dimension to it. Vály's Giotto-image-statues gain their mobility thanks to the observing person's movements, as she walks around the statue, bending this way and that, and meanwhile they force the connoisseur to turn toward childhood, but to look well beyond even that, if she truly should want to understand what transpires around and between the statue's lines of force.

The most difficult lessons in understanding this point are eased by becoming aware of this certain extra dimension. As Giotto's depths appear all of a sudden on the plane of the painting, and as then, with the physical movement and inner travel of the observer, Vály's image-statues overstep not only the three spatial dimensions, but even the four of spacetime, so can one suspect the certainty that the number of dimensions grows beyond the bounds of experience and creates a continuum hiding the impossible indices of infinity within the splinters of the wooden laths. It is, therefore, foolishness to live one's earthly life enslaved to the finite, to set the artistic apart from us, and to observe it as the property of someone else, foreign to us, like some obsolete paraphernalia in the ethnographic museum of our soul. Foolishness! *There is something more fearsome than the finite, than death – Vály's works whisper to us with shocking hopefulness: eternity, immortality.*

THE STRATIFICATION OF TIME

As the most immature flowers of spring's resurrecting nature break through many-layered earth and humus with yearning for the wild light, so Vály's life-giving messages become approachable by reaching through the layers of his works. These strata exist literally, physically, and not just metaphorically. His images often contain his earlier creations, the underlying principles and actual material layers of the given work, pentimenti added during the creation – indeed, he doesn't even correct his mistakes, or if he does, the error and its correction are both there in the work – earlier strata lie beneath the visible surface, fragments of past realities, streaks, spoor, that lie upon still earlier strata. We stand before true pictography. It's as if we held a book in our hands – whoever fails to take the trouble to open the cover and begin to read the pages, won't make it past the author's name, the title, the work's dimensions and its cover! With these strata – through which he has already battled during the work's creation – Vály gives us, the gazing-absorbers, the opportunity, by burrowing and drilling our way through them, for our souls to be that little plant that, breaking through the layers, can have the fundamental life experience of resurrection from the mud.

This working method of calling-to-life becomes instantly comprehensible, once we learn that Vály was born under the sign of Aries. Since his life and work create an organic whole, it's already natural that with the characteristics of the Ram, his works embody *the characteristic movement of breaking through layers* with Spring's nascent strength and dynamics, and he transfers this powerful experience into the observers and recipients of his works as well!

For example, we can see two figures on the canvas of his „Divine Comedy”, that become assembled in the picture's depths from the lines, areas, and pixels of countless other figures – these figures seemingly lose every individual feature in this heaping, one on another. Nevertheless, we do not encounter the generic in the painting, but specific figures. However, in order to encounter them personally, we must carry out a sort of archaeological labor, excavating strata to reach them.

One key to this archaeological work is provided if we recognize that in his works, Vály does not depict

events, situations or actual participants or relationships – seeing as how any given figure or scene can be depicted ten thousand different ways, anyhow. Rather, he shows the energies immediately preceding and/or governing the events; energies, however that are naturally independent of the actual form or style of their depiction, and that are thus much more likely to be typical of the event or of the psychological realities pertaining to the course of the event, than the particular participants themselves. *Vály evokes force fields*, just as the grains of silver colloid record the densities of light and shade in a photograph, or the way iron filings draw out the magnetic lines of force on a sheet of paper held above them!

What sorts of forces knotted up above his head, just before Cain clubbed Abel? What energies govern the course of deeds – thus: the fate – of Oedipus, that carry him toward his dramatic denouement totally independently of his desires – indeed, quite against his will?

This key, however, does not yet open the lock. We need another key, but one that we already possess: we cannot peel back Vály's strata with knife, drill, scalpel, shredding implement, nor even by inquisitiveness. But neither can we get anywhere by attempting to read something into it, or by trying to gain understanding by an axiomatic epistemology. Only perception, an opening-up without predetermined thoughts, a complete emptying will open the gates of the layers in Vály's works – and the gates through our souls to the depths and heights of existence!

HOW LONG WILL THE MOMENT OF LIBERATION LAST?

We are left to ourselves before Vály's works: the same solitude bears down on us as occurs to the artist when he breaks free of his artistic servitude: and this is precisely the moment when we become free.

Vály doesn't aid us at the moment of liberation. He cannot: on the one hand, as discussed above, he is a radically sovereign creator whose art depends not a bit on our understanding. He would like it if we understood his work, since this is his mission, preserving values against the value-destroying tide. But if he were to serve our understanding, he would instantly be dependent on us, on the public, and then he would be unable to lead us to freedom any longer. This is a truly Christ-like position: I declare the truth and point to it, but it is up to you to follow the truth.

The other reason why he cannot help us is that if he were to do so, then freedom and understanding could not become our own experience. On this issue the message is fatherly: you have to take this step yourself, my son: it pains me to see you stumble, but if I were to help you, you'd never feel that you'd reached the goal on your own, and you'd never forgive me this. You would be a slave to resentment forever more.

This is why Vály creates from within, then displays his work to us, waits, and trusts. He trusts humanity.

Vály thus offers us that freedom with which he lives each day in celebration, but he doesn't help us: we have to call forth our own freedom from within ourselves, and we must accept it as well. Vály's works are mediums, objects of meditation or beings that call and entice; but the pain of our rebirth must remain our own! This is the freedom of our birth into the real world from the maternal body, at once a joy and an immeasurable solitude. It is the isolation with which we begin to divest ourselves of the earlier bonds – necessary bonds, until this point! – and turn toward an adult existence. In this lostness that is the isolation of incipient freedom (and from which most of us turn back, fleeing into comforting bondage), we are equipped with nothing more than our senses, feelings, inspirations, intuitions – this is that other key.

This other key was born with us – we bring it with ourselves, originating from creation, as the worldwide resemblance of toddlers' drawings demonstrates! (It is no accident that proud Picasso said right to the end – and with reason – of his old age: „I'm at last able to draw almost like a child.” It is no accident that one of Vály's „strata” is the eternal age of children's drawings.)

Standing before Vály's works, we must trust in this key, and if we do so, we instantly know that our

sense of isolation speaks only of the loss of our mother's body, but in its place we can encounter a much greater inheritance within ourselves. This is why we must lose the paradisiacal spacetime of the maternal womb in being born, so that being „exiled” thence, we can experience a still greater unity: unity with all of creation!

And this second key suddenly uncovers the strata of Vály's works, and in a bound we experience and understand all. Of course we understand everything, since we simply read that universal human and supra-human that Vály has encoded into his strata! And he writes that universal human and supra-human message that has been encoded within our cells at conception. *It is on this point that we can recognize our brotherhood with each other and with every existing thing.*

Correspondingly, Vály's works soothe the eternal human thirst for the un-institutionalized faith (re-ligion, that is, binding-anew, connecting-anew!), inasmuch as they, individually and collectively, point to the eternal unity of the human and the Universe. And, in addition, they point in such a way that this experience of unity always happens in the present, or in other words, Vály abolishes corroded and corroding nostalgia and puts in its place a fresh, here-and-now spiritual human nature. Even in his works speaking of crises, he pronounces the primacy of life and resurrection in a self-evident, unquestionable fashion.

CRISIS-DOCUMENTATION AS POSSIBILITY-MESSAGE IN VÁLY'S WORKS

The experience-ambivalence of freedom-isolation thoroughly permeates today's man, and most often it forces a choice between subservience and survival. One of Vály's favorite authors, Sándor Márai, speaks of it in his diary in his typical, merciless fashion: „There are three lifestyles: the Christ-like, the Faustian, and the Ulyssean. The rest are taxpayers.” This is the brutally honest riposte to the „every man is an artist” mentality! Vály lives this rupture as a personal torn-in-two state (his self-portraits record this interior crisis-landscape). The artist-individual of cultural history always served someone: the community, the Church, political power, nobility, bourgeoisie, proletariat.

With his exemplary self-liberation, holding nothing back, the artist reaches a deep-space vacuum: he loses touch with the commissioning art-consumers, whoever they might be. In any case, the artist is useless in an atheist, success-oriented world in thrall to numbers, unless he himself should happen to generate profit via packaged-production sales and marketing: but in this case, however, it is precisely his own essence that is lost – according to Vály. What is the essence of art? Freedom and truth. And if it is to be of any use to society, that is none other than *to be in touch with one's soul* (rather than with society, or only with society). In consequence of his choosing freedom, the artist must face the fact that he will become isolated. The creator, breaking away from the taxpayer's servile fate, takes a step into life: which, understood existentially, is a cosmic solitude. In the development of the artist's isolation this characteristic, affecting the totality of civilization, takes on a dramatic dimension. To be in touch with the soul: the same as undergoing an identity crisis! In this light it is worth taking another look at Vály's self-portraits. This exists. A crisis exists. Let's not pretend that it doesn't. This does not, however, mean that we must give ourselves up to a final dissolution. An Eastern proverb says, „You cannot prevent the birds of regret from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from making a nest in your hair.” „I don't want to paint anything anymore,” says Vály in the suffering he has endured, „I vomited up my most important pictures onto a shipping container. One can experience catharsis in beholding ugly things, lacking esthetic value, too.”

During his months in Spain, Vály created – among others – garbage-works. His connoisseurs were pedestrian passers-by and trash collectors who, once they had looked at his creations, tossed them into the dump trucks and drove on.

There is an over-production of paintings in the art world. Art is a cul-de-sac. For there is over-production across the globe: over-population, over-production of death (and we haven't even reached cloning yet!), product-dumping on one side and spiritual and/or physical starvation on the other; this is

exactly what the artist embodies, and what his art documents.

Here, servitude leads to crisis. The mass judgment of taxpayers shies away from freedom, but freedom leads to isolation, and it doesn't really placate anyone if he hears that this feeling is only transitory. Nevertheless: art – and everything else – has to die in some fashion, in order that it can be renewed. Art – and everyone else – must give up its subservient role, and falling into the darkness of isolation it must liberate itself in order to be recreated as a free and independent entity. Just as the immature plants break through the layers of dead material in spring. Every single one of Vály's works coaches us in this life-task.

We use the word „crisis” these days routinely in a pejorative sense, meaning a defeat, something tragic. Its original Greek meaning was much broader and richer: crisis as change, as undertaking, as choice. Good is contained within evil, rebirth in death. This is the message of Vály's crisis-works. Whoever doesn't believe this, should look into it more: among Vály's „works of transience” one can count his Spanish, seashore works preserved on film: letters of death on the sand that the waves lapping on the shore slowly erase while people stroll on the beach, perhaps without even noticing *what they are passing through*.

CONSECRATION OF THE MUSEUMS

Vály's works – those that are not intended for immediate destruction – consecrate the museum, that „warehouse of objects from bygone eras no longer meaningful for our time”, into a temple of eternal life, where in an intensive and cathartic experience the person can discover the eternal divine within himself: and one cannot be truly human without recognizing the eternal!

Faith-hope-love – appearing as a unitary symbol in a „threefold infinity” figure in Vály's „Divine Comedy” – accepts as axiomatic the threefold order, and this appears consistently in his cultural-critical works. In his „Death of Marat”, he vehemently shows how the inhuman French Revolution replaced this life-giving threefold principle with the counterfeit trinity of liberty-equality-fraternity – the person must break through this stratum as well, if he wants to return to the clear, divine wellspring of humanity. The contrast appearing in this picture between the dramatic Marat-Che Guevara-doctor-Antichrist and Christ-doctor is Vály's cry to heaven, and a warning. Freedom worthy of a human is not an individualistic liberty based on rights, but rather faith, the freedom of the unique being that a person receives from the divine. His equality is not uniformity, not the undifferentiated servitude of the taxpayer, not the judgment arising from another's position of power: it rests in individual uniqueness that perfectly suffices without comparison to another/others, but which is equal before universal creation. His fraternity is not based on the mythology of Cain and Abel, like the French Revolution's, but on the connection which *that borderland of existence extending from primeval energy through to atomic matter proclaims between every existing being*.

FREEDOM FROM AESTHETICS - INDEPENDENCE OF EXPECTATIONS

In connection with the foregoing, Nietzsche was no false prophet either: he didn't intend to obliterate differences between people, but to validate and proclaim them – precisely in the name of human worth. If we consider even just this much, we can understand Vály's attraction to the philosopher. His work, „Nietzsche in Torino”, does not seek to affect our esthetic sense but offers the possibility of reviving a deeper sense of harmony and/or spiritual sensitivity. Nietzsche proclaims unity, togetherness – with everything! With this he accepts the risk – and historically he indeed underwent it – of madness leading unto death. At the same time, we should not forget: this risk is dwarfed by the awful danger of lapsing into the appearance and existence of the servile taxpayer, the danger of losing one's soul!

AESTHETICS AS PREJUDICE

In order to realize this unification, Vály goes so far as to leave esthetics out of his creative priorities. The esthetic categories of the beautiful and the ugly operate in a certain mechanism as a barrier to acceptance. Let us consider this logical progression: God cannot be beautiful, because He Himself is beauty. Thus, everything that appears beautiful in someone's eyes, is necessarily divine. Whence, since everything is beautiful in someone's eyes, everything is divine. From here it is easy to understand when, in place of esthetic intention, Vály, with the radicalism of his freedom, allows just one path in his works: the sympathetic vibration between creator and beholder in which their energies tune in, one to the other (as given physical proof by his pictorial and filmed „Spanish Street Project”).

Seeing space expanding in Giotto's paintings, and with it the movement in time brought into them, contemporary critics cried: „Barbarism!” The Gothic was named precisely for this reason: the disruption of the civilization of that time by the uncouth, barbarian tribes of Goths: gothic = barbaric! It can easily happen that the artist motivated by esthetic considerations will form his works according to the expectations of current taste, and this is unacceptable to Vály. Besides, an examination of the transitions between temporal strata shows the contingency of esthetic principles, and this alone suffices to dispense with them. As Vály states, with no little humor: someone inclined to be judgmental can stand before his own Giotto picture-statues with just the same attitude as the connoisseur of the past who called Giotto's paintings, now marveled at without reservation, barbaric...

SUMMARY:ONE CAN CHOOSE FREEDOM, BUT THERE IS REALLY NO CHOISE

Vály is one of the most many-sided artists of whom I'm aware. And he may simply be unique in that his different sides do not separate, but thanks to his transformative capacity, cohere into a unity. A fine example is provided by his work, „Death and the Maiden”: a chain whose links are made of verse – music (here comes Vály) – painting – dance – film – danse macabre.

These different manifestations of his art give depth and layering to his oeuvre, in which – like Gauguin – connecting one to another he always poses the same question and seeks the answer: where did we come from, who are we, where are we going?

In the course of continual examination of this question, the stages of historical explorations slide into each other, like sections of a telescoping tube, and finally they even reveal astronomical distances all the way to the origin of the universe, which is still happening in the present. Like the Colorado River's deep excavation, in the course of which the walls of the Grand Canyon display the strata of the geological past. The past minute, yesterday, an individual life, childhood, family history, historical and art-historical precedents, the dawn of mankind, tribal development from its origins, geology, cosmology, creation.

Strata of an oeuvre, strata of historical and intellectual history, material strata, strata of energy, all sorts of strata with their errors and corrections together: a psalimpsest of the strata of creation, copying one onto the other, impressing themselves on every sense – from another viewpoint this is nothing other than the mechanism of oblivion: only the topmost layer, the surface, is immediately visible, while the others beneath are lost in mist! But this does not mean that there is no depth, only surface, that the conscious is only a surface, that a (death) shroud lies over memories, the past, and reality. This meditative method of assimilation is the key, secret and value of Vály's art: to arrive, working through the strata, back at the crucial, the truth. (Although this method can be considered apropos to each of his works, it reaches its apogee of perfection in his „archaeological” „Talazüek Project”).

Often, his works – those that contain only allusions, layers, fragments, energy fields and rays – with their receptive broken frames and patches of color running out of the picture are like some fragments of a primeval language that have, after the tribes' nomadic departure, begun an independent life anew, bringing new languages into being. Seeing these imaginations of an independent pictorial language for the first time, the original primeval language can scarcely be reconstructed any longer. In Vály's creative

and – sometimes destructive – re-creative work, this symbolizes our entire world. Only one solution remains: the observer sinks into himself before his works and tries to return to the primeval One, himself – trusting himself completely to feelings that were either unknown or foreign to himself, earlier.

Vály says, „Perhaps Gauguin was able to find the last crumbs of Paradise in Tahiti; not even that much is left for us.” We must bid farewell to the twentieth century and open a space for rebirth. We must allow ourselves to sense our interior crisis. We must allow ourselves to get beyond the pain of loss to a sadness in a fragmented world without either image or sound.

When a person, battling isolation, crisis, his own lack of understanding, and his fears, slowly begins to push back the darkness, his true labors have only just begun! But if, on the other hand, he doesn't even begin the task, the danger lurks that darkness will fill the entire space given to him.

And the whole battle rages during our ...life.

This is where you are, humanity, in ... life.

If you would live, you must pass beyond the strata and reach a condition of freedom: you have no other choice.

And that is the life-work-message of my brother, Sándor Vály, to humanity.

Ecce genus hominum.