

THE ROLE OF ABSTRACTION IN THE STRATEGIES OF EXHIBITING AVANT-GARDE JOURNALS

The paper draws on our methodological and theoretical experience researching and curating a temporary exhibition project by the Petőfi Literary Museum (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum) – Kassák Museum in 2015 entitled »Signal to the World: War ∩ Avant-Garde ∩ Kassák«¹.

The host institution of the project was the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, which has been operating since 1976 as home to Lajos Kassák's archives and one of the central research sites for the Hungarian literary and artistic avant-garde. L. Kassák was one of the leading artists of the Hungarian avant-garde. He created a significant artistic oeuvre as a poet and painter, but his work as editor of several avant-garde journals and initiator of networks is of equal importance². In view of one of the most important features of Kassák's career, since 2011 the director of the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, Edit Sasvári, has placed archival work and research into the avant-garde networks at the centre of the museum's activities. This concept has seen the museum move away from its former function as a memorial institution and presenting exhibitions addressing the avant-garde networks, the workers' movement of the interwar period, as well as Kassák's own works from the perspective of new research and presentational methods³. The exhibition analysing the journal *A Tett* (The Action) was the first in a series of exhibitions rereading and reinterpreting Kassák's avant-garde journals, including *Ma* (Today), *2x2* and *Dokumentum* (Document)⁴.

THE THEME OF THE EXHIBITION: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF A *TETT*

The exhibition centred on the first journal edited by Kassák, entitled *A Tett*, published in Budapest in 1915/1916. *A Tett* was the first Hungarian avant-garde journal and the first firmly anti-war platform of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy during the First World War. With a left-wing, socially committed outlook, the authors of *A Tett* employed social criticism and novel principles of journal publishing to stand up to the prevailing wartime discourse of stigmatising the enemy⁵. Kassák's public persona united the tones of the prophetic leader with the anti-authoritarian activist. Starting his life as a factory worker, he soon engaged with socialism and the workers' movement in Budapest. From political agitation he turned towards poetry, and by the second year of the First World War he published his first book of poems, influenced by Futurist poetic forms. Kassák's journal was intended as a forum for young artists adapting the most recent »isms« of the avant-gardes but, at the same time, it prompted an attack on pro-war intellectuals and the popular press.

Kassák published a manifesto of the Hungarian avant-garde in the tenth issue of *A Tett*, in which he formulated his long-time credo: »New literature may not swear allegiance to any one of the »isms«⁶. In Kassák's definition, »new art« was to be a »universal phenomenon«, the glorified ideal of which was »man, enlightening to infinity«. According to Kassák, internationalisation had already taken place in the domains of politics, economy and social life, with the exception of the arts, which »blinded themselves in the jungle of

phrases of national pride and heroic romanticism«. »New art«, instead, must be the »most fanatic spokesman of progress«. Regarding the anti-war artistic content, the interpretation and subversion of wartime topics and discourses were closely connected to the strategies employed by Franz Pfemfert's Berlin communist/expressionist journal of the same title, *Die Aktion* (The Action). Kassák's journal was published for nearly one year, before censorship banned it in October 1916.

The radical artistic and political standpoint represented by *A Tett* may not be immediately apparent to today's reader. In the hundred years that have passed, the points of reference against which the journal appeared seditious, violating norms and even »threatening the interests of warfare«, have faded away. When we began working on the exhibition, we tried to set out a series of questions to explore the former statement. Our main purpose was not to commemorate the centenary of the beginning of the Hungarian avant-garde in a way that denies the complexity of understanding and interpreting the central questions raised by Kassák and his fellow artists themselves, but to make these problems vividly accessible to a contemporary audience. To achieve this, we have chosen the form of an exhibition based on research.

Drawing on primary sources with a focus on the microhistorical aspects of the editing and reception of Kassák's journal, the exhibition attempted to outline the Hungarian and international contexts in which *A Tett* operated, showing how the journal did indeed constitute a »signal to the world«, just as Kassák's manifesto, chosen as the title of our exhibition, suggested. These contexts were identified as the pro-war Hungarian popular press, the »culture of war«, the artistic and political hinterland of the journal and the anti-war international art that provided the conceptual basis for Kassák's response. As a result, the exhibition functioned as a field of research itself where the visitors could formulate their own interpretation through their reading and perception of the written and visual sources presented.

EXHIBITING AVANT-GARDE JOURNALS: RESEARCH METHODS AND EXHIBITION DISPLAY STRATEGIES

The questions raised here are connected to the recently theorised questions of exhibiting avant-garde archives. »Presenting a critical view of avant-garde art is a problematic endeavour in a museum environment. The avant-garde was full of subversive undercurrents and created an unregulated sphere of operation in a regulated society, in direct conflict with museum principles. [...] The means of conveying the significance of these aspects lie in the documents held in the museum archives. In general, museums treat archives separately, as background material, rarely looking at them as sources of exhibition items. For anything related to Kassák, this attitude was reinforced by history and museum policy, particularly given the unwarranted rejection of avant-garde art during socialism«⁷. Although this archive affords plenty of scope for a researcher, a much more problematic issue is how to present archival materials in an exhibition.

To resolve this problem, we decided to present all of the exhibited objects as documents, which meant that they were deprived of their function as individual artworks. Our main purpose was to apply strategies of exhibiting the content as well as internal and external contexts of avant-garde journals, as opposed to the method of presenting them as authentic works of art; this resulted in most cases in exhibiting them closed⁸. The methodological background of our research is provided by periodical studies. The journal was the most complex medium of the avant-gardes; it was a site for debate, self-presentation and self-interpretation. Periodical studies aim at a complex understanding of journals, which involves taking into account the so-called »periodical codes«, i. e. the literary output of the journals, their use of artistic repro-

ductions and typography, as well as the debates held in the journals, the editorial strategy for promotion, advertisements, and their relationship to censorship⁹. The approach of periodical studies is particularly relevant to the case of Kassák's avant-garde journals as he looked at his journals as his most important medium of communication and primary means of self-archiving. In line with periodical studies, we have examined *A Tett* as a complex phenomenon in which social, political, artistic and economic questions and constraints intersected.

The exhibition was an experiment in presenting complex research results through a strategy of combining early avant-garde publications with explanatory graphic elements. These graphics played a key role in shaping the display by defining the arrangement of the original works and documents. Our aim was to visualise the results of research that utilised contemporary scientific methods by using visual and design solutions that could both reinterpret and transmit these complex messages. The main challenge of the exhibition from a museological point of view was to present microhistorical and mainly textual research results through the use of an abstract language that attempted to generalise correlations.

Graphic elements played a key role in the exhibition as a means of visual analysis. Although the use of elements such as infographics and other data visualisations is now widespread in museum exhibitions, they are generally employed in a spectacular, decorative or illustrative role. Our exhibition took the use of visual elements further, investing them with an interpretative function and elevating this to equal rank with the curatorial concept. Graphic elements in our exhibition revealed the complex interrelationships between the exhibited documents, evoking the techniques used by the avant-garde artists in a museum setting completely different from their original environment. Graphic elements set out complex scopes of problems without offering pre-prepared summaries of the research and packaging it in arbitrary narratives, and thus leave a wide scope for visitors to make their own interpretations. At the same time, the graphic elements used in our exhibition were not created through generative data visualisation (as infographics usually are) but through a creative and intuitive artistic process that enabled them to be perceived as abstract works of art as well. The combination of the layers of graphic elements and original objects created compositions in which all of the elements could be perceived as documents¹⁰.

Our aim was to look at exhibition display not simply as a public showcase of original objects and documents with explanatory texts but as a medium of social and cultural knowledge production where publicity and visual language play a key role¹¹. By subverting the conventional hierarchy of original object, document and explanation, and by emphasising visual interpretation, we prompted viewers to see how the meaning of each of these three elements always affects that of the others.

SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition consisted of three separate displays, each analysing one aspect of *A Tett*. The first section of the exhibition analysed *A Tett* in the context of the pro-war popular press by placing the first issue of Kassák's journal among twenty-four newspapers with the highest daily print run in Budapest (fig. 1). All of the issues selected were published in the same week as *A Tett*. The visualisation here consisted of two levels: firstly, the cover pages of the newspapers, which created an outline of the war discourse of that particular moment during the First World War through their headlines and editorials; secondly, the graphic that visualised the print run of each newspaper, as compared to *A Tett*'s print run of a maximum of 500/1000 copies. As our research showed, the highest grossing newspaper was published in nearly 300,000 copies per day. In 1915, daily newspapers with an extremely high circulation were more or less united in endeavours to form and transmit the »culture of war«. This was the context into which Kassák and his associates brought

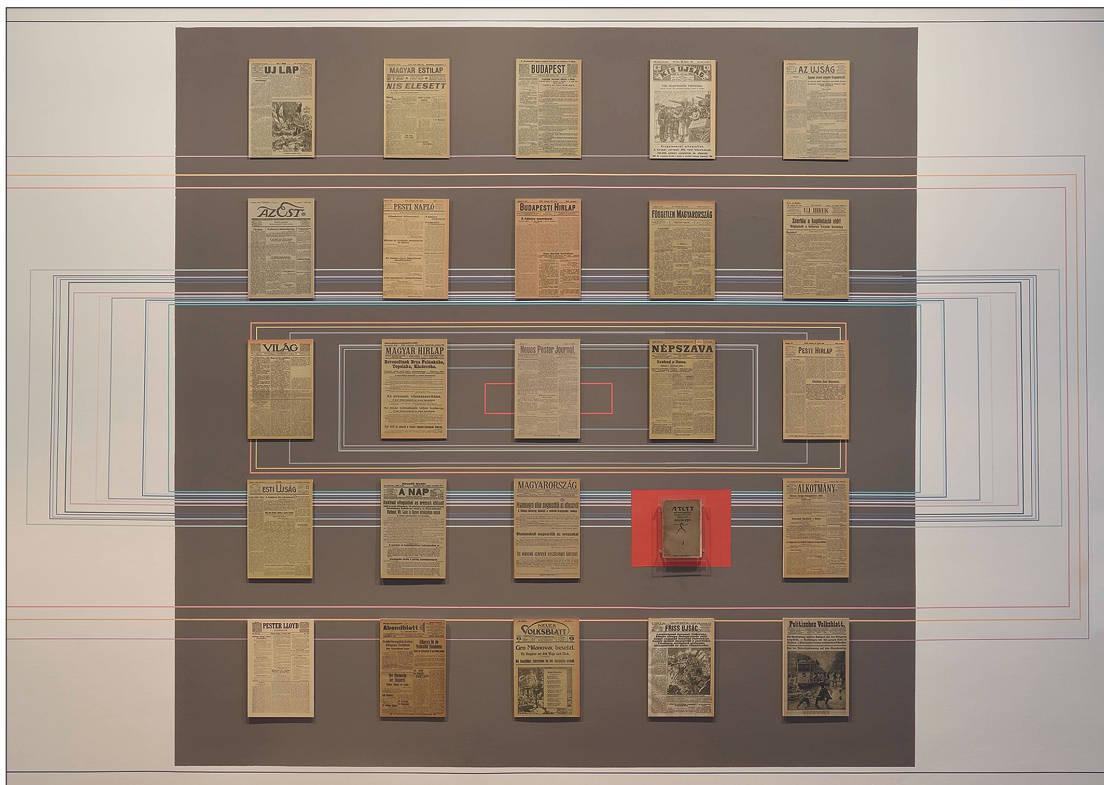


Fig. 1 A *Tett* in the context of the popular press of November 1915: Interior of the exhibition »Signal to the World: War n Avant-Garde n Kassák« in the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, 2015. – (Design © K. Rudas; photo © Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, J. Rosta).

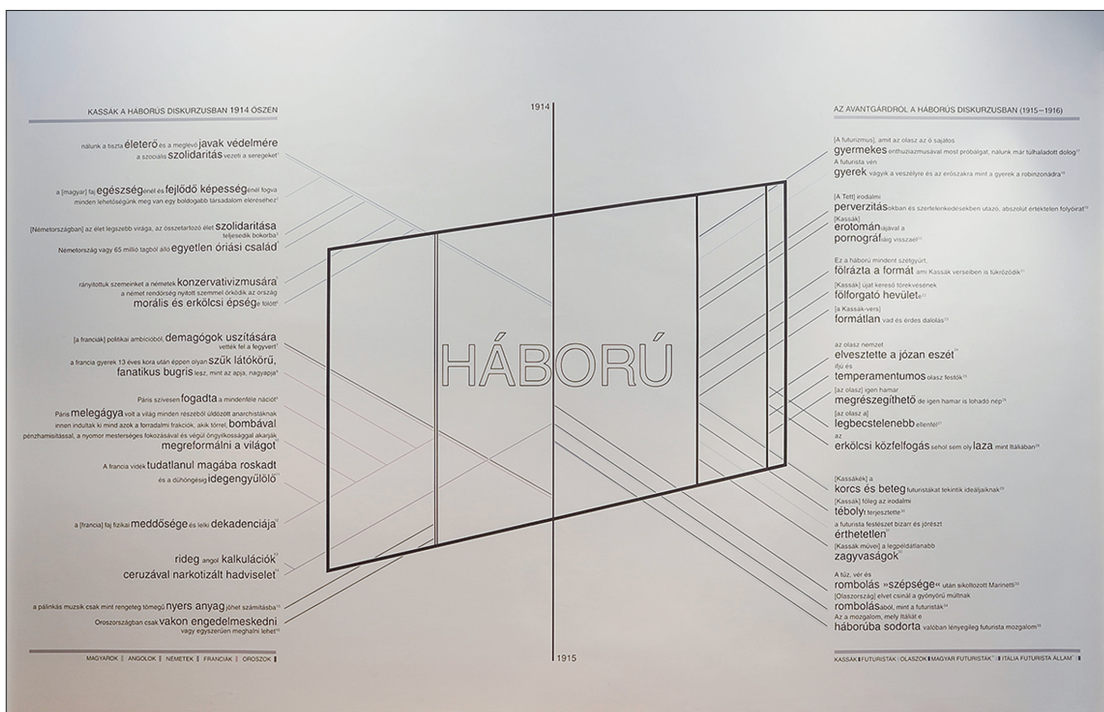


Fig. 2 Lajos Kassák and the »culture of war«: Interior of the exhibition »Signal to the World: War n Avant-Garde n Kassák« in the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, 2015. – (Design © K. Rudas; photo © Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, J. Rosta).



Fig. 3 *A Tett's* international horizon: Interior of the exhibition »Signal to the World: War n Avant-Garde n Kassák« in the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, 2015. – (Design © K. Rudas; photo © Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, J. Rosta).

a radically new voice: this fact highlights the courage of Kassák and his associates and conveys the social and political milieu that motivated them to launch *A Tett*.

The second section of the exhibition attempted to analyse the interrelation between the stereotypes mobilised in the war discourse by Kassák, and those used against Kassák's avant-garde group (fig. 2). Although generally remembered only for his vehemently anti-war stance, during the autumn of 1914 Kassák himself helped to formulate the »culture of war«. In early articles, he divided the warring parties into the »good« (the Central Powers) and the »bad« (the Entente Powers). Kassák portrayed the confrontation between the allies and enemies of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy through popular national metaphors and negative stereotypes. However, Kassák reconsidered his attitude to the war in early 1915; having studied the positions of foreign socialist movements, his views changed radically and he became a war critic and soon opened up his own channel for anti-militarist ideas. *A Tett* challenged the »culture of war« and became a target of indignation for pro-war intellectuals. The Hungarian press treated the journal and its editors as an internal enemy: the war party publicly bracketed the anti-war avant-garde views of *A Tett* with Futurism and the idea of »treacherous« Italy¹². In the public mind, *A Tett* was simply the journal of the »Hungarian Futurists«. The exhibition infographics analysed the patterns derived from hundreds of pages of contemporary reviews and articles on Kassák's avant-garde journal. Our attempt was to find the most common patterns in this corpus and present their standpoint through selected quotations, visualised through lines connecting these passages to the war discourse.

The third section focused on one of Kassák's novel editorial principles espoused during the publishing of *A Tett* (figs 3-4). Kassák decided to present parallel phenomena of international art to the Hungarian public,

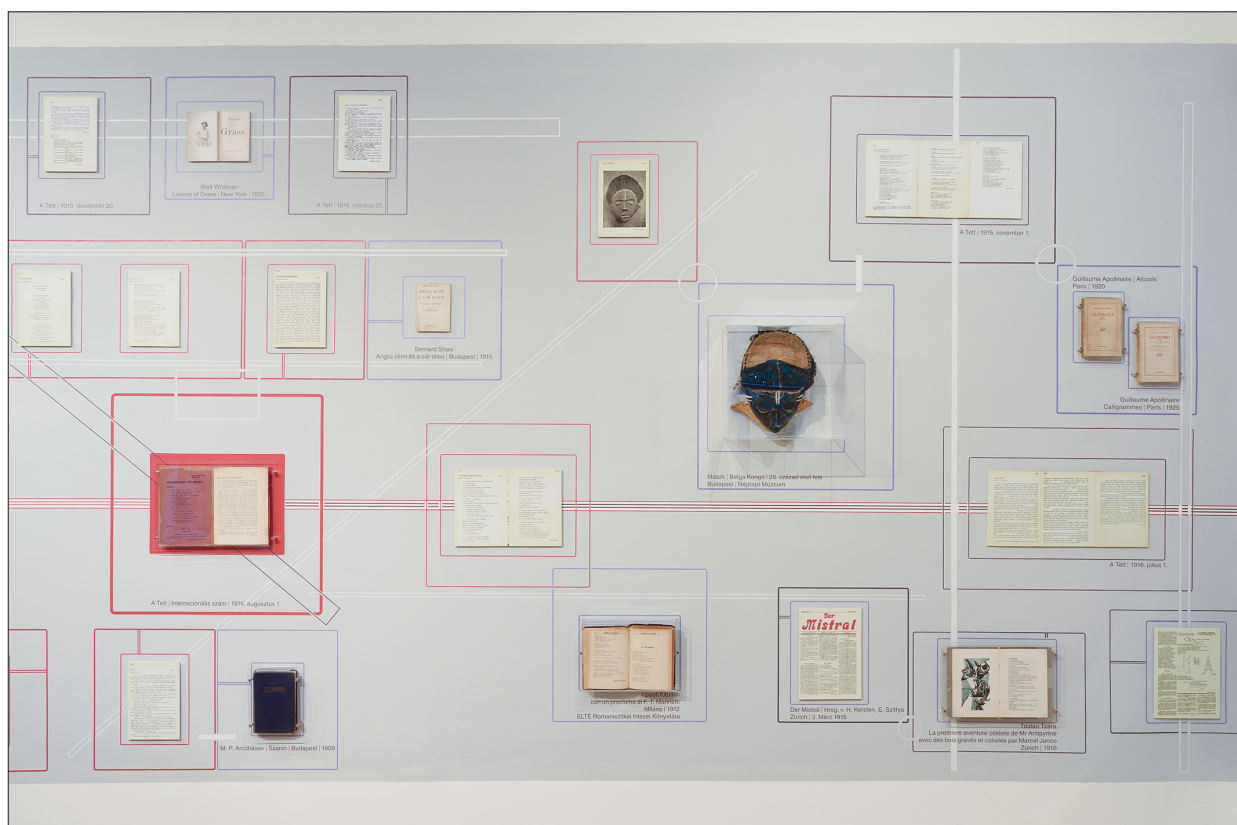


Fig. 4 *A Tett's* international horizon (detail): Interior of the exhibition »Signal to the World: War n Avant-Garde n Kassák« in the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, 2015. – (Design © K. Rudas; photo © Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, J. Rosta).

as, in his view, publishing »international art« was a clear stance against the »culture of war«. A definite statement of this was the so-called »international issue« of *A Tett*, published in August 1916, featuring artists from France, Britain, Italy, Russia, Serbia and Belgium, i. e. enemies of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In his manifesto entitled »Signal to the World«, Kassák left no doubt as to his aim to join the international pacifist-socialist movement¹³. *A Tett* thus became the promoter of »socially committed new art« that »rose above self-serving racial or national ends and conventions«¹⁴. For the exhibition, we collected all the international works of art, including translations of poems and reproductions of artworks, and searched for their original sources of publication from which Kassák had drawn when selecting them for his own journal. The identification of these sources recreated a virtual international network around Kassák's journal, which could also be identified as the international context of the early Hungarian avant-garde. Supplemented with additional publications for each sub-context, the network also highlighted the ambiguities of Kassák's way of incorporating particular groups, such as the Futurists, the German Expressionists and an early French avant-garde group, the Abbaye du Créteil, in his scope, while excluding others¹⁵.

The inclusion of authors from Entente countries was deemed a provocation: the censor, citing its propagation of ideas »endangering the interests of warfare«, banned *A Tett* in October 1916. To avoid clearly harsher state repression, Kassák relaunched his organ under the title *MA*, focusing more on visual arts and literature until the end of the war. *MA* spread anti-militarism in a less obvious form to distract the censorship, and so was published for the following ten years nearly uninterrupted, and became one of the most recognised journals of constructivism during the early 1920s.

RECEPTION OF THE EXHIBITION

During the exhibition, several museum professionals and art historians raised the question of whether this form of presentation was accessible enough to visitors to be used in a museum context and whether it was an adequate form of transmitting knowledge to a wider audience, or whether it was too »hermetic«. In the exhibition space, visitors were confronted with a visual interpretation of research results, which are usually presented in the more discursive form of an essay. Our experience was that the primary audience of the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum appreciated the task of conducting research in the exhibition space by themselves and easily adjusted to viewing journal issues, books and even artworks, including a relief by the sculptor Ivan Meštrović and an African mask from the Budapest Museum of Ethnography, regarded as elements of an »infographics« that transmits complex questions visually.

Notes

- 1) The publication was prepared as part of the research project by the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum K-120779 entitled »Lajos Kassák's avant-garde journals from an interdisciplinary perspective (1915-1928)«, supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office. Exhibition: »Signal to the World: War n Avant-Garde n Kassák«, Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, 26 June – 8 November 2015, curated by G. Dobó and M. P. Szeredi, designed by K. Rudas. – An extended online version of the exhibition is available at attet.kassakmuzeum.hu (21.01.2018). – A collection of essays by E. Balázs, G. Dobó, K. Rudas and M. P. Szeredi containing the exhibition documentation was published under the same title (Dobó/Szeredi 2016).
- 2) On Kassák, see Sasvári/Zólyom/Schulcz 2011 and Csatlós/Sasvári 2011; on Kassák's avant-garde journals, see Balázs/Sasvári/Szeredi 2017.
- 3) Sasvári/Dobó 2015, 599-610.
- 4) For more details on this series, see Balázs/Sasvári/Szeredi 2017.
- 5) Balázs 2016.
- 6) Kassák 1916a, 160-161, cf. Forgács 2006, 260-274.
- 7) Sasvári/Dobó 2015, 599-610.
- 8) See e.g. the installation of avant-garde journals in the exhibitions Bury 2007, Grenier 2013 and Kühnel/Lailach/Weber 2014.
- 9) Brooker/Tacker 2009, 1-26. – Stead/Védrine 2008. – Brooker/Bru/Thacker 2013.
- 10) Rudas 2016.
- 11) Cf. Frazon 2011, 22-23.
- 12) Dobó 2016; 2018.
- 13) Kassák 1916b.
- 14) Cf. Kassák 1916a.
- 15) Cf. Szeredi 2016.

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- Dobó 2016: G. Dobó, *Imagining the War: »Frenzied Futurists« and »Treacherous Italians« Portrayed in Hungarian Newspapers of the 1910s*. In: Dobó/Szeredi 2016, 48-64.
- 2018: G. Dobó, *Framing Futurism in Hungary (1909-1944)*. In: G. Berghaus (ed.), *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* (Berlin 2018).
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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Die Rolle von Abstraktion bei Strategien zur Ausstellung von Avantgarde-Journalen

Dieser Artikel basiert auf methodologischen und theoretischen Erfahrungen, welche die Autoren bei der Erforschung und Kuratierung einer Sonderausstellung über das Journal *A Tett* (Die Aktion) gesammelt haben, die 2015 im Kassák Museum des Petőfi Literaturmuseums in Budapest stattfand. Das erste ungarische Avantgarde-Journal *A Tett* wurde von dem Poeten Lajos Kassák in den Jahren 1915 und 1916 herausgegeben und wendete sich energisch gegen die sogenannte Kultur des Krieges. Aus einer linken, sozial engagierten Perspektive heraus wurden Gesellschaftskritik und neue Prinzipien der Zeitschriftenpublikation genutzt, um sich dem vorherrschenden Kriegsdiskurs, in dem Gegner stigmatisiert wurden, entgegenzustellen. Die Ausstellung experimentierte damit, komplexe Forschung zu präsentieren, indem originale frühe Avantgarde-Publikationen mit erklärenden visuellen Strukturen kombiniert wurden, welche die Anordnung der Objekte bestimmten. Aus museologischer Sicht bestand die größte Herausforderung der Ausstellung darin, die mikrohistorischen und größtenteils textlichen Forschungsergebnisse durch den Gebrauch einer abstrakten Sprache darzustellen, die gleichzeitig versuchte, Zusammenhänge zu verallgemeinern. Übersetzung: A. Kleuser

The Role of Abstraction in the Strategies of Exhibiting Avant-Garde Journals

The chapter draws on our methodological and theoretical experience researching and curating a 2015 temporary exhibition on the journal *A Tett* (The Action) at the Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum in Budapest. This first Hungarian avant-garde journal, edited by the poet Lajos Kassák in 1915/1916, vigorously opposed the »culture of war«. With a left-wing, socially committed outlook, it employed social criticism and the novel principles of journal publishing to stand up to the prevailing wartime discourse of stigmatising the enemy. The exhibition was an experiment in presenting complex research through a strategy of combining original early avant-garde publications with explanatory visual structures that define the arrangement of these objects. The main challenge of the exhibition from a museological point of view was to present microhistorical and mainly textual research results through the use of an abstract language that, at the same time, attempted to generalise correlations.