Péter Korniss

by

James R. Hugunin

Péter Korniss

A Life in Photography

Péter Korniss lecturing at his retrospective exhibition, Budapest, September 2017

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Cover: Péter Korniss, his wife Edit, and the woman in *On the Road* (2015) in front of the exhibition's entrance

Péter Korniss before one of his images

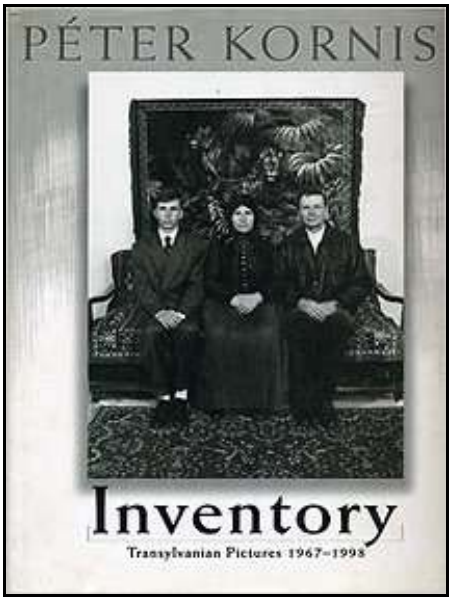
Hungarian photographer Péter Korniss worked for Nők Lapja, a weekly women's magazine, from 1961 to 1991, and then as a freelance photographer. His reputation rests on his many decades as a documentarist. His images have been exhibited in museums and galleries in 16 different countries. For three years from 1977 he was a member of the World Press Photo jury and in 1983 he joined the International Advisory Committee of the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund. In 1999 he became the first photographer to be awarded the Kossuth Prize. His exhibition, "Péter Korniss: Continuing Memories," at the Hungarian National Gallery opening in September 2017, and on 18th October, 2017 at the Várfok Gallery, Budapest, spans the 50-year career of this photographer, whose unerringly observant and analytical approach to social changes has constantly shaped and reshaped his own realm of imagery. His attention gradually shifted from traditional peasant culture towards the globalized world and the trials and tribulations of itinerant workers.

Péter Korniss Exhibition

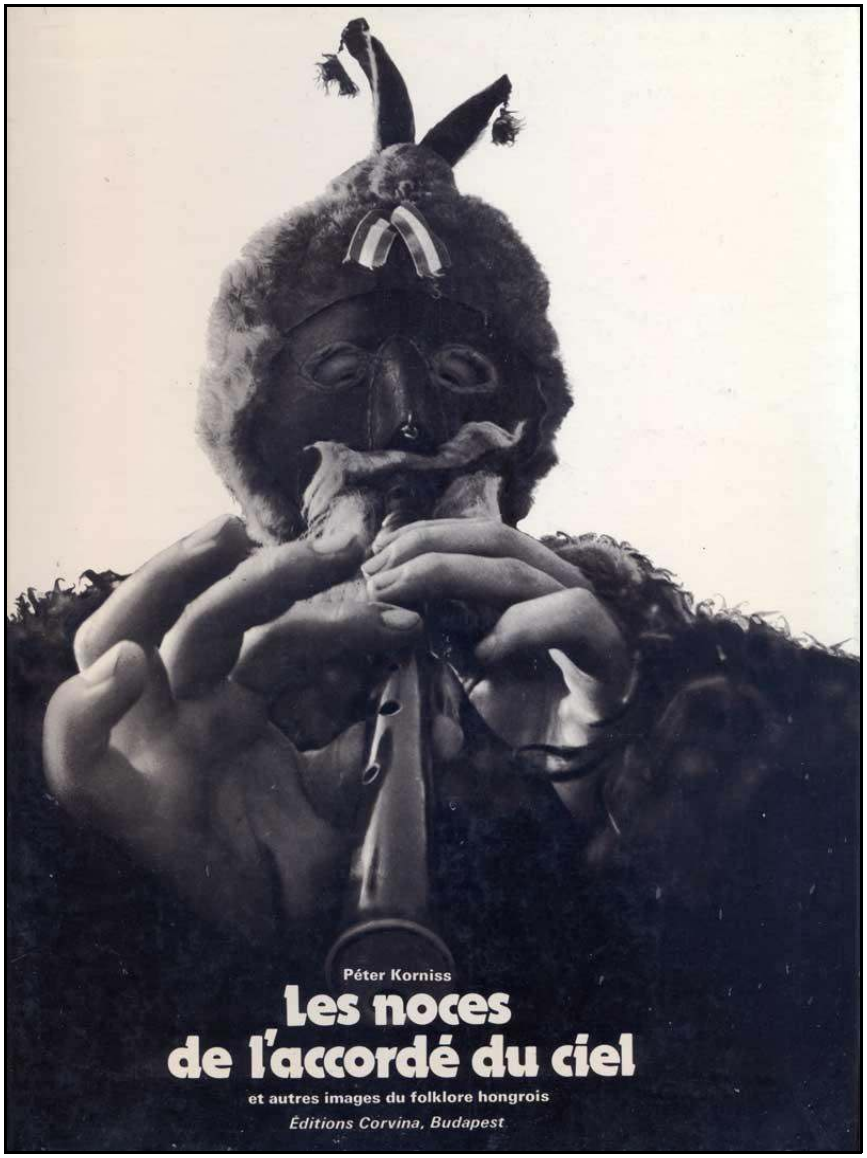
Freshly Painted Room (1969) Péter Korniss

That human nature is the same in all people, but that the lives we lead cause it to flow through us in different ways. That emotions, thoughts and notions open us and are compressed in different places, depending on where and how they encounter resistance.

— Karl Ove Knausgaard, “August Sander,” in *Autumn* (2017)



Victory for the Revolution in Romania (detail, 1989). Korniss values his Transylvanian roots, a historically contested area that has shuttled back and forth between Romanian and Hungarian hegemony.



Cover to the French edition of *Heaven's Bridegroom* (1974) awarded the Hungarian national Balázs Béla Prize

The unreality of Hungarians donning masks that resemble those of deepest Africa is not only startling but incredibly revealing. Unlike others who use "schmaltz" to demonstrate the brotherhood of man, Korniss seeks out the men and enables the viewer to make and enjoy the remarkable discovery. When one discovers that in certain Hungarian villages the color mourning white and not black, the immediate connection is to the orient. Then, one wonders about the relationship.

— "East of of East," Michael Edelson, *Camera 35* (1976)

A Life in Photography

The Land and the Globe have been pitted against one another — the lived world against the known world; the imagined soil of old against the real territory of the future; the deeply rooted folks versus the uprooted globalizers, and so on. . . . Once modernizing has started, we have no idea of what the Land — toward which some want nostalgically to go back to — would look like. . . . the Land is always a retrospective invention.

— "On a Possible Triangulation of Some Present Political Positions," Bruno Latour, in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 2018, vol. 44, no.2)

Péter Korniss in his home showing the author a print (Budapest, November 2016)

Péter Korniss

I first met Péter Korniss (b. 1937) in Prague. We were two of a group of International jurors for the 2014 Czech Press Photo competition. I was impressed with his critical comments, his graciousness and his own work (he gave me one of his photobooks). In 2016 I was able to go to Budapest and spend a few days with him. I wanted to look at the work he was assembling for his encompassing life retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Hungarian National Gallery, in Budapest (September 2017 to January 7, 2018). I got more than this. I was taken to a fine Hungarian restaurant, a favorite of his, near his home. Later, he took me to the Hungarian House of Photography (near the city's Opera House) which had been the home and studio of Budapest's premier portrait photographer Mai Manó (1855 - 1917) and now features a gallery, superb library, bookstore, and Manó's refurbished studio space with two of his vintage cameras.[1]

Mai Manó's Daylight Studio, second floor, Hungarian House of Photography, Budapest, photo by James Hugunin (2016)

1. See András Török, "Resurrecting Budapest Photographer Manó Mai and his Studio/Home," *Photography and Research in Austria, Vienna, the Door to the European East* (European Society for the History of Photography, 2001): pp. 57 - 67). Note, formal Hungarian places the last name first, as seen in this title.

Péter Korniss

Mai Manó, early 1890s, taken in his own studio (Hungarian Museum of Photography).

Korniss is a committed supporter of this important historical monument and very active contemporary resource for Hungarian photographers. Walking through the House's gallery, he talked of the extensive number of significant photographers who have emerged from Hungary over the years since Manó, how Hungary's unique linguistic and historical situation has encouraged the use of photography as a "universal language." The names of

Mai Manó's Studio Cameras; his glass plates were lost, but some 1000 prints survive.

The author in the exhibition gallery of the Hungarian House of Photography (Péter Korniss, November 2016)

two names came up first since they were, as was Korniss, born in Transylvania: Brassaï (Gyula Halász) and Martin Munkácsi (Márk Mermelstein); they were followed by Robert Capa (Endre Ernő Friedmann), Andre Kertész (Andor Kohn), and László Moholy-Nagy. As Hungarian-British author Arthur Koestler elucidates in his autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue* (1952), "Hungarians are the only people in Europe without racial or linguistic relatives in Europe. Therefore they are the loneliest on this continent. . . . Hopeless solitude feeds their creativity, their desire for achieving . . . To be Hungarian is a collective neurosis."

My tall, slender interlocutor graciously introduced me to staff, then gave me a running commentary on the current exhibition of Hungarian photographers whose work was supported by the annual Pécsi József Photography Grant competition.

The following evening with Péter was spent in his home sipping Unicum (a native herbal liqueur produced according to a secret formula of more than forty herbs) and enjoying him pulling out large prints of his past and present work, explaining to me how they would fit into his forthcoming retrospective, the culmination of over fifty years recording East European lands and people. He broadly sketched out the catalogue planned for the show and its contributors, scholars and historians of East European photography.

The cover of the retrospective's catalogue

That evening I expressed an interest in reviewing the show, hoping to return the following year for its opening, but personal reasons intervened. Péter did send me the catalogue, *Péter Korniss: Continuing Memories* (Museum of Fine Arts, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2017) and I immediately jumped into reading the insightful essays by László Baán (director of the Hungarian National Gallery), Péter Baki (director of the Hungarian Museum of Photography in Kecskemét), Daniela Mrázkova (Czech photo historian), and Colin Ford (British photo historian and museum director). Their articles address the complexity and long duration of Korniss in-depth record of country and city life from the Communist era ("Forty years of socialism and there's still no toilet paper")[2], through the "refolution" of the late-1980s,[3] to the evolution of state capitalism into a global leviathan, what

2. Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999): p. 16, cites a protesting Polish worker.

3. Ibid.,14, British journalist Timothy Garton Ash's term for the mixture of reform and revolution that constituted the collapse of state socialism in the Eastern Bloc countries.

Péter Korniss

Coverage of the ill-faated 1956 Hungarian Revolution


The Bihari Dance Ensemble (1964) Péter Korniss

American sociologist Benjamin H. Bratton has called, in his 2016 book by the same name, "The Stack," referring to the layered global megastructure of our digital age with its six tiers: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, and User.

Having been born in Kolozsvár, Transylvania (today Cluj-Napoca, Romania) and, after his father's death during forced labor service in the Army, moving to Budapest in 1949, Korniss experienced displacement first hand. In the 1956 Revolution, he found himself at the center of politics when he was elected to a revolutionary committee. With the failure of that revolt, his participation therein resulted in his expulsion from Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University where he was studying law, necessitating a new source of income.

During the post-1956 era's János Kádár regime, dubbed "Goulash Communism," [4] Péter Korniss began

4. Goulash Communism (or Kadarism, after János Kádár who ruled the Party) refers to the variety of communism as practiced in the Hungarian People's Republic, from the 1960s until the Central European collapse of communism in 1989. With elements of free market economics, as well as an improved human rights record, it represented a mild deviation from the Soviet principles. It was, however, a period of deception and lies on the part of the government.

During the Kádár era, there were only two major stores where one could go to buy shoes, clothing, and other essentials that today one might go to a mall to purchase: the Centrum and the Skála. The Centrum was the "standard" store, while the Skála had "fancier" items that were supposedly more "Western." The shift from socialism to a capitalist economy is increasingly figured in Korniss' later images.

The greatest sin of the Kádár era is the way in which the regime succeeded in bending the spine of society, of co-opting everyone into either active or passive complicity with a corrupt regime. It broke people's self-confidence, it pushed them to guilt and self-loathing. The era was plagued with rigidity and brittleness,

his photographic career. Hired at the Photography Co-operative in Budapest, by the early 1960s he had worked his way up to doing photo-reportage for a weekly magazine as well as dance photography for the State Ballet Institute and the new Pécs Ballet formed by Imre Eck; later, he photographed the folk dance group, Bihari Dance Ensemble, becoming friends with their choreographer Ferenc "Tata" Novák who took him to the village of Szék (today Sic, Romania) where he experienced the dance house, which is an integral part of village life, a world of tradition that became his life-time commitment to document.

The post-World War I Treaty of Trianon cost Hungary two-thirds of its territory; a third of ethnic Hungarians ended up in neighboring countries. The effects of this loss of the country's self-image resulted in what became known as Hungary's "Trianon Trauma."

during which the "anti-straight-faced" generation of bohemian artists, writers, and intellectuals suffered social trauma — see the stunning, close-up portraits of unsmiling faces of that generation of cultural rebels made by Miklós Déri (*Déri Miklós: Arcok/ Faces* [Budapest: Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center & Déak Erika Gallery, 2016]).

Péter Korniss

Workers' Brigade with their Trailer in Budapest (1985) Péter Korniss. A close-knit six-man worker's brigade from the village of Tiszaeszlár whom the photographer befriended and photographed for two years.

Relatives of the Bride (1971) Péter Korniss

Korniss would refine his sustained interest in the cultures of the Carpathian region, where, as Korniss says, "All people have a common fate and in their cultures there is more of what binds them together than what separates them." Over time, he has examined how that area's culture has responded to the pressures of modernization: peasants increasingly commuting or migrating, to the cities as laborers and, most recently, as colorful participants in the commodification of their own indigenous traditions for a growing tourist trade, a continuity found now for old customs. In turn, Korniss' approach increasingly moved from a documentary style in monochrome to staging his subjects before his camera and shot in color (see *Nativity Players in the Shopping Mall*, 2009). The theatrical, which had always been present in his work, later becomes more forthright.

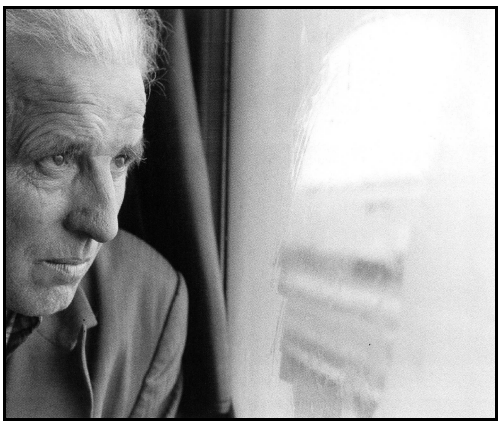
The latter works, except for being in color, remind me of the similar staging seen in German photographer August Sander's visual inventory of German people in *Face of our Time* (1929).[5] But whereas Sander's modernist photobook title puts the emphasis on the *hic et nunc*, and even points toward an ominous future in his portraits of uniformed Nazis, Korniss, in a postmodernist U-turn, nostalgically titled a mid-eighties album of his *Passing Times* recording the social casualties following upon "progress." But in both bodies of work, the photographers take advantage of the fact that our lives are written in our faces and on our bodies.

The exhibition catalogue for Korniss' 2017 retrospective notes, over a quarter of a million "guest workers," were commuting from rural homes to cities, spending a week residing in shabby hostels, then returning on the weekends to their native villages.

5. The people were assigned no name, only professions. Many of the faces have impenetrable expressions, yet they speak to us. Karl Ove Knausgaard, in "August Sander," *Autumn* (2017) wrote: "The tensions felt in these photographs are due to the fact that every face, every person in them carries a charge, but what has created the charge is invisible."

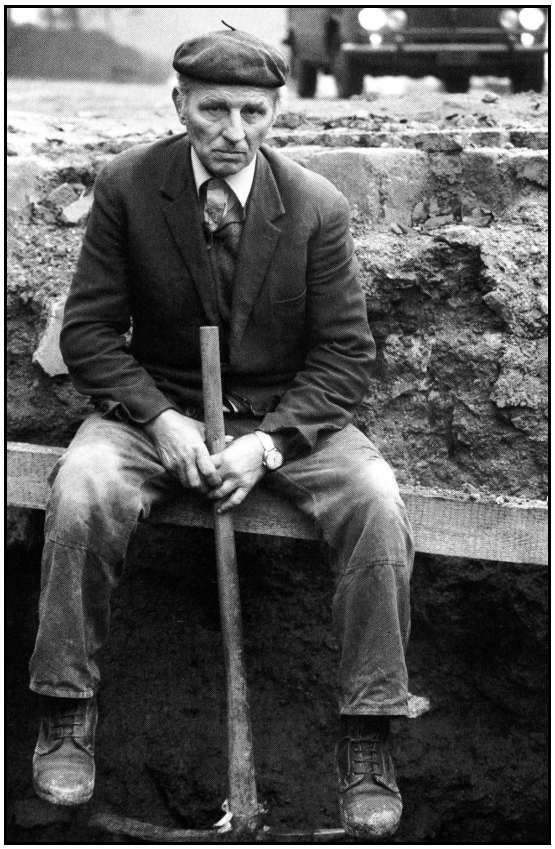
Péter Korniss

András Skarbit and his wife Erzsébet Urbán,Tiszaeszlár (1951) re-photographed by Péter Korniss



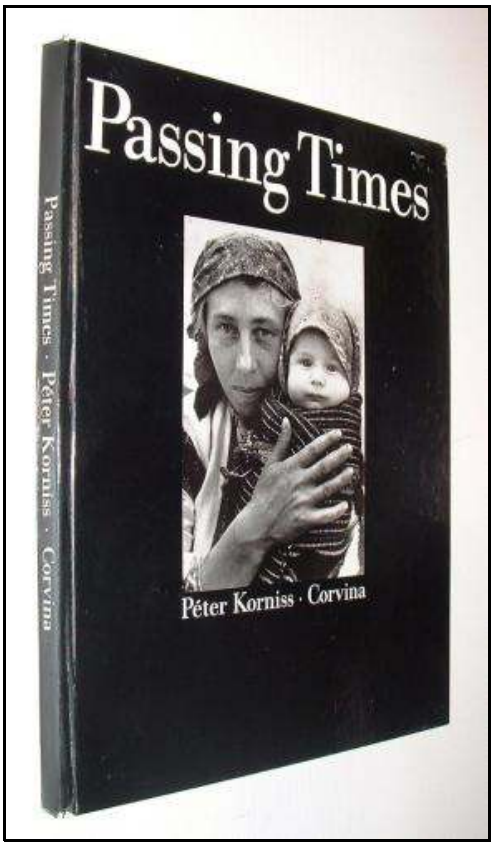
[Skarbit] *On the Train* (1981) Péter Korniss

Below Buda Palace (1982) Péter Korniss

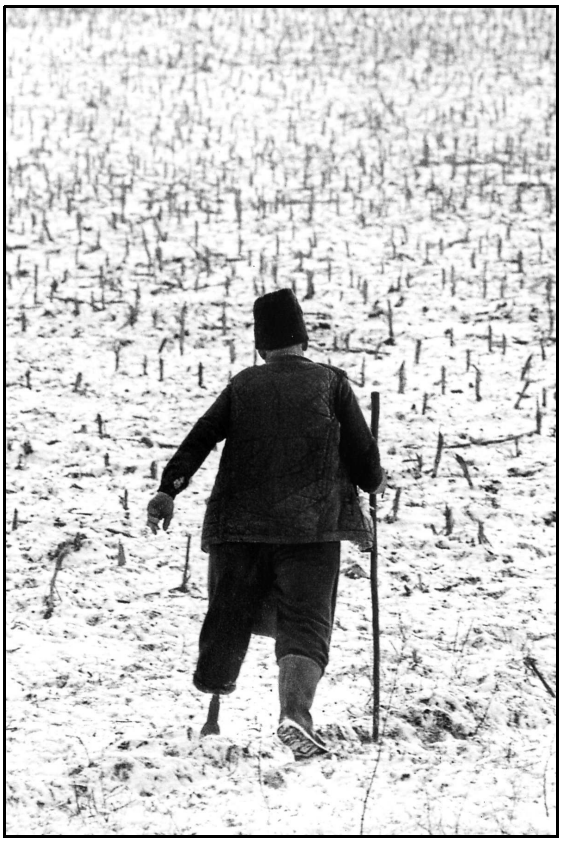


At the Side of the Trench (1982) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss



Passing Times (1979) Péter Korniss

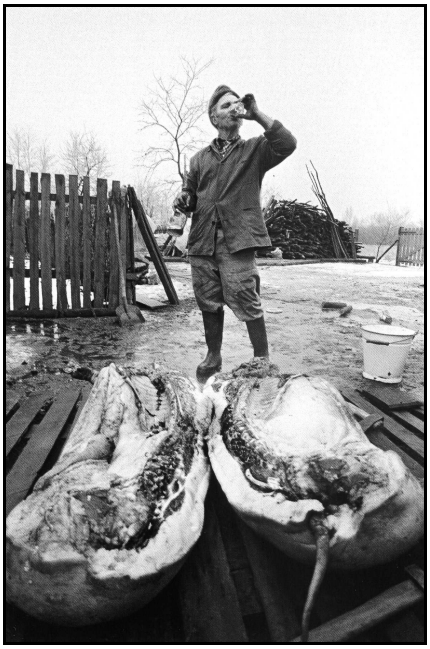


Disabled War Veteran (1976) Péter Korniss

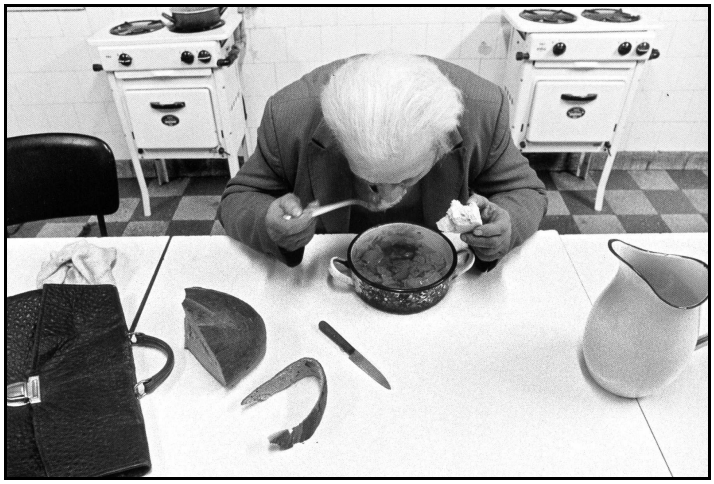
New Year's Eve Ball (1971) Péter Korniss

Hanging Cradle (1973) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss



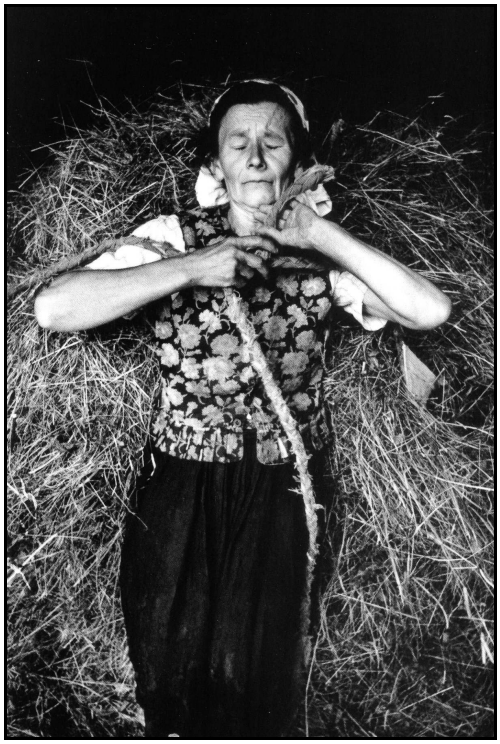
[Skarbit] *Pig Killing* (1981) Péter Korniss



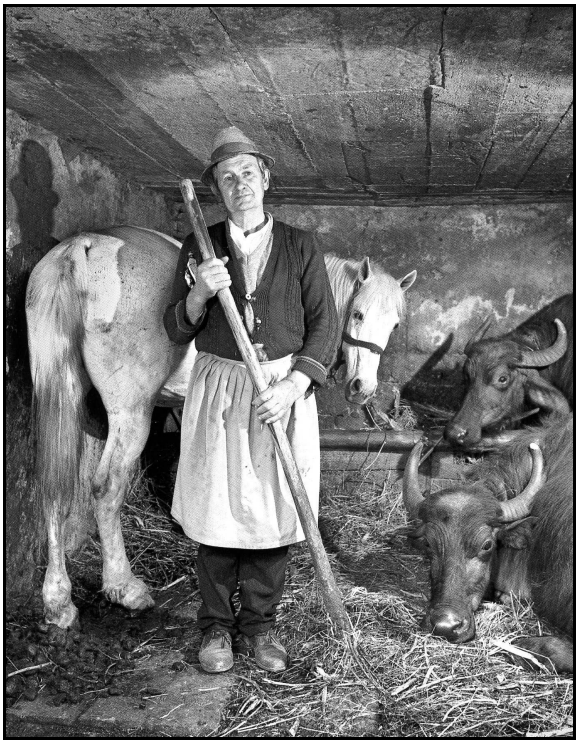
[Skarbit] *Supper in the Kitchen* [at the work hostel] (1983) Péter Korniss

Birthday in the Pub (1986) Péter Korniss

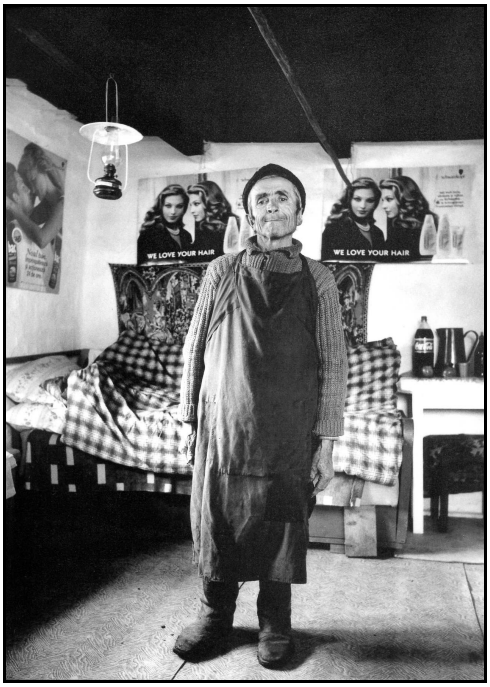
Péter Korniss



Woman Carrying Hay (1977) Péter Korniss



Farmer in the Stable (1997)



Man in Home Decorated with Posters (1997)

Hanging Cradle (1973) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss

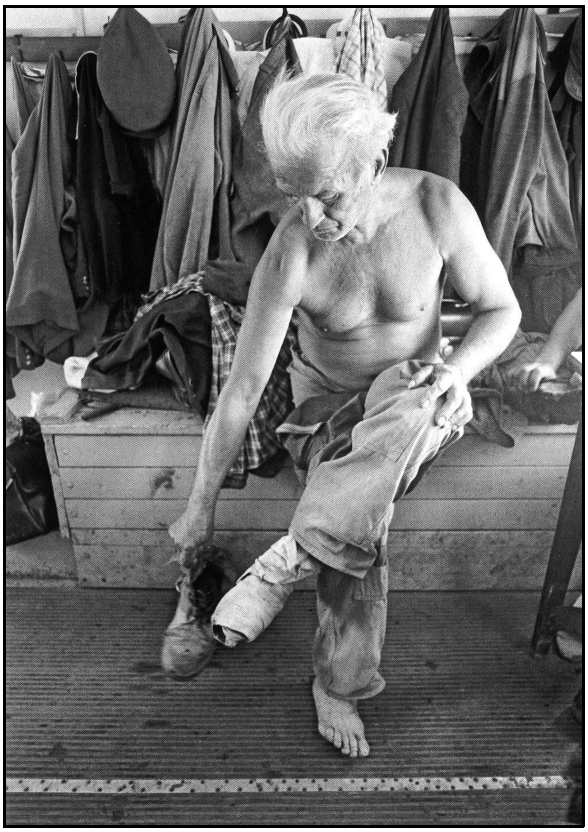
Nativity Players in the Shopping Mall (2009) Péter Korniss

Angel with Shepherds (2005) Péter Korniss

Larisa, the Daughter of Ioan from Máramaros [Maramureş] Still Dresses in Folk Costume for Celebrations (2014) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss

Standing at the Window [of the train] (1978) Péter Korniss



[Skarbit] *Pulling on Boots over a Foot Cloth* (1985) Péter Korniss

Korniss bore witness to this common plight in his much touted *Guest Worker: A Novel,* images taken from 1978 to 1986. “We must preserve things that will soon disappear,” Korniss explained. This was on the minds of those early photographers who saw the Daguerreotype as “a mirror with a memory” that would inventory a pre-industrial landscape fast changing due to the industrial revolution. But Korniss’ aim was more than a visual record; he desired, as catalogue contributor Péter Baki points out, to get below “the visible surface” of his subjects, relating to them with his deep empathy and understanding, and modifying his aesthetic approach accordingly.

This is exemplified by a related, more protracted and focused project: he trained his camera on one guest worker, a farmer from Tizaeszlár, András Skarbit. For over twenty-five years, during which time Skarbit worked for the Metropolitan Gas Company in Budapest, Korniss recorded the man’s commute by train, his stay in grim housing, then his return to family life in his village. When Skarbit died in 1999 and his wife, Erzsébet, in 2013, the photographer had amassed an astonishing record of life lived during an era of far-reaching transition in Hungarian society. Skarbit’s house, depicted in one of Korniss’ photographs from 2017, still remains vacant today.

That image of domesticity lost shows us merely an empty house, but make us *feel* the absence of its long-time inhabitants and the passing of time in both a human sense and in social changes, making us aware of our own mortality, the ongoing arrow of time. Yet Korniss still has his memories and, of course, his extensive body of photographs to share with us like a family album passed among relatives.

Péter Korniss

[Skarbits] *In Front of the House* (1982) Péter Korniss

The [empty] Skarbit House (2017) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss

[Skarbit] *Among Paving Blocks* (1984) Péter Korniss

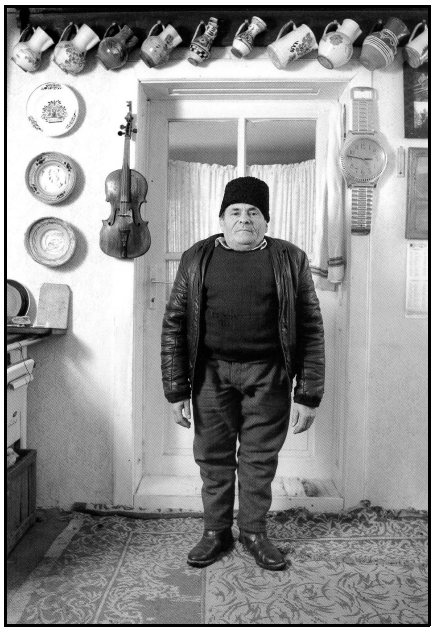
[Skarbit] *Going Home with a Loaf* (1974) Péter Korniss

Rarely has a photographer gained access to his subject for so long and with such intimacy as this (in one village Korniss has become godfather to three children). It speaks of his ability to gain trust, make friends, put people at ease, to empathize, and keenly observe, in order to carry out a project he deemed of personal and historical importance.

Unlike photojournalists who, too often due to the nature of their profession, "parachute" into a situation, record events in slices of time, then extract themselves, Korniss has had the privilege of being able to capture his subjects in temporal duration. While working on his extended homage to the peasant-worker, Korniss continued witnessing, honoring the disappearing folk life of his native Transylvania in both its more colorful aspects and its bleak harshness in black-and-white and color.

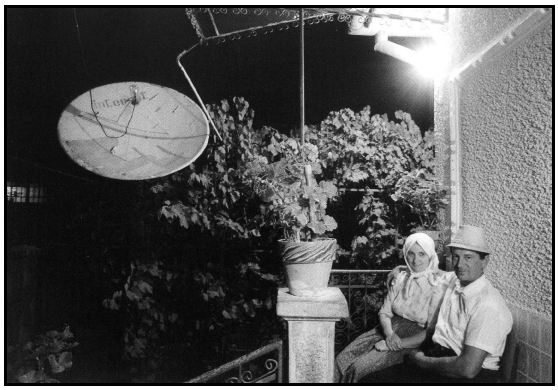
By the turn of the century, he'd increasingly augmented his traditional documentary by making what A.D. Coleman calls "directorial mode" images, staging color shots of his subjects inside peasant homes, before studio backdrops, in urban domiciles where many of the peasant women work as domestics, at transportation hubs (bus and train bus stations linking village to city), and in urban commercial settings (malls, stores, markets), so as to visually contrast the post-Communist era with its limitless global network of goods and flows with the increasing stagnation of rural life. Korniss liked to train his camera at incongruities: an old woman in her new modern kitchen, a rural couple with their satellite dish, a house interior in which a Michael Jackson image sits near family photo-

Péter Korniss



Musician at Home (1997) Péter Korniss

Old Woman in Her New Kitchen Péter Korniss



Married Couple with Satellite Dish (1994) Péter Korniss

Corner of the Room (2016) Péter Korniss

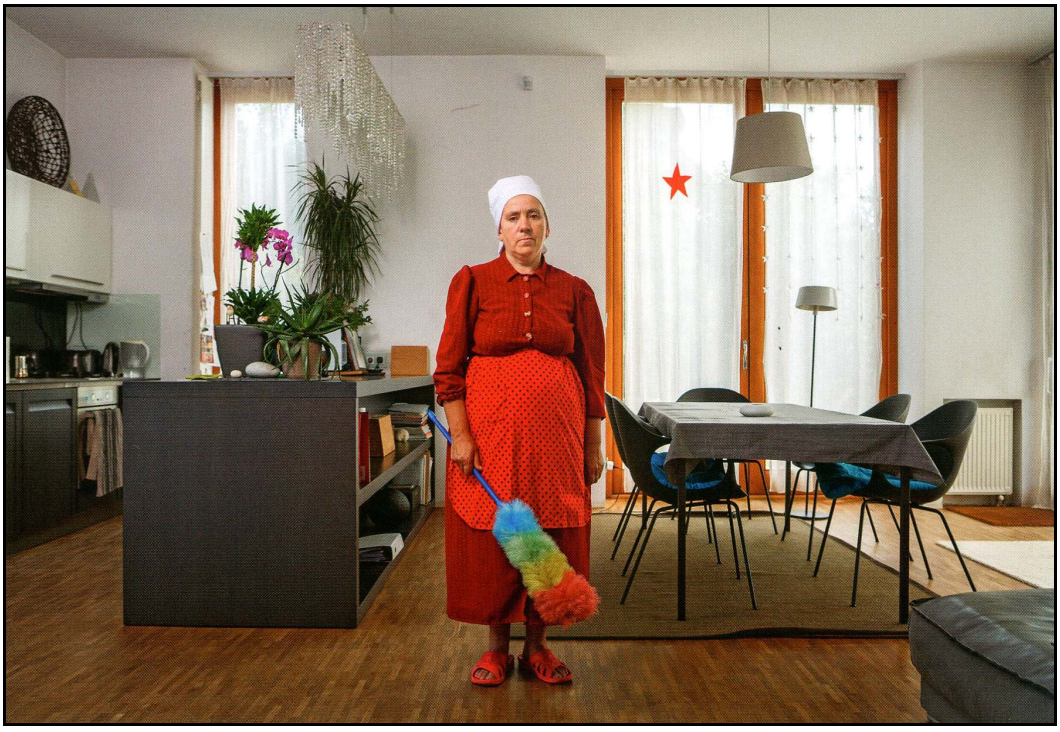
Girls on the Main Road [with high heels] (1997) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss

A Woman Who Spends the Greater Part of the Year Selling Her Wares in Budapest at her Village Home in Transylvania (2016) Péter Korniss

With a Red Dustpan (2014) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss



With a Colorful Feather Duster (2014) Péter Korniss

At the Bus Station (2014) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss

Easter Monday (1972) Péter Korniss

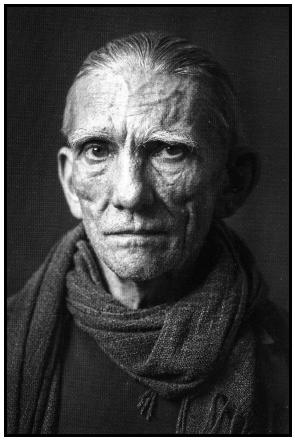
In the Village Museum (2007) Péter Korniss

graphs, young girls walk in traditional costume but wear high heels, a tourist snaps a shot of a peasant in a village museum playing a traditional fiddle,[6] a nice contrast to an earlier image from 1972 where a man (the same, but older?) fiddles at a peasant Easter celebration, figuring communal solidarity (*gemeinshaft*); compare this to the visual cacophony and implied anomie of big city life (*gesellshaft*) as captured in the photographs of Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand, and Joel Meyerowitz.

6. Hungarian fiddle playing is known the world over for its passion, romance and virtuosity, and to most non-Hungarians, the music is synonymous with the campfire, the open road and the gypsies. Surely Hungarian fiddle music *is* gypsy music? Yet within the country you will find considerable resentment towards this stereotype, and, whilst there is much appreciation of the skill of gypsy fiddlers, it is considered to be Hungarian music, not gypsy music, and the widespread revival in folk music since the seventies has been largely non-gypsy in origin. The controversy is not a new one.

Péter Korniss

István Octtos, *Architect/Artist*
(circa 2014) Miklós Déri



Tibor Kovácsy, *Journalist*
(circa 2014) Miklós Déri

Korniss' humanist approach foregrounds his empathy toward his subjects and contextualizes them in their environment. In contrast, another Hungarian photographer, Miklós Déri, shot close-up portraits of late-Kadar era counterculture personages, raw, deconextualized portraits rendered in great detail (akin to Helmar Lerski's in the 1920s), from a variety of professions; they stare, observe, gaze, carrying political import to those who lived through those dark, grim times.[7]

Korniss eschews the aesthetic of indifference so much in vogue these days, a posthumanist repudiation of portrait conventions as given voice by German photographer Thomas Ruff: "I believe that photography can only reproduce the surface of things. The same applies to a portrait. I take photos of people the same way I would take photos of a plaster bust."

Thomas Ruff's portraits on exhibition

Such a distanced viewpoint could not serve Korniss' creative need "to enlarge upon the picture of reality . . . the beauty and vitality of peasant culture" he experienced in a small Transylvanian village called Szék during a trip there in 1968.

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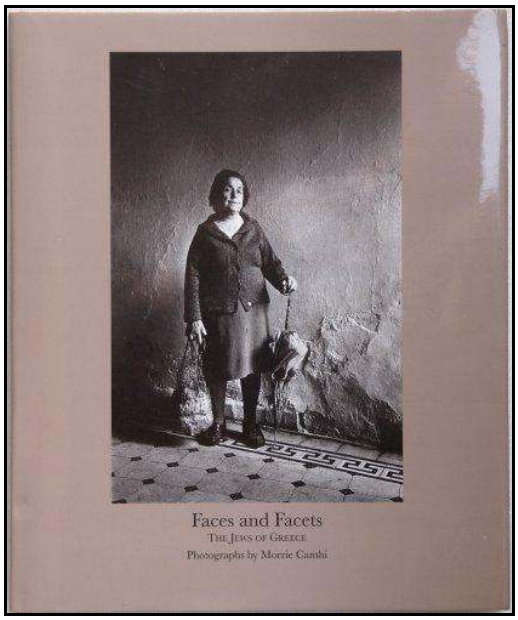
7. On Kardarism see page v, note 4.

Kata Oltai, in "A Postmodern Portrait," *Déri Miklós: Arcok/Faces* (Budapest: Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center & Déak Erika Gallery, 2016): 26, mentions this subcultural group as a "definable circle, a matrix of people based on personal and professional friendships, loves, hanging out, contemplating and making music together," it was "a group ... of the eighties and nineties." This series, titled "Portraits," was originally published on Facebook.

Zsolt Unoka, in "Post-traumatic Counter-Portrait-Regime," ibid., pp. 21 - 22, comments on these portraits' "straight-facing" pose: "One of the tools of adolescent rebellion against the power structure of the family and the school [and governmental, authority] is also the straight face. As if it was to say: you have no power over me anymore, you cannot have an effect on me." Unoka goes on to write: "Members of this subculture operating in the Kádár system became victims of a social trauma — they couldn't make the authority smile."

Péter Korniss

From Roman Vishniac's *A Vanished World* (1983)



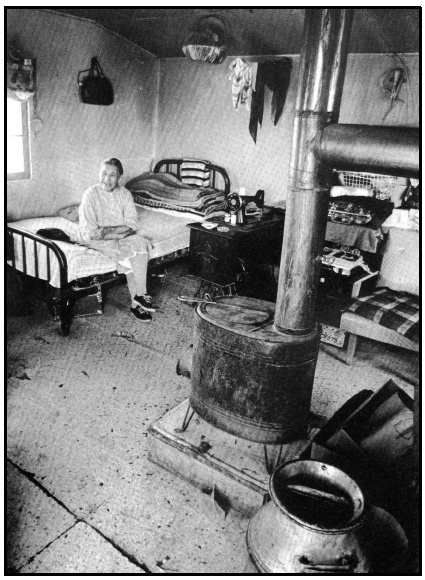
Faces and Facets: The Jews of Greece (1995)
Morrie Camhi

Korniss has favorably mentioned Roman Vishniac's (1897 - 1990) photographic documentary work in Eastern Europe. Korniss would've seen something of his own impetus to photograph in Vishniac's earlier project. From 1934 to 1939 Vishniac photographed the Jews of Eastern Europe creating over 16,000 images ranging from portraits to urban landscapes. (More recently, Californian photographer Morrie Camhi (1928 - 1999) also trained his camera on Jews in his 1995 photobook *Faces and Facets: the Jews of Greece*.)

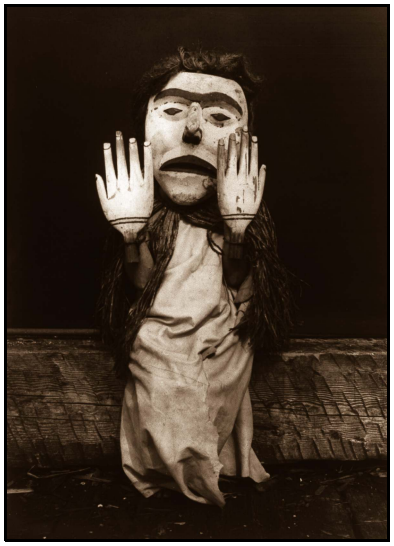
Although initially commissioned by an American Jewish committee, Vishniac had a personal interest in the project. He and his family lived in Germany and witnessed first hand the rise of Nazism, realizing that the world of the Eastern Jew may soon eradicated by a growing threat that many at the time failed to recognize. The work he created during this period was compiled into a book titled *A Vanished World* (1983). "I knew it was my task to make certain that this vanished world did not totally disappear," said Vishniac of these images documenting a way of life that had remained unaltered for hundreds of years until the arrival of the SS at the beginning of the war, words echoing Korniss' own concerning his portraits of traditional cultures, not just in Transylvania and Hungary, but also in Slovakia, South Yemen, Serbia, Siberia,

Péter Korniss

Cover, *The Land of Red Cloud: Among North-America's Indians* (1982) Péter Korniss with Introduction by Professor Robert D. Miewald, University of Nebraska



Inside a Brulè Sioux home on the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota, USA, Péter Korniss



Kwakiutl Ritual, Edward Curtis (early 1900s)

Yemen, and on the reservations of North American First Nation Peoples: the Navajo, Hopi, Sioux, and Kwakiutl.

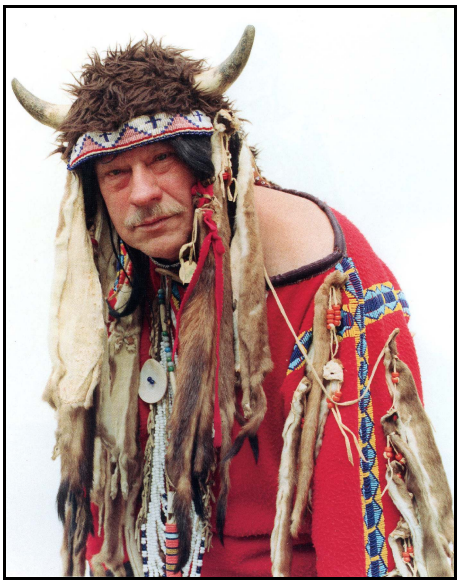
Much earlier, at the turn of the century, Edward Curtis explained his photo-documentary of "American Indians" as a need to record "vanishing races." Korniss's documents are impelled by similar desires, to record ways of life fast disappearing.

Korniss's interest in American Indians is mirrored in the German people's fascination with Native Americans, initially induced by romantic author Karl May's nineteenth-century envisionment of the "Wild West" where the Indians are portrayed as heroes, the Whites as villains. Indian fans clubs (*Indianistikgruppen*) arose, adopting native dress and wigwams. Photographers Andrea Robbins and Max Becher (husband and wife) work collaboratively; one their photo-projects, *German Indians* (1997/98), focuses on Karl May's hometown of Radebeul, near Dresden, where on May's birthday a two-day festival celebrating May and his heroic Native protagonists takes place. Their images (see next page) record what may be an outlet for Post WWII discouragement of nationalism and group ritual; perhaps, even criticism of atrocities against Native Americans give Germans some sense of relief from their own shame of the Holocaust.[8]

Comparing Korniss' European images with his American photographs, it is no surprise his work in Romania and Hungary exhibits deeper understanding of his subject.

8. See "German Indians," Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, in *Contact Sheet* No.98 (Light Work, 1998).

Péter Korniss



German Indians (1997/98)
Robbins/Becher

Native American subjects look at the photographer and only see another invasion into their lives, while the European peasants look and find they can relate to him, allowing Korniss to get below the visible surfaces of things in his homeland. Significantly, no photographs from *The Land of Red Cloud* were curated into this recent retrospective, which stressed Korniss' deep roots in Hungarian society, and his photographic healing of the artificial divisions wrought upon his country post-World War I.

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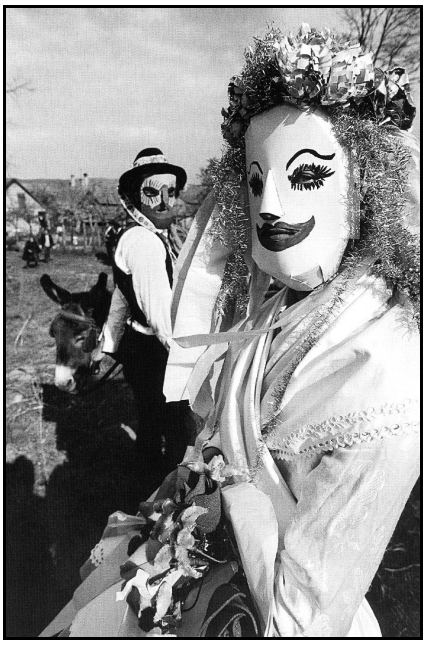
German Indians (1997/98) Robbins/Becher

Péter Korniss

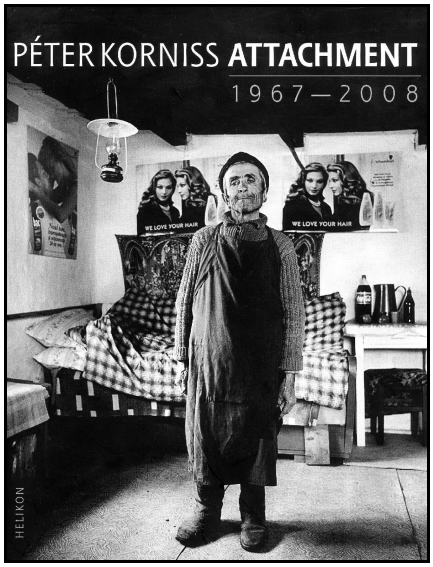
Interpretations



Men in Easter masquerade (1974) Péter Korniss

How can we interpret Korniss' work? Péter Baki's catalogue essay for *Continuing Memories*, "Viewpoints and Interpretations," does a superb job in analyzing such. He notes that Korniss had his first one-man show in the Budapest Mücsarnok [Hall of Arts] in 1974, which was well-received; some 50,00 people became familiar with his photographs due to this show and the resulting publicity, which made him widely known.

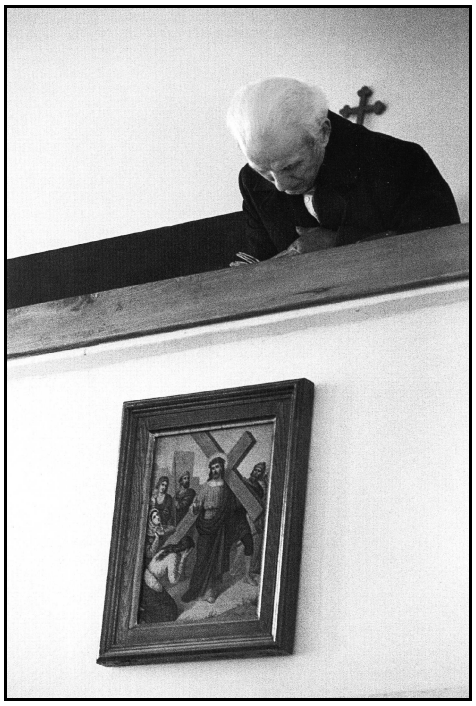
Two ways of interpreting this work arose at this time: "Gyula Rózsa," writes Baki, "was the first to express in the monthly *Kritika* that the intellectual roots of Korniss' pictures were based on the traditions of the Hungarian social documentary photography, and not the so-called 'Hungarianizing' style of photographs widespread between the two world wars." But, says Baki, "Poet Sándor Csoósi had a different viewpoint: 'Certain photos remind us of the folksongs collected by Bartók, Kodály, Lajta, or perhaps Kallós. An instinct building up the past of a nation'."



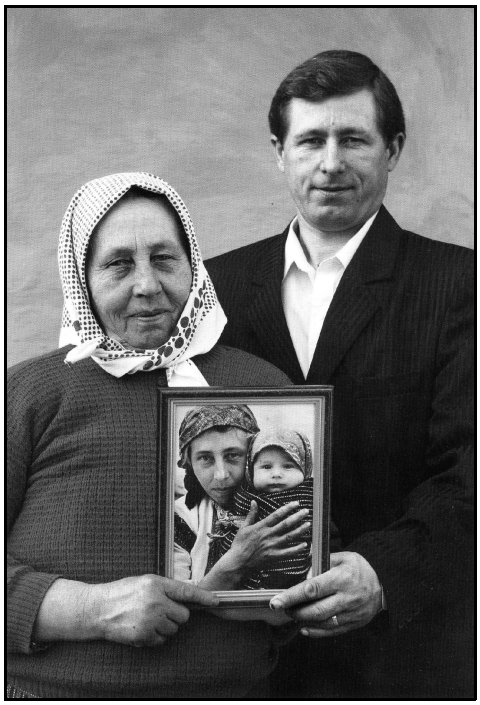
Attachment: 1967 - 2008 (2008) Péter Korniss, large summation of work from this period

Csoósi's opening speech and published article sentimentalized Korniss' work and put a political spin on it; it provoked a reply from Rózsa. The riposte was directed against the Nationalistic "ideological appropriation" of Korniss's imagery, which had its roots in the fact that between the two world wars Hungarian photographers sentimentalized village life in the Transylvanian region (Karl Ove Knausgaard in his book *Autumn*, 2017) writes: "We can call sentimental that which exaggerates feeling, which wastes it"). But after the Second World War, photographing in that area was, as Baki notes, "taboo for political reasons." Consequently, by the 1970s, Baki says, "a generation had grown up having no visual experience of Transylvania. In this way Korniss' exhibition was partly discovery for many people, and partly a politically sensitive area." This goes to show how historical context inflects meaning.

Péter Korniss



In Church [Skarbit] (1982) Péter Korniss; continuing religious traditions



Mother and son thirty-five years later (2008) Péter Korniss, reproduced in *Attachment*

Korniss' images may be factual, but their evaluation is not. Baki reports that of Korniss's album *Heaven's Bridegroom* (1975), a Jenő Széll reads the imagery therein as evoking "nostalgia for a lost paradise." This was not Korniss' overt intention. Baki cites Miklós Almási's reading as being closest to the photographer's: "As I say, it's not the last nostalgic glance round before things die out that has a place in this collection — it's rather the new continuity of old customs."

This tension between two modes of reading Korniss' work continued, but now with images of Hungarian workers shot between 1979 - 88. The result was *The Guest Worker* (1988), wherein the photographer produced an in-depth study of peasants commuting from village (a symbol of the past) to city (the symbol of the urban present) to do menial labor, living in dismal worker hostels during the week, then returning to their ancestral village on weekends. Among others, he focused on one man in particular, András Skarbit. Again, Baki notes two interpretations of this body of work: 1) as social documentary, "concerned photography" as Cornell Capa preferred to call it; and, 2) as an expression of the image-maker's private romanticism, "fine art".

The 1988 exhibition featuring this body of work was received with great excitement as a kind of aesthetico-political statement within the context of a Hungary still under the Communist yoke, but which was about to win its freedom a year later). Baki captures this fluid context well by citing an article by Pál Bodor detailing the opening of Korniss's show: "A vast crowd surged into the hall — companions and enemies, former and current rivals . . . By and large the whole active and inactive intellectual Hungary was there: ex-prisoners and current officials, one-time forbidden figures now speaking out everywhere; the billowing, passionate, down at heel, still fervent, yet em-

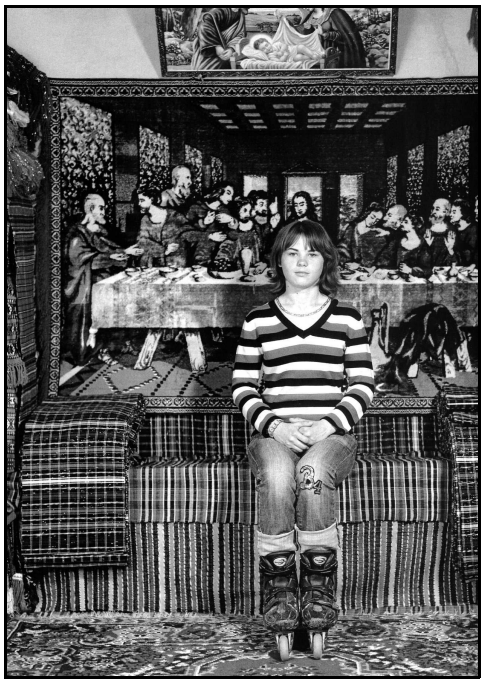
bittered Hungarian intelligentsia, one could, say got the feeling that this was a memorable day; they could see one of the best Hungarian novels of the past decades." It is rare an exhibit of photography in the West stirs up such sentiments. Obviously, Korniss's work was engaging Hungarian society as its deepest levels. Social changes that went with political changes, notes Baki, would from 1989 on become even more of a focus for his camera.

In 1998, Korniss released *Inventory — Pictures from Transylvania,* a book built upon his long contact with village people in that area. Farming had changed little, but as Western popular culture and capitalist economic changes began to penetrate the area, one saw changes in clothes, culture, and weakening of traditions often played out in generational differences.

In 2001 a young academic, Katalin Timár, read *Inventory* as a personal photo album, its pictures being a "diary of travel experiences" which, at the same time, depicts the "community of Hungarians" and a need to preserve it, the Hungarian nation. Timár, cited by Bak, observes that: "The reason for the success of the photos lies in the huge sentimental legitimacy still connected to nationalism, national identity, and other associated cultural constructions today." This art historian branded Korniss as "a post-colonialist," a colonizer in a political sense, which Baki strongly believes runs counter to Korniss' intentions which do not exploit these people, but preserves as visual memory a culture fast dying out in face of interminable global change.

Nativity Players at the bus stop (2012) Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss



Girl with roller skates (detail, 2008) Péter Korniss

Hungarian hand-colored cabinet card (c. 1890s)

Globalization (European Union) and its effects increasingly became a dominant theme in Korniss' work. By the end of the 1990s, Korniss was moving away from his earlier documentary approach to actively direct his subjects, formally posing them in what, as previously mentioned, critic A.D. Coleman dubbed "the directorial mode" of photography. This latest series, *Women from Szék in Budapest,* revisits Korniss' interest in Transylvanian peasants who are now photographed selling wares or performing in Budapest due to the increasing tourist trade there. Peasants are posed in front of backdrops (recalling early Hungarian cabinet cards shot by Mai Manó), in their homes, or in the urban residences where they work as domestics, as well as situated outside in a fast-changing urbanscape. The setting and the accoutrements his subjects wear, speak of the social changes encroaching on traditional Hungarian society. A favorite subject of his, the Nativity Players, are now posed in modern malls, at bus stations, on city streets replete with bold graffiti, and so forth, creating incongruous juxtapositions of past village tradition with diverse modern city environments.

Baki makes a keen observation on this change in Korniss' approach: "These posed pictures took him back to the very beginnings of photographic portraiture (citing Korniss): ' . . . a time when people stood in front of the camera with a sense of excitement and expectation and gave themselves over to the unique moment of photography with awe'." It is as if these peasants were nineteenth-century time-travelers plopped down in the twenty-first — akin to the Germans playacting as traditional Indians, and oft-repeated time-travel scenarios as seen in many popular films these days, such as *Kate and Leopold*, 2001 (see next page).

Péter Korniss

Film still from the movie *Kate and Leopold* (2001)

Formal Analyses

The success of Korniss' imagery has largely rested on interpretations based on the photographer's empathy toward worker and peasant society, his ability to gain trust and be allowed to reveal lives we might never know about, and his distancing himself from any overt politics in his work. Yet in doing so, the photographer has composed those subjects in masterful ways.

From his earliest work, such as *The Bihari Dance Ensemble* (1964), he's shown a keen eye. In this image figures turn and blur, stand and are frozen in their gestures, near and far, in a visual rhythm that reveals the dance in way that makes us *feel* it. The array of figures read as a sort of musical score going across the page. In *New Year's Eve Ball* (1971), a dancing couple fills the foreground, the woman's dress blurring in a spin that animates whole composition as figures recede in scale as our eye moves to the background figures in motion.

In *Relatives of the Bride* (1971), perspective also plays a role. This color image features two pairs of female peasants flanking a fifth in the background who is placed slightly left of center where a tall, decorative cabinet stands, a solid symbol of peasant

craftsmanship. The whole composition overflows with decorative elements and our eyes are welcomed into the home, drawn inexorably in by that receding perspective. The colorfulness of peasant life is revealed to its fullest here.

Birthday in the Pub (1986) also utilizes perspective. Four men sit at a table strewn with bottles, all laughing uproariously from the effects of liquor and comraderie. The composition puts the "birthday boy" at the head of the table, wearing his hat and placed right of center; his two companions flank him on his right, one on his left. They seem to have totally forgotten the presence of the photographer, so an intimate moment is now shared with us the viewer.

Disabled War Veteran (1976) contrasts a crippled man in dark clothing against field on white snow, the whole composition an array of sticks: the walking the man wields, the sticks sticking up through the snow in the field, and the man's peg leg, his outcast left arm used to balance himself as his whole body leans to compensate for his injury. The vast field on sticks recalls a vast field on markers in veteran cemeteries; the man's slow progress into the field suggesting his eventual fate — suggesting all our fates.

Man in Home Decorated with Posters (1997), used for the cover of the photobook *Attachment* (2008), has the subject dead center, flanked by posters of young women on the wall in the background. His is flanked by the heads in the posters behind him. In its directness, the image calls to mind similar compositions by August Sander. The man allows viewers into his humble abode, standing with pride in his work boots and apron, giving himself utterly to our gaze. Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) distinguishes what he terms "the studium" from the "punctum." The former refers to what indicates historical, social or cultural meanings, in this photograph this is the man's peasant surroundings. The latter refers to what cannot be semiotically so analyzed, but points to those features of a photograph that seem to produce or convey a meaning without invoking any recognizable symbolic system, something that "pricks" the viewer. This kind of meaning is unique to the response of the individual viewer of the image. For me, the "punctum" here is the pose the man takes, a slight S-curve resulting in a very subtle imbalance to the man's upright position that casts his head very slightly to his right and contrasts with the perfect rectilinearity of the background: the posters, the furniture, and the checkerboard-design cover on the bed.

In Church (1982) is deceptively simple, an elderly man (Skarbit) bowed in prayer in church. But then the viewer notices the man bowing could be seen as looking down over a railing at an image of Christ bearing his cross; the man also bears his own cross, a small crucifix on the wall behind him, which in optical space appears to be weighing him down. I can imagine the delight Korniss must have had upon spying this moment, how it could be used to symbolize the loads that this man's harsh life has given him to carry (which we've seen in the decades long document of this man's life as a peasant-worker). The image speaks, then, of faith, endurance, redemption, and the practice of religion at a time when Hungary still bore the cross of Communism and its injustices on its back.

Péter Korniss

In the Village Museum (2007) is composed of angles: the roof timbers, the leaning flag, the momentarily leaning tourist-photographer, his arms and legs at angles, and the bow of the peasant fiddler; only the framed image on the wall and the sturdy wooden bench where the musician sits solidly in place are rectilinear. That musician, playing a traditional tune is rooted in his place, on his traditional bench, yet surrounded by forms that speak of instability, change. Korniss' image elegantly captures time-past, time-futuring.

Girl with Roller Skates (2008) is a humorous take on the theme of tradition and modernization A young girl in the latest style of roller skate sits just off center among a display of traditional fabrics, placed before a backdrop of a tapestry of the Last Supper and Christ in a manger attended by Mary. The fabric design consist of vertical bands, which then contrast with the horizontal bands in the girl's contemporary shirt. The overall effect, is a quasi-Op Art experience for the viewer where a modern abstractness plays against traditional representational imagery. The girl, as a figure, is imaged as both "abstract" and "representational," as spanning time-past and time-futuring.

This theme of tradition and modernization becomes even more explicit in *Nativity Players in the Shopping Mall* (2009). Korniss uses perspective recession inside a modern shopping mall to suggest the forward motion of time. But this trajectory ahead is arrested visually by a line of five Nativity Players in white costumes sitting on a concrete (not wooden) bench before a tall decorated Christmas tree, the tree dead center, blocking the eye's need to follow the perspective recession of shops on either side to the vanishing point. Icons of tradition, the tree, and costumed peasants arrayed like a white picket fence, hold us back from visually entering further into the realm of global commodification. But, ironically, those peasants have themselves become a commodity within Hungary's burgeoning tourist business.

This recent body of work moves beyond any trace of nostalgia for times past and engages us with the challenge set forth to Hungarians by modernization and global capitalism and its flows in a post-Communist Hungary. The people now recorded by Korniss sit on a razor's edge between two eras (just as his homeland, Transylvania, has sat between two nations, Hungary and Romania), two types of economy, two aspects of Hungarian life, two modes of time. He does not resolve that tension, but lets it play out before our eyes. The future remains open, but hopeful (Korniss has always shown the resilience of humanity), in his exemplary documentation of his people over decades.

Extrapolation

But there are those in Hungarian politics who want to resolve that tension, firm up the future of Hungary in Nationalist terms. Instead of an open future, they desire a prelapsarian idyll. In February 2017, at the State of the Nation address, Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary and the leader of the far-right, anti-immigrant Fidesz party,


Orbán / Trump

offered his vision for the country in the coming year: "We shall let in true refugees: Germans, Dutch, French, and Italians, terrified politicians and journalists who here in Hungary want to find the Europe they have lost in their homelands," he proclaimed. In reality, Orbán's "refugees" have been moving to Hungary, and Budapest in particular, for years. A small clique of Identitarians, or aggrieved Nationalists from Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and elsewhere, all motivated by their disdain for their home countries' commitment to liberal values, have found an ideological match in Orbán's Hungary, where two extreme far-right parties, the governing Fidesz and Jobbik, the largest opposition party, make up most of the National Assembly. Jobbik is the first European political party to champion a border wall. Its members frequently express open anti-Semitic and anti-Roma sentiments, and prioritize the preservation of "Hungary for the Hungarians."

This constitutes, "The drive to picture — and, in the process, either freeze or reinvent — the people seems strongest when they are on the verge of fragmentation," writes Alexander Provan, an editor at Triple Canopy.[9] A position diametrically opposed to Korniss' non-political stance in his various projects.


Troops at the Croatian - Hungarian Border (video still, Sept. 2015) from "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe," Tomáš Rafa

On the political side of recent documentary, the work of Slovakian photographer/videographer Tomáš Rafas has been focused upon this rise of neo-fascism across Europe. Rafa, born in Zilina in 1979, studed at Academy of Fine arts in Banska Bystrica and Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at Professor Grzegorz Kowalski's studio of Audio-visual space. Rafa and his project "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe" won the prestigious Oskár Čepan's Award for young artists under thirty-five years in 2011. "Tomáš Rafa: New Nationalisms," a selection of his videos in the style of *cinéma vérité* playing on six monitors was shown at MoMa PS1 in the summer of 2017.

9. "They, The People," Alexander Provan, in *Art in America* (December, 2017): p. 56. Provan reviews the MoMa PS1 show, summer 2017.

Péter Korniss

Hungarian National Support March, Warsaw (video still, November 13, 2015) from "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe," Tomáš Rafa

Immigrant Refugee Camp (video still, 2015) from "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe," Tomáš Rafa

Péter Korniss

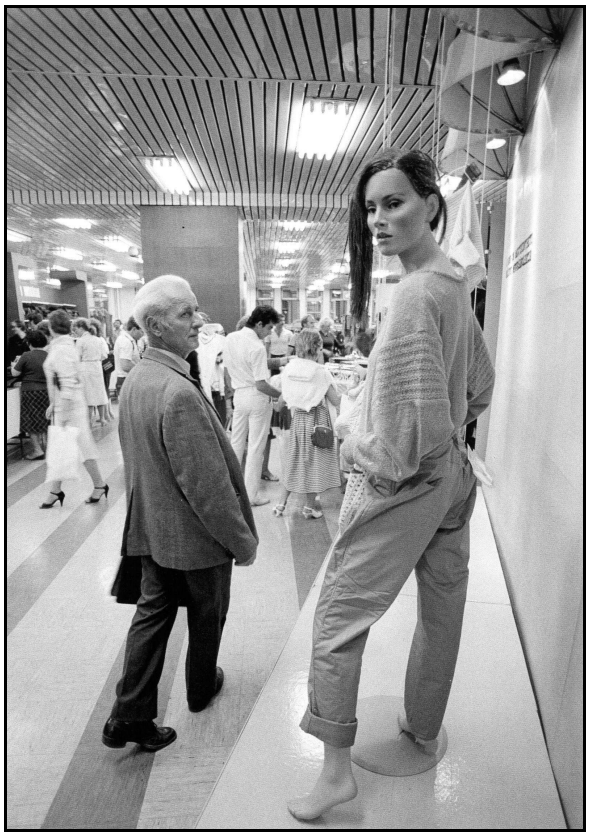
Warsaw, 2017 (video still, 2017) from "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe," Tomáš Rafa

Right-wing extremists at an anti-EU march in Warsaw (video still, 2013) from "New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe," Tomáš Rafa

Péter Korniss

The populists employ a Nationalist fiction of better times past, of ethnic identity versus ethnic Others. Jan-Werner Müller writes in *The New York Review of Books*: "There is the populist notion that the country is forever divided between 'the real, rural Hungary' and the cosmopolitan (sometimes called 'foreign-hearted' — i.e., Jewish) Budapest liberals." [10] As curators of Korniss' retrospective focused on the photographer's regional subjects, ignoring most work done outside East European borders, man and show could be understood to be framed in quasi-nationalist terms for a public eager to celebrate "their" major photographer. But Korniss' images were *never* intended to celebrate fixed identities.

In fact, the usual stable division between farmers as grounded in culture and urban dwellers uprooted by civilization becomes quite fluid as Korniss' depictions plead the case for appreciating difference and change across national borders, underscoring common humanity's ability to evolve in new ways in our complex global society — and often does so with a sense of humor.



{Skarbit] *In the Corvin Department Store* (1985)
Péter Korniss

For instance, *In the Corvin Department Store* contrasts his peasant/ worker András Skarbit (time-past) with a fashionable draped mannikin (now-time); the old man does a double-take to his right, the young model is posed, turned left; it seems as if the flashy model rebuffing his gaze. Always sensitive to dance movement, Korniss presses his shutter precisely when the man's and the woman's legs mirror each other. This gives an important tension and balance to the image, which figures the relationship between old age and youth, the past and the present, country dweller and urbanite. Perfectly situated in between, in the background, a young urban couple, the new modern consumer-types, peruse a dress rack. The basic composition of a couple in the foreground, figures in the background, has been used in his images shot at dances (see *New Year's Eve Ball*, 1971).

10. "Homo Orbánicus," Jan-Werner Müller, *The New York Review of Books* (Vol. LXV, No. 6 (April 5, 2018): p. 61. A review of Paul Lendvai's *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*.

Péter Korniss

Péter Korniss being feted by musicians during the opening of his retrospective

But what *unites* all the people Korniss has photographed over the years shows through their economic, cultural, and political differences: birth, suffering, laughter, work, play, death; a common humanity reaching for a better life, and in doing so offering the world a beauty that the photographer has been privileged to share and share with us, the viewer.

— The End —

Photo by Marianne Nathan

James Hugunin teaches the History of Photography and Contemporary Theory at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1983 he won the first Reva and David Logan Award for Distinguished New Writing in Photography. He is the author of *A Survey of the Representation of Prisoners in the United States: Discipline and Photograph, The Prison Experience* (1999), and *Writing Pictures, Case Studies in Photographic Criticism, 1983 - 2012* (2013), *New Art Examiner Reviews: 1986 - 93),* and *Afterimage: Critical Essays on Photography from the Journal Afterimage, 1977 - 88*, all collections of his critical writings. He has also written several novels: *Something is Crook in Middlebrook* (2012), *Elder Physics, The Wrong of Time: Stories from an Elder Home* (2013), and *Case-X* (taking us inside the mind of an academic undergoing treatment for salivary gland cancer). His current novel-in-progress, *Finding Mememo,* plays with the genres of academic writing, detective and sci-fi genres (forthcoming in 2018) as it critiques the suffusion of neoliberal economics into academia. In 2016, Hugunin was elected a member of Chicago's Society of Midland Authors.

Mother and Daughter with Deceased (1998) Péter Korniss