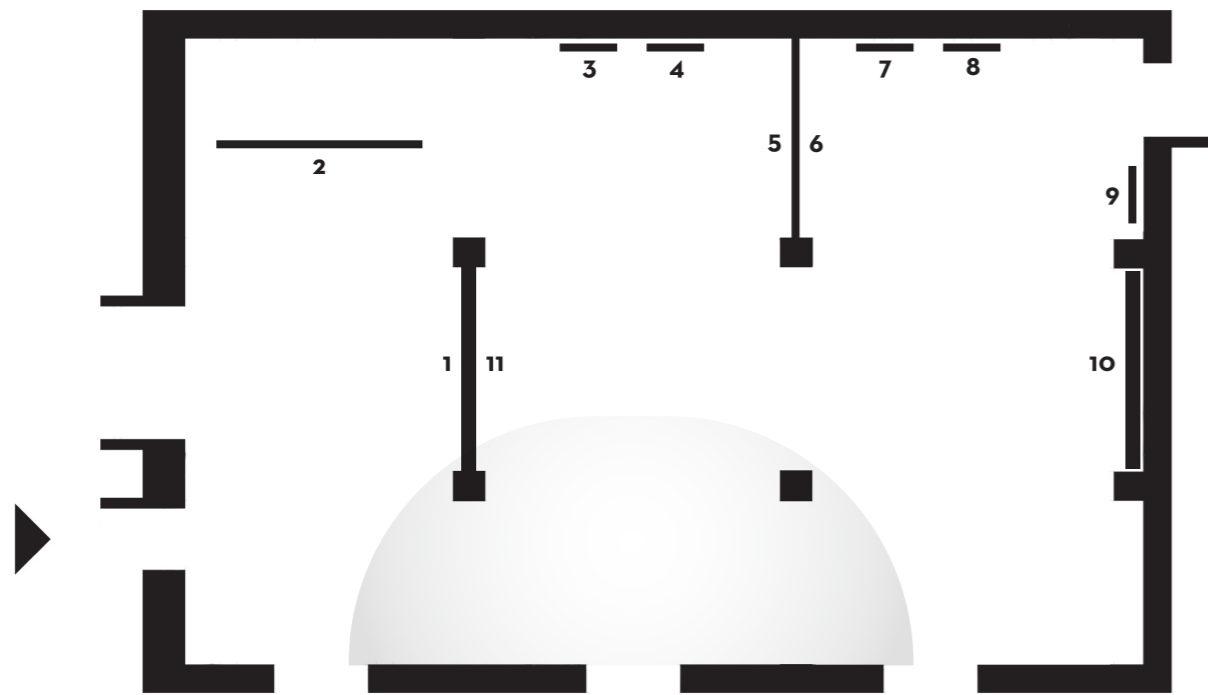


# ILONA NÉMETH EASTERN SUGAR

07/05 – 19/06/2022

Opening: 06/05/2022 (FRI) 7PM



**1. Dunajská Streda, 2018**  
Single channel video, silent, 52”

**2. Šurany, 2021**  
Single channel video, silent, 5’ 50”

**3. Interview with Tibor Pelle**  
Former director of the sugar factory  
in Rimavská Sobota  
2020, Rimavská Sobota  
Single-channel colour video with sound, 29’ 14”

**4. Interview with Christian Laur**  
Member of the Board of Eastern Sugar  
between 1993–2000  
2018, Bratislava  
Single channel video, silent, 16’ 38”

**5. Rimavská Sobota, 2021**  
Single channel video, silent, 2’ 49”

**6. Kaba, 2021**  
Single channel video, silent, 4’ 10”

**7. Interview with István Papp**  
Financial Manager of the former  
sugar factory in Kaba in 2002–2008  
2020, Kaba  
Single channel video, silent, 19’ 42”

**8. Interview with Emma Szegi**  
Mayor of the city of Kaba  
2020, Kaba  
Single-channel colour video with sound, 16’ 33”

**9. Interview with Dušan Janiček**  
Director of External Relations  
at Slovenské cukrovary, s.r.o.  
Sereď, AGRANA Group  
2017, Sereď  
Single-channel colour video with sound, 14’ 46”

**10. Sládkovičovo, 2021**  
Single channel video, silent, 5’ 7”

**11. Pohronský Ruskov, 2018**  
Single channel video, silent, 3’ 15”

## Returning the F(l)avor: Eastern Sugar as Transperipheral Research not Multinational Corporation

The vacant site of a Soviet-era sugar factory remains visible from the windows of artist Iлона Németh’s house in southwestern Slovakia. She passes its brownfields when she heads towards Bratislava, and, on the road of automotive dealerships and suppliers – contributors to Slovakia’s largest industry, car manufacturing – she remembers its smells, the clamor of its machines, its silhouette against the sky. ‘Eastern Sugar’ was the name given to a joint venture between British company Tate and Lyle and French firm Saint Louis Sucre, which, in 1991, set out to purchase formerly state-sponsored factories in post-Soviet Czechoslovakia and Hungary after the privatizations that followed 1989.

By 2002, Eastern Sugar had ceased operations at nine of its twelve sites, and by 2007, gave up production quotas for the remaining three factories that it maintained as the second largest domestic sugar producer. In 2022, however, an online query for ‘Eastern Sugar’ in internet search engines reveals an amusing brand transformation: under the name *Eastern Sugar*, Németh has been sharing her studies of sugar and the post-socialist transition around Europe and beyond, reenacting co-optation upon the Eastern Sugar company in a gesture of ironic reversal from the Central and Eastern European periphery.

The exhibition at Trafó Gallery is the first to focus on video-interviews and photo-essays from *Eastern Sugar* that foreground Hungary, specifically the sugar factory Hajdúsági Sugar Factory in Kaba. Architectural remnants and surrounding landscapes of various sugar factory sites are documented in the photo-essays which include short accounts of each factory’s fate. Video-interviews with Kaba mayor Emma Szegi and former CFO of Eastern Sugar István Papp are on view alongside testimonies of experts from the Slovak industry, including Dušan Janiček, former director of the Sládkovičovo factory, now an executive at the Austrian AGRANA and an expert advisor on Németh’s project.

As a response to the rise of nationalist populisms, which, in Slovakia and Hungary, Németh sees as being strengthened by economic issues, the artistic research project *Eastern Sugar* explores the lack of opportunities to reflect upon what was lost in the swift transition out of socialism and the process of hasty accessions into the EU. It is organized as an inclusive inquiry of long duration that fosters debate and generative dissensus among artists, researchers and experts with conversation as its main method.

## From Dunajská Streda to Kaba: Transperipheral Solidarities in Sugar

Originally named Juhocukor (Southern Sugar) for its location, the factory in Dunajská Streda was among several built in Czechoslovakia between 1965 and 1969, the period of the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion, when Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, led by the Soviet Union, occupied their Eastern bloc neighbor to stop its loosening of the Stalinist stranglehold. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, historians looked back to the invasion as a turning point in the Cold War. In the 1990s, however, the notion of reform was again forcibly abandoned, this time by shock therapy strategies adopted in a capitalist occupation intent on free-market manipulations. Sugar, which started as a tool of imperialist enterprise to colonize land and its peasant societies via industrialization, ended with neo-colonial exploitation within Europe when Western European states needed to stimulate their own economies.

The selection of video-interviews on view at Trafó Gallery reflect on how socialist policies stunted technological development in sugar production, threatening the industry while also focusing on how post-socialist reforms, rather than wholesale destruction, could have been carried out for the benefit of the region. Instead, knowledgeable people trained as high-performing technicians under socialism – whose livelihoods were invested in the industry – were not included in decision-making processes around its future. In his interview with Németh, Christian Laur, a member of the Managing Board at Eastern Sugar, admits to knowing “nothing” about the sugar industry in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia where he was sent to explore the possibility of expanding Tate & Lyle’s business.

Unlike the Juhocukor factory in Slovakia, the Hajdúsági Sugar Factory complex in Hungary still stands but is not in operation. The physical survival of its facilities, however, means that Hungary faces a massive fine for non-compliance with the demolition requirements of the EU restructuring compensation that Eastern Sugar accepted for itself, the factory’s employees, and its beet growers in 2006. Though the sugar market was liberalized in 2017 and the system of quotas was removed so each factory can produce sugar without limits, in his interview with Németh filmed at the complex, István Papp concludes “there won’t be a sugar factory in Kaba.” Kaba’s future lies in its surrounding solar park, the country’s largest; however, solar power cannot contribute the jobs that sweetness once did. A nearby manufacturing site will be adapted by a U.S. firm to produce flavors and fragrances, but the ever more sophisticated management of the senses, just seems symptomatic of a compulsion to repackaging reality.

All videos by Iлона Németh in cooperation with **Cukru production – Martina Slovákova**  
Exhibition design: **Peter Liška** • Production: **Peter Liška, Alžbeta Lišková, László Ordasi, László Remkó**

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Nyitva: keddtől vasárnapig 16-19h, előadási napokon 16-22h  
Open: Tuesday to Sunday 4-7pm, performance days 4-10pm

Németh is never nostalgic for sugar but the total disregard for the economic and social importance of sugar factories sent a clear, even if unintended message: *the labor for self-sufficiency and social good that used to be your livelihood has no role to play in the future. Purge yourselves of its sensibilities or be excluded.*

#### **Sucrocultures: From Tucumán Arde (1968) to The Sweet and Sour Story of Sugar (2012)**

The term 'petrocultures' was coined by scholars who study how energy shapes societies. It gives a name to the way oil extraction and consumption shape the imaginaries, expressions, structures and practices of modern societies. Art historically, Németh's *Eastern Sugar* joins two iconic sugar projects - the Argentinian *Tucumán Arde (Tucumán Is Burning, 1968)* and the Indonesian *The Sweet and Sour Story of Sugar (2012)* - in exploring what could be called 'sucrocultures', or how sugar as energy has shaped contemporary economic, social and cultural life. Aside from being unique for its focus on the overlooked role of Central and Eastern Europe in the global sugar trade, Németh's *Eastern Sugar* is also conceptually and formally different, neither activist nor collectivist, but somewhere in between, operating through partnerships with artists, curators, experts, organizations and institutions to create exhibitions, workshops, conferences, study trips, a sugar loaf manufactory and even a prototype for a Museum of Sugar. The materials of focus change in response to the time and place of programming.

Conceived by a group of over thirty artists and intellectuals for an important trade union, *Tucumán Arde* mobilized an activist campaign against the closure of sugar mills in Tucumán, an impoverished province not unlike the northern part of Hungary's Great Hungarian Plain where Kaba is located. In fact, materials from *Tucumán Arde* were included in the *Eastern Sugar* exhibition *Sugar of the East (2020)* in Bourges, curated by artist Ferenc Gróf. Like Németh, the artists involved in *Tucumán Arde* created immersive environments of information but their fieldwork reinvented art in direct action rather than in retrospective reflection.

Before curating *DOCUMENTA (15)*, in which Németh is a participant through *OFF-Biennale Budapest*, Indonesian artist collective *ruangrupa* organized and curated *The Sweet and Sour Story of Sugar (2012)*, a collaboration with the Dutch institution *Noorderlicht*. It used photography and archival research to investigate four centuries of colonialism through sugar that connected Brazil, Indonesia and Suriname with the Netherlands. Its materials were presented in São Paulo, Paramaribo and Yogyakarta as packaged consumer products and sugar souvenirs. Several iterations of *Eastern Sugar* have similarly presented *Sugarloaf Manufacture* (Kunsthalle Bratislava, 2018 and Schaffhof, Friesing, 2021), an installation by Németh that involves visitors in the fabrication of sugar loaves that they can take away from the show. Visitors to *ruangrupa's* show were, instead, principally engaged as consumers-made-conscious.

Németh's father worked in agriculture as the director of a farmers' co-operative then later as Deputy Minister of Agriculture and general director of the Czechoslovak state agricultural company SLOVOSIVO. Current events in agriculture were part of daily discussions at home; the fields were his life.

In his 1986 autobiographical novel *Gaps*, Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal, tells the story of a writer like himself in the voice of his wife, Eliška, who recalls how, as a pastime, her husband mapped the fields around their home. He "knew about raising sugar beets," "sat with the (...) farmers from the co-op, and just loved talking about anything to do with work in the fields." Similarly fascinated by fields, sugar beets, and conversation, Németh's project is not just about sugar: it is imbued with values imparted by sociality around land in the region.

#### **On Sugar Loaves and Solid Gold Cadillacs**

As Slovak journalist Rado Baťo explains in dialogue with philosopher Fedor Blascak for *Eastern Sugar's* 2021 publication, the "privatization for the masses" that excited people in the 1990s was a "fairytale" best characterized by the idiom "like a blind chicken to grain". With Slovakia's contemporary automotive industry in mind, one might also describe it as "the solid gold Cadillac." The eponymous 1956 Hollywood comedy stars Judy Holliday as Laura, a small stockholder in a billion-dollar corporation who attends stockholder meetings with the belief that her challenges to company policies will be heeded. The real ruse is that they eventually are.

With the help of other small stockholders who she rallies to her cause with personal letters, Laura saves the company from the corruption of its board, marries its founder, and becomes its vice-president. As a wedding gift, the small stockholders give her a solid gold Cadillac. In the end, nothing has changed about the company's structure or the extravagant benefits its board members receive, only now democracy sanctions them. As Gáspár Miklós Tamás wrote in 2001, post-fascism needs no coup d'état: its disenfranchising practices are facilitated by elections and representative government. Thus, the accelerationists have argued, the suicidal gesture, speeding up capitalism's decline, may be the only way out.

In László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* (1985), little Esti closes her eyes and has a vision just before she poisons her cat, then herself. She sees her deceased father returning home with "a sugar loaf and a thousand other items brought from the market." Before I encountered Németh's *Eastern Sugar*, I understood this image of the "magical kingdom" symbolized by sugar as a metaphor for the lost sweetness of a collectively desired future in the fatalism of a late Soviet collective farm. *Eastern Sugar*, however, changed my understanding of sugar as a metonym for hope for the future to a desire for history.

Perhaps for Esti, sugar is an omen of what, in 1985, still seemed impossible: an opening, but one that would only bring what former CEO of the closed Rimavská Sobota sugar factory, Tibor Pelle, in his video-interview with Németh, calls an "era of savage capitalism": Dušan Janiček calls it "the euphoria of freedom" that "forgot about the future." *Eastern Sugar's* trans-peripheral research, from Dunajská Streda to Kaba, returns the f(l)avor of transnational European trade in sugar, not to romanticize the past, but to glean other ways out of its traps from the discards.

Emily Verla Bovino (researcher, writer and artist)

**Ilona Németh** is an artist, organizer and curator of Hungarian nationality based in Slovakia. Her artistic practice seeks a balance between the personal experience of growing up in a region marked by political turmoil and the universal history of the Eastern Bloc countries during the transition period from 1990 to the present. She graduated from the Hungarian University of Arts and Design, Budapest, in 1986 and, in 1987, co-founded the nonprofit art organization *Studio erté* which organized the Transart Communication performance art festivals in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the region. In 2006, she defended her doctoral thesis at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Németh is a participating artist in *documenta fifteen* (2022) through *OFF-Biennale Budapest* and recently finished work on the international exhibition and research project *Eastern Sugar* with the Slovak National Gallery Bratislava supported by the European Commission's Creative Europe program. She has curated two traveling exhibition series: *Private Nationalism*, which traveled to Budapest, Bratislava, Krakow, Dresden, Pécs, Kosice and Prague in 2014 and 2015, and *Universal Hospitality* at the City Festival of *Wiener Festwochen* in 2016, then *MeetFactory* and *FUTURA* in Prague in 2017. From 2011 to 2012, her traveling retrospective, *Dilemma*, was presented in Budapest, Košice and Brno. In 2001, she exhibited the multimedia installation *Invitation for a Visit* in the Pavilion of the Czech and Slovak Republic at the Venice Biennale with Jiří Surůvka.



Photo: Adam Šakový



Photo: Á. András Cséfalvay