

## Ilona Kiss: forming a bridge



### Le lieu dans l'espace

Moscow Square in Budapest

This is the city to be born in, to live in  
somewhere...

The most beautiful city on the Danube!

The bridge in the city

The Chain Bridge

to cross, to depart...

to follow clouds, to land...

The new bridge

a book under my arm

an artist's book, forming a bridge

between the fine tradition

of the classical book and the arts

It is a way to make an abstraction

concrete through art

The artist's book

speaks a visible language

It is my language

It is my history.

### A brief biography

Ilona Kiss was born in Budapest in 1955. A year later, the Hungarian uprising took place and on November 4th the troops of the Warsaw Pact invaded the city.

Until the 1970s life was difficult for Ilona's family as it was for all Hungarians. Fortunately Ilona and her sister could spend summer in the country-side with her grandparents: there was a garden, vegetables, fruit and ...animals.

As for travelling, Ilona saw a lot of her own country and through a student-exchange visited Moscow and Leningrad. Until the seventies her sense was that the situation in her country would never change.

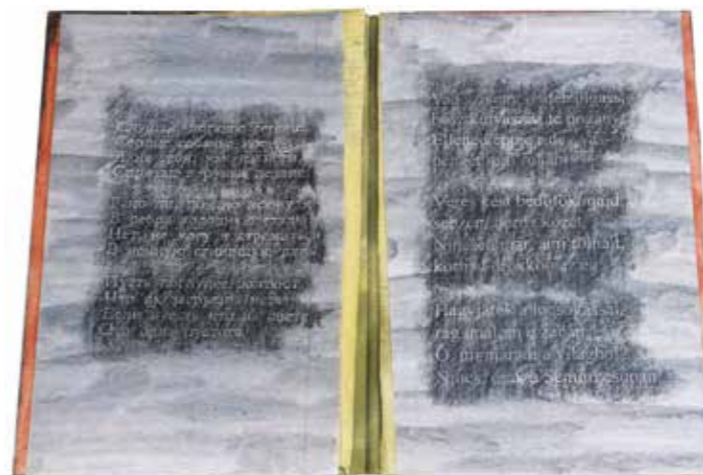
Books and drawing; these two passions always occupied her mind. That she might one day be able to combine both was far from evident. In 1974 she matriculated at the Academy of Decorative Arts in Budapest where she chose to work in the Book Department. After completing her studies she spent the next ten years working as an independent graphic designer creating book covers and book illustrations for publishers and printers.

The year 1989 was the turning point in Ilona's life. In August the iron curtain was opened at the Austrian border and Hungary became a republic. On November 9th the Berlin wall came down. This was also the year Ilona obtained a scholarship from the city of Barcelona. It was the beginning of her discovery of the 'West' and of the world of book making, artists' books and book-objects. In 1991 she visited the Frankfurter Buchmesse and in 1994 she received a scholarship from the 'Ministère des Affaires Etrangères' for a stay of two months in Paris. This was the perfect occasion to visit art galleries, museums and libraries. 'I can say that it was really at this moment that I decided to dedicate myself to the artist's book and the book object'.

Another scholarship was offered by the city of Frankfurt in 1996 and there she contacted the organizers of the 'Frankfurter Buchmesse'. Three years later Hungary was the guest country at the fair and Ilona Kiss was asked to organize the presentation of artists' books of her country.

### The Golden Ring

Allow me, before tackling the subject of Ilona Kiss's books in my possession, to make a detour by the 'Golden Ring'. In 2006 we participated in a 12-day cruise along the rivers Wolga and Oka. One of the many wonderful old towns around Moscow we visited was Konstantinovo, beautifully situated high above the river Oka. It is the birth-place of the poet Sergei Yesenin (1895-1925) a fact impossible to ignore: his small house and the school he attended have both been carefully restored. We visited both and I bought a booklet with a selection of his poems. You may know him because of his affair with Isodora Duncan and/or his suicide (murder?) but in Russia it is for his poems that he is best remembered.



### Sergei Yesenin : Listen to this unclean heart, 2003

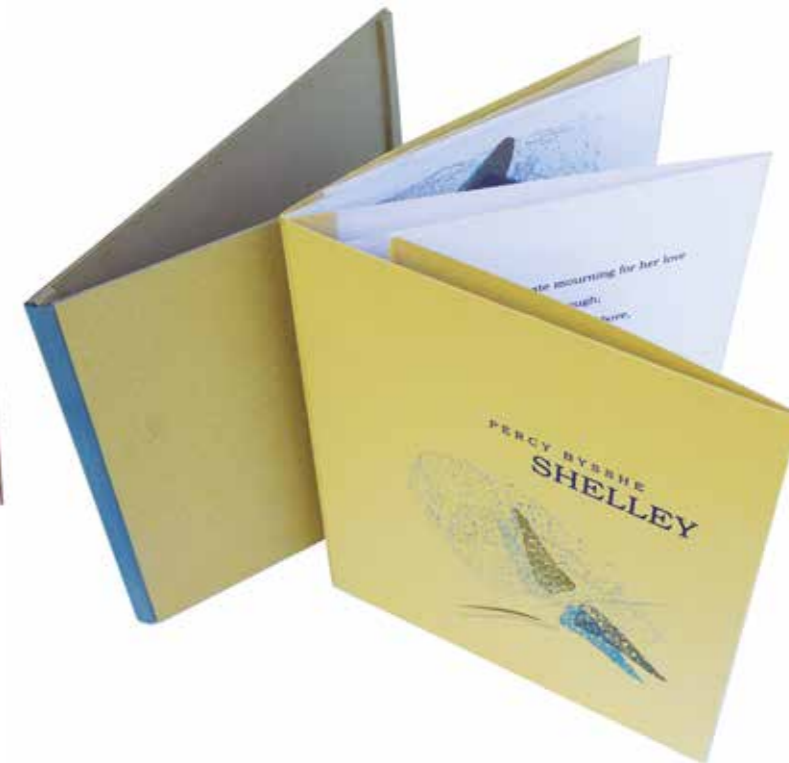
In that same year, 2006, we visited a book fair in Brussels where we met a friendly lady who showed us the books she has made. It was Ilona Kiss: she handed us a book with a poem by Yesenin, in Russian and Hungarian. It struck me immediately as a masterpiece of book-art and it is still one of my most cherished books.

It was made in 2003 for the 'Frankfurter Buchmesse' when Russia was guest country. The covers are made from black cardboard bound together by a heavily textured linen. The front cover has a generous layer of brown colour with marks of black paint. Where that layer is missing, Sergei Yesenin's name is printed in Cyrillic.

When the book is opened, you see the poem in Russian on the left and in Hungarian on the right. Ilona had the poem engraved on wood and by 'frottage' transmitted on a folded translucent paper. It is perhaps complex but becomes even more so as you continue and find a canvas folded in four, painted on all sides and with a collage of aluminium, surrounded by red paint. For Ilona, this may be a symbol of Yesenin's chosen (or unchosen) death. In the poem Yesenin says that he has a knife in his sleeve, suggesting that one day he will stab it in his ribs.

It is a short, intense poem which I dared to translate in Dutch with the help of my former Russian teacher during a three-year evening course in Antwerp. This was the era when Gorbachov brought a smile (if only briefly) to a huge nearby country I knew so little about.

8 copies made. Format: 27 x 19 cm.



### Percy Bysshe Shelley: Song, 2011

This is Ilona's only book in English to date. She discovered this poem through a translation made by Niklos Radnóti (1909-1944), one of Hungary's best known 20th-century poets, and a victim of the Holocaust. The poem, about a 'widow bird', comes at the end of Shelley's 'Charles the First'. It is printed in English and in Hungarian of a fold out with the 'illustration' at the centre. It sits within stiff covers with the title and a coloured figure of a bird's wings on the front.

For the illustrations Ilona invented a technique using sand paper onto which she applied ink using a roller and printed on a hand press to create the background then she printed the linocut figures using 'Charbonnel' etching ink in different tones of grey and blue. The result is a beautiful interpretation of the poem. A streak of colour in the illustration is repeated between the two stanzas of the poem.

13 copies made. Format: 18 x 21,5 cm.



**Jean Tardieu: L'affaire se complique, 2013**

Jean Tardieu (1903-1995) is a French author who wrote lyrical as well as humorous and metaphysical poetry, informal writing as well as texts for the theatre and children's books. Moreover, he translated Goethe and Hölderlin. A versatile writer, to say the least.

*L'affaire se complique* is written in colloquial, nonsensical language and relates the story, if you can call it that, of an elderly lady taking a walk. She is depicted first by a photograph and then by her silhouette. On her way she appears on a seesaw with a man. Further on you encounter an egg and a chicken... The book is an irregular four-folded leporello in the form of an accordion with the text printed in brown. The illustrations include a collage (the photo of a lady), crayon drawings and linoprints. The leporello is sewn into the seams of a boot which is lined with a damask fabric.

In this way Ilona creates an admirable visual equivalent to the nonsensical text. This miracle is held inside a simple envelope of ribbed cardboard bound together with a string. 18 copies made. Format: 27 x 11,5 cm.



**Page-objet: Misztótfalus Kis Miklós, 2003**

In the year 2000, when Gutenberg's 600th birthday was celebrated, Ilona began to make 'pages-objet'. These 'objects' consist of a wooden block to which a metal grid is attached. Seen together they look like the opened page of a book, the grid suggesting the making of paper and the block referring to ancient printing methods.

A typical example is the example devoted to the punch-cutter, type designer, publisher and printer Miklós Kis (1650-1702). D deservedly famous in his native country, Hungary, Miklós Kis is also renowned for his design of *Janson*.

Ilona painted Miklós Kis in colours on a leaden strip nailed onto an old wooden block. A piece of tissue, papier maché and a leaden strip with her signature all point to Ilona's interest in the history of printing. Miklós Kis's stay in Amsterdam and his return to his native country is for many Hungarians symbolic: to depart, to remain, to return...

This was also the case in Ilona Kiss's personal life: a booklet called *Quelquefois* which she gave to us in Brussels in 2006, has the following text of hers which runs through the pages of the leporello: 'Quelquefois en t'éloignant, tu peux être plus proche que ceux qui restent à la maison' which can be translated as 'Sometimes by going away, you may be closer to home than those who stay at home'.

Unique copy. Format: 28 x 26 x 3 cm.



**Heinrich Heine: Buch der Lieder. Lyrisches Intermezzo XLVIII, 2007**

The poems of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) were collected and published for the first time in *Buch der Lieder* (Book of Songs) in 1827. The poem in this book, 'Es liegt der heisse Sommer' was written in 1822-1823. In two verses, each of four lines, Heine compares his beloved's heart in summer and in winter. It is perhaps its simplicity that makes this poem so beautiful. The German text is accompanied by a translation in Hungarian by the poet Mihály Babits (1883-1941) which, according to Ilona Kiss, even improves on the original!

The leporello of six pages sits in a folder with the title on the front. The text is printed in screenprint, in a different colour for each language. The poem appears opposite a whole page illustration created by a combination of lithography and lino printing. Summer is suggested by a yellow colour and winter by a dark blue-green.

The book is held inside a white stiff paper folder. The edges are protected by two strips of card, one cm thick, on which the back cover is attached. Two ties hold the cover together. The paper used for this book is Velata Avorio. It is one of seven books by Ilona Kiss in the collection of the 'Deutsche Nationalbibliothek' in Leipzig.

27 copies printed. Format: 28 x 19 cm.



**Café-Livret, 2007, 3rd edition.**

Ilona Kiss collected a great number of used coffee-filters, cleaned them and let them dry. She then started to create a series of 'coffee-booklets' transforming a daily, commonplace utensil into an idea, the possibility of a meeting, a conversation. As Ilona herself explains: 'eight pages, eight short sentences, eight linotypes, how simple! It is like going into a café and having a coffee. It is also nostalgia for the literary cafés where artists, writers and publishers used to meet'.

This is exactly what happens in *Café-Livret*: two friends; Caroline and Luc, meet each other on the street and arrange to meet for a conversation over a cup of coffee. They are depicted by linocuts printed in brown or black with a little dog. The coffee filters show the traces of what they were used for. The binding is in brown linen with some needle work on both covers, the back is in brown leather. The text of the conversations and the colophon is typed with a typewriter. The colophon says 'Livre d'artiste d'Ilona Kiss, ancienne Boursière du Gouvernement français'. The 'Institut français' of Budapest founded an association for youngsters who have obtained a scholarship abroad. Ilona Kiss was a 'boursière' for her stay in Paris in 1994.

The form of *Café-Livret* reminds me of a butterfly. Metamorphosis is a term used by some critics about Kiss's work and in this case rightly so. Personally I would also add 'an intonation of light humour and understatement'.

29 copies made. Format: 17 x 11 x 1 cm.

Numerous Hungarian museums, libraries and public institutions have bought Ilona Kiss's books. Most of her books abroad are to be found in France, and especially so in the 'Bibliothèque Forney'. The library is housed in one of the oldest mansions of Paris, situated in Le Marais. It specialises in decorative arts, handicrafts, fine arts, textiles – and artists' books. The collection currently holds 29 books and four posters by Ilona.

Outside France Ilona's books can be found in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in München, the Klingspor Museum in Offenbach am Main, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Her books can also be found in a number of Swiss libraries as well as the Public Library of New York.