



CURRENT ISSUES IN HUNGARIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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DÉLIA VÉKONY
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FOREWORD
BY THE EDITOR

How much do we know about the art of the former Eastern Bloc? What is available in English language about the practices of the region? Aside from specific conferences and workshops addressing the subject, is it possible to get a thorough and deep understanding of what is actually happening in the field of contemporary art in, for instance, Hungary?

Hungarian Contemporary is a journal of contemporary Hungarian art in English language, and it is aimed to enable the international audience to engage with art in Hungary. It often happens that language barriers prevent proper engagement with certain local context, therefore the purpose of this publication is to abolish these linguistic boundaries and give an insight *through local eye but via an international language* to Hungary's complex, diverse and lively art scene.

This first volume presents five studies by selected art professionals, ranging from international, recognized experts to young voices in the art scene. All authors work in Hungary, and therefore have primary insight on what is going on. The volume addresses *current issues in Hungarian contemporary art*. Just what is it that matters for Hungarian artists these days, what is it that they are caught up with, what triggers them and why? Each author was asked to choose a theme that they think characterizes the present artistic practices.

Although most of the studies focus on artworks, the first text introduces the reader to the institutional structure of the Budapest art world. Hungary is a centralized country, so much of the activities of the contemporary art scene take place in Budapest.

The text by **Zsófia DANKA** provides guidelines, some kind of a 'map' for the reader to orientate themselves in the Hungarian art world. The diverse institutional structure has complex roles and it is good to know who to turn to if there is an intention to deepen one's knowledge or if thinking of collaboration.

The second study introduces the reader to the concept of post-communist iconology. **Sándor HORNYIK** frames artistic initiatives that are references to the past and present consequences of communism within iconology, and argues that the artistic work with these old icons and the visual consequences of communism is a unique voice not only locally, but it is also an important chapter for the study of iconology in general.

Róza Tekla SZILÁGYI's text about precarious conditions and contemporary art continues the proposition outlined by Hornyik, namely that socio-cultural conditions have always been visible in art. However, the Hungarian artists explored by Hornyik as well as those referred to by Szilágyi found a unique, local voice that is nonetheless comprehensible for an international audience. In her text, Szilágyi explores how the lifestyle, financial insecurity, project-based labour and the lack of a secure physical background puts the artist into the social class of the precariat. This inevitably defines not only the means how art is produced but also the issues that the artworks actually address.

Gerda SZÉPLAKY looks upon how post-feminism influences artistic practices in Hungary. It is again a unique position, as the communist past has influenced the

development of feminism very differently in the region compared to Western Europe. Furthermore, because of the Kádár-regime, Hungarian feminism took yet another turn, and it differs significantly from feminist practices in other countries of the region.

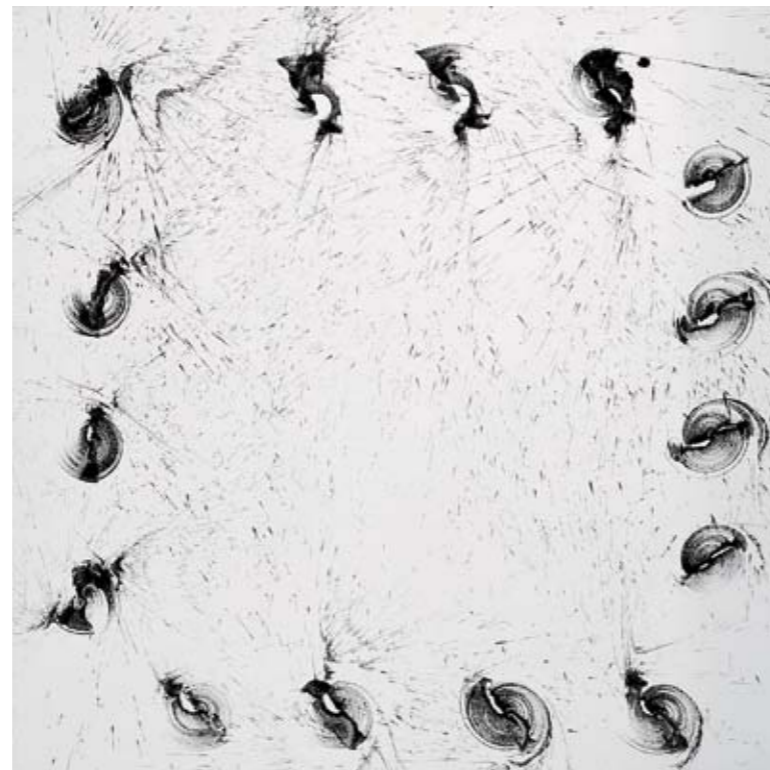
Finally, the study written by **Attila SIRBIK** takes the publication to yet another level. Sirbik practices the kind of art history in which the author does not create an analytical distance between himself and the artwork, but rather uses the text as a tool that takes the reader closer to art and facilitates an 'other-than-cognitive' engagement. The tone of Sirbik's text corresponds perfectly with the art he writes about, addressing the question of the body and its organs as the only site of certainty, the sole place of security in times when everything else is subjected to superimposed structures and the working of the speculative mind.

Thus, throughout the texts we experience a journey that starts with the practical matters of what to see, where to go, and who does what in Hungary, which is followed by an exploration of the art inspired by the communist past and its consequences as well as its place in iconology. Then the current social and financial status of the artist and the consequences of living conditions on art production is explored, followed by the role of women artists, addressing a new tone of femininity characteristic of the 21st century. Finally, we arrive to the human condition inspired by the physical rawness of the body, that, regardless of languages and national boundaries, defines all of us as human beings ■

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Dóra MAURER: Seven Twists VI/V, 1979/2011, silver print, 20x20cm, ed5 collection of Tate



István NÁDLER: Rotating to music III, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 120x120 cm

ZSÓFIA DANKA

ARTS VENUES FROM THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE TO THE PRESENT

The dynamics of the contemporary Hungarian art scene can be best understood by exploring its arts venues and the professional directions of operation they are taking. Knowing the works and professional goals of the artists associated with each institution will help one understand the exhibition trends of galleries and museums. The international attention surrounding Hungarian artists is highly dependent on their debut as well as their professional environment in their home country.

The only kind of art that can affect us is the kind that we can connect to in some way. However, understanding contemporary art and getting close to it does not happen overnight. As we find ourselves in a white cube space or in a huge museum, it can be quite frustrating to be suddenly faced with the challenge of having to learn a complex language that combines art history, aesthetics, sociology and history at the same time. That is why it is important to be aware of the nature of the sociocultural changes of the local, that is, the examined community. If we go even further, and specifically try to understand the art of this small Central Eastern European country today, we need to look back over the last fifty years. The global visibility of outstanding representatives of contemporary Hungarian fine art as well as the international success of the young generation of artists all prove that it is worthwhile and important to pay attention to what is happening in our country.

In the first part of this article, I outline the history and evolution of Hungarian fine art from the neo-avant-garde to the regime change (i. e. the end of Communism in Hungary). The heroic rebellion of the seventies, the progressive subcultures of the eighties, and the softening pop culture of the nineties put contemporary Hungarian fine art on an internationally sound footing. The arts venues, the creative communities, and the opportunities and visions of professionals from public institutions play a key role in presenting valuable examples of contemporary art. This was the case during the years of the socialist dictatorship, and it is still the case today.

Following this introduction to a very unique part of our cultural history, I will look into the most important art institutions, galleries and museums any traveller coming to Budapest must visit as well as the professional events one can attend. Moreover, the list includes a couple of venues that could be considered 'underground' (i. e. a bit farther away from the mainstream) – visiting those practically makes one a native insider.



Imre BAK: Charleston, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 200x150 cm
Photo: Miklós Sulyok