

Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts
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The social and political role of Hungarian art after the regime change

DLA thesis

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Csaba Nemes

Supervisor: Dr habil. László Beke, CSc, Honorary Professor

The starting point of my dissertation is the following statement: Contemporary Hungarian art barely reflects on political and social issues, if at all. This in turn raises the following question: What are the most likely reasons that lie behind the apolitical or outsider attitude of artists?

I have drawn up a questionnaire for my research and tried to investigate the above quoted prevalent statement through the analysis of the answers received as well as through my personal experiences. I have designed the questionnaire so as to focus on the reasons I assumed, thus being able to test the appropriateness of my assumptions.

Summary:

1. It can be stated that not everyone agrees with the previous, seemingly prevalent statement, with some respondents articulating or evaluating the positions of political, socially critical art within the existing structure in a more refined way.

The answers also show some degree of uncertainty in interpreting political, socially critical art as a category.

2. My research revealed that artists primarily believe that the institutions of contemporary art suffer from attention deficit. At the same time, theoreticians typically claim that artists fail to take risks by presenting social problems or current crises.

Thus the Hungarian art scene seems to involve artists and theoreticians imposing responsibility upon each other.

It can generally be stated that those works of art representing a political attitude are less evident and visible than it would otherwise be predicted.

3. Can artists be regarded as public figures today in Hungary? My research suggests that it is a vague role to be an artist and focus on the interpretation or portrayal of social changes. Artists hardly ever actively shape public discourse on social issues so that this option is not considered by the affected parties either.

What we see here is the symptoms of a general self-esteem crisis. As if artists would no longer believe in the effectiveness of the media in shaping society. Yet, this lack of self-confidence is not only attributable to the situation in Hungary, but also to a global value crisis that characterizes contemporary art throughout the world.

4. In carrying out my research I have found that the specific nature of the peaceful regime change in Hungary had a decisive impact on the development of the artistic positions and roles. Real and assumed opportunities as well as various expectations all had a strong influence on what roles contemporary

artists undertake and how confident they go about portraying social or political issues.

In the first decades of communism, political art was restricted to only serve propaganda purposes. Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, it could work in the framework of "second publicity" or in the "tolerated" category at best. This narrow cross-section could not rely on a real social basis, thus leaving the majority of the works then created without substantive reflections.

For the generation that emerged after the regime change striving to react to social affairs, this "second publicity" became the reference point as well as the communications structure to step over. Most of the artist of the 1990s aimed at extending their relations with the public. (Although the state control of art has already loosened in the 1980s, the art of that period focused on other problems.)

The new Eastern European capitalism taking shape in Hungary did not want a socially critical art. On the other hand, some of the neighboring countries have been successful in articulating the controversial problems of the "east" toward a culturally more open western capitalism.

In my view, contemporary Hungarian artists have hardly taken their share of this activity, which is partly due to the fact that the regime change has started beneath the surface as early as the 1980s, thus bringing about less intense euphoria in Hungary than in other countries. Therefore, artists felt that dealing with politics is more of a nuisance and wanted to get out of that obligation. They have even retained the illusion that political art is no longer wanted in a free country.

5. Based upon my research, the political art of the 1990s was rather characterized by the criticism of "new capitalism". Most of the works dating from that period focused on sociology, economics or cultural criticism. The moderate reception of these works in Hungary also contributed to a sense of uncertainty on the part of the artists. Due to the apathy of media the tight-knitnes of the artist community continued, which used to characterize the previous position of opposition, yet this time without any oppression or state control. The socially critical art has found itself in a vacuum.

It can be stated that these relations have only changed over the last few years, since the Hungarian political scene has waken up from its "sleeping beauty" dream and the political elite has been seemingly undergoing a restructuring process. The dangers of such transformation seem to encourage artists to be more active in taking positions. It is only now that we have to face the undisclosed and underestimated problems of many decades.

6. In my analysis I point out that Hungarian artists must also fight against the anti-modernist, romantic-conservative, sometimes retrograde attitude of society. Some reasons of this situation, however, go back to the past.

In my opinion, art discourse in Hungary tries to keep pace with the achievements of international development, yet the results of these endeavors remain difficult to interpret by the wider public.

The restructuring process of the contemporary art scene may gain new momentum as a result of an increasing interest from the private community over the last years. The activity of private capital in culture, however, results in further conflicts as well, which encourages artists to be more responsible in their work, define a more conscious self-picture, and develop new strategies.

7. In my opinion, the development of a more conscious socially critical role in art is also prevented by the lack of a paradigm shift.

The prevalent view – whereby art reacting to current social events can not be on a par with that art “intended for eternity” (and thus refraining from dealing with daily affairs) – is slowly undergoing change.

It came up several times during the research that the artists are uninformed regarding current discourses on art theory and practice.

8. In my opinion a further problem lies within the fact that there are very few oeuvres (Tamás Szentjóby, Miklós Erdély, Tibor Hajas, etc.) that may set examples for the upcoming generations. Moreover, most of the oeuvres that may live up to this requirement are only partially explored (lack of monographs or oeuvre catalogs).

Finally, I believe that the lack of socially critical discourse is also problematic in art education due the small number of instructors with the above discussed political attitude.