

HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS
Doctoral School

Where is sculpture nowadays?

Resume of the DLA thesis

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Subject of the thesis

The subject of my DLA thesis is contemporary sculpture. My starting point was the experience that although the term is used in various situations its meaning is not clear enough. One of the reasons can be that sculpture, during the changes throughout the 20th century, consolidated all innovative efforts thus expanded so much that for nowadays all characteristics which could distinguish sculpture from other arts have disappeared. Practically any object or any three-dimensional piece of art can represent a sculpture. On the other hand, there is an artistic practice that is based on the traditions of sculpture. In my thesis I approach contemporary sculpture from here: I examine how artists of today relate to the traditional notion of sculpture¹, what role does this relationship play in their artistic practice.

This starting point has a personal aspect as my own artistic activity is highly influenced by sculpture. My objective is to recognize and turn conscious the role that sculpture plays in the process of creation of my works.

Methods of the thesis

1.

I presuppose that the complexity of contemporary sculpture can be observed in the relationship between *sculpture* (as art), *sculpture* (as a piece of work) and *sculptor*. Thus, to establish further researches I define aspects of these notions that are important for me:

In present days one can say *sculpture* to an artistic activity that presents a relationship to sculpture of the past. So we can consider contemporary sculpture as a reaction to modern sculpture and to *sculpture in the expanded field*.²

A contemporary *sculpture* is a piece of art

- which has tangible substance;
- where the raw material is formed in accordance with its creator's intention;
- where the intention to establish a relationship with sculpture has played a role during the process of creation;
- where the "how-ness" of the object (the characteristics of its form) carries important contents and is not subordinated to the "what-ness" of the object (what it intends to show, what it means).

If today an artist defines himself as a *sculptor* it can refer to his/her intention to relate towards sculpture. However, I consider someone being a sculptor based on the following criteria:

- talent;
- formation;
- professional skills;
- basic approach.

2.

Because of the quality of the possibilities for fine arts to express itself (that is the direct encounter with the works) the *sculpture* is the most important and most arguable of the three notions examined.

¹ The notion of sculpture before the modern sculpture; I refer to it as *sculpture* in the followings

² An expression by Rosalind E. Krauss that designates the postmodern sculpture. In: *A szobrászat kiterjesztett tere, Enigma*, 1999, 20-21. sz.

In my opinion there are certain cases where the issue of sculpture—non-sculpture brings up significant difference in the interpretation. Such cases are:

- “sculpture-like objects” (e.g. Little Warsaw: *The Body of Nefertiti* or Ferenc Varga: *Unsuccessful attempt to refuse the temptation of carving a sculpture*), or
- pieces of art that are “rather sculpture” (e.g. Balázs Kicsiny: *Pumproom, Work in progress*); the viewer, at first sight, can consider these as sculptures but I do not define them as sculpture because of their *how-ness* and the underlying *intention*.

There are pieces of art (similar in their shape to the previous ones) which I consider as sculptures based on aspects above (e.g. György Kálmán Nagy: *Meat market*).

I think that it is unnecessary to decide for every piece of art whether it is a sculpture or not. Even in cases where the question seems obvious, like:

- border cases, (e.g. Frank O. Gehry: *Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao*), or pieces in which sculpture combines with other arts similar to it in means of expression.

3.

Since my approach to contemporary sculpture is a practical one I think it is important to get to know and to introduce the personal opinions of the artists themselves. Besides, the best way for me to analyze my own works is to broaden my knowledge about the environment that highly influences their creation. To achieve this I made interviews with ten artists who I consider as sculptors and who are definitive for my own creative activity: Ágnes Előd, Norbert Kotormán, Barna Péli, Gergő Kovách, Ádám Szabó, Andrea Huszár, Péter Gálhidy, Balázs Csepregi, Ágost Koppány Erős és Balázs Duronelly.

The questions were gathered into four groups:

- group 1 contains questions about the conscious relationship towards the notions: *sculpture* (art), *sculpture* (piece of art), *sculptor*;
- group 2 examines the working methods; whose works can one designate as sculptures based on the characteristics defined by me;
- group 3 examines the *relationship* towards *sculpture* considered traditional by the history of art and towards notions of modern sculpture;
- group 4 examines the relationship towards *sculptor* as a profession.

Interviews are analyzed in groups. I tried to appoint characteristics that are unique to the phenomenon that I perceive as contemporary sculpture.

Results

1.

Based on the interviews I concluded the followings about the relationship between *sculpture* (as an art), *sculpture* (as piece of work) and *sculptor*:

In contemporary sculpture, the relationship towards sculpture of the past can manifest itself on a conceptual level; in the use of ideas or means of traditional sculpture; however, this does not mean that it appears only in the form of a sculpture. If we try to position an artist only by his/her works we can get to a result different from his/her self-definition: some may satisfy the criteria of *sculptor* and also their works satisfy the criteria of *sculpture* but they do not consider themselves as sculptors, nor they define their works as sculptures. And vice versa: others consider themselves as sculptors (and their works as sculptures) yet this does not come down undoubtedly from their work.

Thus, in contemporary sculpture it is not possible to give a general formula for the relationship between the notions *sculpture* (as art), *sculpture* (as a piece of work) and *sculptor*. The relationship between these notions differs almost in every case.

2.

I compared the interviews to the works and distinguished four different artistic attitudes. I defined these in relationship with the modern sculpture and the “sculpture in the expanded field”.

- One part of the interviewed artists links to sculpture on the level of ideas; they conceptually use most of the notions of sculpture but they do not use the traditional means of sculpture and often it is not a sculpture that they create. However, they strongly link to sculpture theoretically and verbally (they define themselves as sculptors and estimate highly the professional part of sculpture: the formation and the talent), their activity can be considered as a reinterpretation of sculpture. This links their activity to the notion “sculpture in the expanded field”.
- An other part of the artists uses the traditional means of sculpture but does not pay attention to the notions of sculpture; their work does not display an intention to innovate sculpture. Often they create sculptures but do not look at them as sculptures and do not define themselves as sculptors. They do not commit themselves to sculpture, instead they use other mediums also, yet they do not take this act as crossing the boundaries of sculpture. I think their activity is in reality a new perception of sculpture.
- The third attitude is represented by one artist only: the notions of sculpture are important for him and he creates sculptures. With his works he tries to stay within the boundaries of sculpture so his work can be linked to modern sculpture.
- The fourth attitude can not really be evaluated in such an approach to sculpture.

From most of the interviews one can discover the importance of the creation of the work. A lot of them underline the importance of creating with own hands and the importance of the meanings coming to life during this process. It turns out that many of the artists work in a way where the idea is immediately associated with physical activity and this gets fixed in the material. This can be a manifestation of the attitude that many drafted about the relationship between art and life: the process of creation is not to be treated as a separated system; it is an organic part of life. I think with this method of creation the means of sculpture can be successfully applied.

3.

In order to draw a personal conclusion I also answered the interview questions. When compared my answers to the other results I got to the following points:

- The fact that I do not define myself clearly as a sculptor, yet create works influenced by *sculpture*, generates a tension in my thinking about creation.
- All my works were heavily defined by the not fully consciously applied elements of sculpture. Broadening the boundaries of sculpture gets great importance during their interpretation and also the applied materials link them to sculpture. I think that is an obstacle in the process of creation and it greatly limits the works. This could be the reason that many times the relationship between sculpture and my works is not obvious for the viewers.
- Having defined such an artistic attitude and method of creation that represents a real novelty in sculpture I outlined a possible way for myself also.

4.

The personal conclusion can join the general conclusion:

Using the means of sculpture freely, independently from the notions of sculpture can lead to efficient expression of personal contents. This method of creation presupposes a direct contact with the material, the inseparability of planning and shaping; as a result, the work enriches with a plenty of content during the shaping. This method of creation can only be successful if the artist has professional skill, talent and proper formation.

From this point of view the importance of the notions that I defined gets confirmed and it makes sense to discuss contemporary sculpture as a phenomenon distinguished from fine arts.