

HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS, DOCTORAL SCHOOL

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The Vákuum Tv

intermedia performance cabaret, in the period 1994-95

DLA theses

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The subject of this dissertation is the work of the young artists of the Vákuum Tv group in Budapest at the *Tilos az Á* alternative nightclub between March 1994 and December 1995. It is an examination of their relationship to the cultural and artistic medium, and a contemporary mapping of a cultural phenomenon that transcended itself.

The research aims to meet the challenge of presenting almost two years of Vákuum Tv, their most intense period between 1994 and 95, in an authentic and perceptive way, i.e. the empirical and ephemeral creative situations of a group that existed 27-28 years ago. I rely on video documentation of the period, analogue technology of poor quality by today's standards, which, moreover, because of the nature of video, is only partially capable of interpreting the live performances of Vákuum Tv. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the authentic video footage has sometimes acquired new contexts as a result of the social and cultural transformations that have taken place since then. Thus, a representation, perceptive to an essential characteristic of the events of that time, i.e. the intensity of the creative situations, can only be attempted today in the light of these altered contexts, i.e. the shifts in emphasis that have continuously developed since. Yet, I have tried to paint as sensuous a picture as possible to help later generations decipher the meaning of Vákuum TV at the time. It may – given its niche character – also provide a valuable source of information for future cultural history research.

The term Vakuum Tv defined several things at once. Firstly, it was the huge set piece that framed the performances, a stylised television set the size of a human being, and also the program and event organised and created around it. Additionally, it referred to the group of artists who created it. The combination of these was the concept of Vákuum TV and of the unique genre that the group created.

From March of 1994, Vákuum Tv worked on a weekly basis in Budapest at the alternative entertainment venue, *Tilos az Á*, exploring cultural phenomena of the

period from after the 1989 regime change, in which the transformation processes of everyday life, television and the quality of culture manifested in the form of an event-based, interactive art project. The crew worked with a mixture of moving image, sound and theatrical action, fusing them into theatre,¹ cabaret, performance, revue and television genres. What emerged was more a live show, a montage of interactive performance mixed with video. The interplay of the genres in the context of the huge TV frame-display provided an opportunity to evoke and caricature the absurdity of the most influential medium of the time, television. Vákuum Tv events took place on Monday nights, a reference to the fact that until 1 January 1989², the state TV channel did not broadcast on this night. This created an empty evening, a vacuum in the entertainment of the country's population.

The audience for the shows was made up of young intellectuals keen to embrace and shape the liberating atmosphere of the regime change, but foreigners open to developments in Eastern Europe at the time also joined the camp of interested viewers. The relationship between the audience and the creative community was characterised by how, in the flow of interactive performances, the consumer guest sometimes became a performer. Sudden self-organising processes, not only on stage but also in the auditorium, influenced the course of the pre-planned show. These situations forced the participants to improvise, to be alert and to interact in a concentrated and engaged way. Alongside their planned segments, the group reflected on the social and artistic transformations of the early 1990s through informal improvisational situations, mixing play and humour.

The existence of Tilos as *Á* was a constant subject of debate. Conflicts of interest arising from a series of public complaints, but even more so from the political lobbying of the district by rival restaurateurs, eventually made the club's existence impossible. Tilos az *Á*, which opened at the dawn of the regime change on New Year's Eve 1989, closed in 1995. As the ongoing event-based artistic activity of the Vákuum Tv group was closely intertwined with the Tilos az *Á* environment, the closure of the club also marked the end of the most productive period of cooperation of the Vákuum Tv project, a period of about two years, which had generated at least 44 individual,

¹ I began my doctoral program on reflection of Zoltán Szegedy-Maszák's thesis (https://doktori.hu/index.php?menuid=195&lang=HU&tk_ID=106914). Date of latest download: 2021. 12. 03.

² https://helsinkifigyelo.blog.hu/2019/07/23/vege_az_adasszunetnek_televiziozas_1989-ben Date of latest download: 2021. 12. 03.

unique programs. After that, in 1996, the group performed twice more abroad, at the Next 5 Minutes, tactical media conference in Amsterdam, and at the La Flèche d'Or nightclub in Paris during the Hungarian Parallel Cultural Week. Subsequently, László Kistamás put Vákuum Tv on occasionally at various venues with a different line-up of performers for another two years, creating four independent shows for locations such as the 1997 U2 event series in Vienna, and the Budapest French Institute, as well as the “Media Modell” exhibition in 2000 on the Varosliget ice rink terrace, where the group presented two evening shows.

Research Methods

My thesis is based on an high-quality video archive, which contains footage of Vákuum TV recordings for most of the shows at the Tilos az Á and other venues. I examine this material using methods developed from my studies and creative experiences since then. Several of these videos can be viewed at the links in the footnotes. I report on the formation of the group and the situations that emerged during the collaboration, using the narrative method for my own recollections. I also use my creative experiences, observations, reflections and related material from published cultural history writings to situate the activities of the Vákuum Tv group in the cultural context of the 1990s.

As I was a member of the group, my essay is a subjective account, drawing on my memories and experiences to offer personal reflections and conclusions. Since my present creative work is about communicating through moving image and sound, in the genres of mockumentary³, reality and scripted reality on different platforms of the internet, I can approach the medium of art history more as a practitioner. In my writing, I have therefore sought to create a text structure that facilitates the communication of creative commentary. I have tried to reflect not only the facts but also the experience.

Structure of the Thesis

The text of the dissertation is a presentation of events, a web of reflections on these, and analysis of what happened. The resulting nodes can be used as a map to help the reader to interpret the Vákuum TV phenomenon.

³ On mockumentary: <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary> Date of latest download: 2021. 12. 03.

The first chapter describes the circumstances of the emergence of Vákuum Tv, the creative activities of the group's founder in the 1980s and 1990s, his cultural contacts and the cultural interests and milieu of its later members. It outlines the creation of the group, and the creation and significance of the framework of its operations and its distinctive set. This leads to a discussion of the role filled by the Tilos az Á Club as a subcultural nightclub in the immediate aftermath of the regime change, the cultural archetypes of its owners, their resulting aspirations and their supportive relationship to the activities of Vákuum TV. In this respect, it also provides insights into those aspects of the cultural, artistic, social and art-educational aspects of the period that are relevant to the context of the thesis.

The second chapter discusses in detail the creative work of the Vákuum TV group between 1994 and 1995. In doing so, it lists variations in structure, function and visual operations of the group's shows, the structure of the "broadcasts", and then describes the occurrences of functional and visual operational variations on the basis of a few selected program examples. Then, by describing selected shows from the video documentation of the performances and by making the video material of the selected documentation available, it provides detailed insight into the dramaturgy of these segments and the multiple and novel ways in which the creative methods are interwoven with it. The description, in combination with visual documentation, is used to illustrate the emergence of the new format. The concluding sub-chapter examines their art historical connections.

The third chapter takes stock of the cultural connections of the Vákuum Tv group between 1994 and 2000, including to the progressive theatre, visual arts, music, film and alternative scene of the period. It recants national and international events that took place around the time of the performances and other appearances, and then discusses the dissolution of the group's core. It outlines the obstacles to the group's longer-term survival and visibility. The subsection, "On the Associative Cultural Contexts of Vákuum Tv" outlines the paradigm shifts of the 20th century and places them in their context, discussing the fictive historical relations I have proposed between the creative activities of the Vákuum Tv group between 1994-95 in a theoretical context.

In the fourth chapter, the masterwork is presented.

The fifth chapter contains a list of the literature and photographs used.

The sixth chapter, the Appendix, contains an inventory of cassettes containing video recordings of the events of Vákuum TV from 1994-95, which is also a list of the surviving broadcasts and segments in the chronological order in which they were performed.

The subject has not yet been studied, and the result of this research can only be to fill this gap, at least in part, and to promote its cultural transference. It is assumed that both art historians and the general public will find it interesting to gain an insight into the intensive creative period of the group between 1994 and 1995, during which at least 44 performances and some 200 segments were produced.

The period of Vákuum Tv was a decisive one in the development of my creative career and had a strong influence on the choice of themes and the formal language of my later works. An assessment of this influence is also important for me in redefining my artistic activity and for a more conscious continuation of it.