

FIVE YEARS

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The Soros Center for Contemporary Arts of the Soros Foundation is approaching the tenth anniversary of its establishment, and in the present paper I will attempt to give a brief account of the last five years of its existence. The last decade is divided into two periods by a historic change the events of which occur maybe once in 50 years in the history of a country, let alone a whole continent. The end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990 marked such a turn in the history of Hungary and all of Eastern Europe. The political transition that took place in this region brought about changes in every sphere of life, including art. Although the main changes occurred in politics, they have had an effect on the general state of art and the life of artists. To mention only the most immediate effects: the plans for the re-burial of the executed Hungarian prime minister, Imre Nagy, were made by artists. Another symbolic act of the 1956 revolution's re-evaluation was the erection of the monument to the martyrs of the uprising. A great number of artists entered their plans for the competition which a board selected one from. On the basis of this plan the monument was then built. In the new circumstances, some artists started to deal with politics more and more actively. Before the changes, art was one of the possible ways of expressing political views indirectly. A great deal of political issues, which during the existence of the one-party system could only be dealt with in the language of art, could now be discussed directly. Thus, they became separated from art. The arts were no longer categorized according to the infamous "three T's" (which stood for **T**űrt, **T**ámogatott, **T**iltott, i.e., supported, tolerated and banned arts) which made a distinction between works of art not only on the basis of their content or message, but also on the basis of stylistic criteria. Abstract art, for example, was considered unwelcome. The exhibitions showing works that, under the previous regime, could only be shown illegally (e.g., *Underground Art in the Aczél Era*) illustrated perfectly how the new situation re-writes the history of arts in retrospect. Works representing lasting value have become clearly distinguishable from those which are ephemeral, merely conveying current social and political issues without inherent artistic merits.

Of course, the historical changes described above do not mark a sharp dividing line. The changes occurred gradually in Hungary. Signs of the forthcoming transition became apparent in the mid-eighties, within the art scene as well. The new painting of the eighties was already synchronous with the international context. It was not born in a vacuum, as was the art of the previous decades. Free access to information, of course, worked the other way around, too: Hungarian artists began to exhibit their works abroad more and more often, thus Hungarian art became integrated in international mainstream art.

The first half of my paper will provide a chronological overview of the past five years, which, I hope, will properly illustrate the changes occurring in Hungarian artistic life. I consider it important

to discuss not only artists, works, styles and groups, but also other issues which are closely connected to art, i.e., art trade, exhibitions, art magazines, etc.

The 1990s have brought about many changes in the institutional system of Hungarian art life. Art trade has ceased to be a state monopoly, and, as a result, private galleries have appeared, creating a new market and exhibition opportunities for artists. Obviously, the fact that artworks have become "market commodities" also brought about a change in artistic attitudes and habits. Ideological considerations were replaced by financial concerns. The situation is, of course, not so simple. The new and more liberal artistic life emerging in the place of the cultural-political system of categories has not yet been crystallized. It needs a longer time for a new circle of collectors to emerge, for the new forms of sponsorship to be shaped and for the artists to adapt to the new situation. The bulk of new galleries in Budapest opened during the changes that took place five years ago, e.g., in the autumn of 1989 the Knoll Gallery, in 1990 the Roczkov, the VárfoK and the NA-NE Galleries. The first large-scale show and market of contemporary art, the Budapest Art Expo was organized in 1990. Since then, the event has become part of the Budapest Spring Festival with a growing number of participants every year.

The changes also concerned the field of museums and other exhibition sites. At the end of 1988, the huge exhibition room of the Kiscelli Museum, converted from an old church, was opened temporarily. Since then, various exhibitions of contemporary art have been organized there. In the spring of 1989 the Ludwig Museum Budapest was established. Since 1991 it has exhibited its collection in the rooms of the former Hungarian Labor Movement Museum. Since the autumn of 1992 the Ludwig Museum has organized numerous temporary exhibitions of works by contemporary Hungarian and international artists. In 1991 the Budapest Múcsarnok (Palace of Exhibitions) was closed for reconstruction, and the institution moved to the Exhibition Hall in the City Park, the Palme House, where it will remain until 1995. Two foreign institutions play an important role in the presentation of the works of contemporary Hungarian artists, namely, the Budapest French Institute and the Goethe Institute. Naturally, the already established older or newer exhibition sites such as the Fészek, the Budapest and the Liget Galleries are still active. The Artpool Center for the Research of Art, which has conducted a singularly important activity in the organization and documentation of Hungarian art for long years, was also officially opened for the public during this period.

The number of alternative exhibition sites have increased as well. In 1990, the building of the ÚjJlak Cinema, after which the ÚjJlak Group was named, was pulled down. The following year the group man-

aged to move into a new building (an abandoned pasta factory), in which they have held exhibitions of their members and invited artists. These exhibitions are only open for one or two nights. Similarly short exhibitions can be seen in the tiny room of the Műterem Kiállító. The period of transition has also brought about changes in the life of the Young Artists' Studio, founded in 1958. In 1988, for the first time since 1966, they could organize an exhibition without having a selection board. In 1990 they became an independent association, the Association of the Studio of Young Artists. The Studio comprises artists under 35 and has its annual exhibitions in prestigious places (e.g., the Hungarian National Gallery, the Ernst Museum, etc.). The exhibits illustrate the wide range of styles the members represent. Changes, however, do not only imply a more liberated life, but also bring along new financial difficulties to face, which can be demonstrated in the Studio's case. Due to the general administrative re-structuring of the cultural institutional system, the Studio had to find new fund-raising strategies. This year the building in which they had rented a gallery space was sold. (It was in this exhibition space where the ever more popular *Gallery by Night* series of art events were organized every spring. The event always lasted for several days, or rather nights, with a different artist showing works each night). For several months it seemed that they would remain without an exhibition space. In July 1994, however, the Studio finally acquired a gallery, thus they can continue their activities.

You may have noticed that so far I have only written about Budapest. And the reason for this is not solely that about one fifth of the Hungarian population lives in the capital. Unfortunately, in only very few other cities are there museums or galleries the programs or collections of which could be considered a significant part of the contemporary art scene. In the vicinity of Budapest the cities of Szentendre and Vác must be mentioned. For more than a century, many artists have lived in Szentendre, and, in addition to numerous museums, the city also houses an artists' colony. The Lajos Vajda Studio, which comprises neo-dadaist and geometric tendencies and was founded in 1972, is also based in Szentendre. In the city of Vác, contemporary art exhibitions and inter-media (performance, poetry and music) festivals have been organized since the end of the eighties. Székesfehérvár is another important city not very far from Budapest. The King St. Stephen Museum of Székesfehérvár began to present its contemporary collection to the public in May 1990. The collection was moved to an independent, new building quite soon after that. Besides that, the museum mounts temporary exhibitions of works by outstanding Hungarian contemporary artists and group shows representing modern tendencies. From among the most outstanding avant-garde artists after 1945, Sándor Altorjai's retrospective exhibition was held in 1990, and Miklós Erdély's in 1991. The King St. Stephen Museum has for years orga-

nized a series of exhibitions surveying 20th century Hungarian art, of which the 1989 show presented the period between 1975 and 1980, and the exhibition in 1993 concluded the series, with the art of the eighties (1981-1990). From among the cities more distant from Budapest, mention must be made of Pécs and Szombathely. The galleries of both cities hold exhibitions of contemporary art and have significant collections as well. New institutions exhibiting and collecting contemporary works can also be found in the Transdanubian part of Hungary. It seems that the river Danube functions as a watershed in art too.

The changes also had an effect on the institutional system of art education. As a result of the "students' revolution" at the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts, the rector of the institution resigned, and important changes were introduced. A great number of artists who had not been allowed to teach there before, were now invited and a new department (the Intermedia Department) was also established. In 1990 a new form of education, the School of Art Masters was set up in Pécs.

The art magazine scene also took on new life. From 1990 *Művészet* (Art), the only art magazine at the time, came out with a new layout and its title was changed to *Új Művészet* (Art Today). The publishers of the magazine have even started to publish a series of art books. In 1990 *Belvedere*, which only dealt with art trade previously, devoted one issue to articles on contemporary art. Last year *Balkon*, an entirely new monthly art magazine dealing with contemporary art, was launched. The New Visual Culture Foundation started to publish its periodical, *Enigma. Laza lapok*, published "randomly" and distributed free of charge, adds a nice, alternative color to the variety of art periodicals. *Magyar Narancs* and *Nappali Ház* deal regularly with contemporary art. There are temporary periodicals, such as the six issues intended as a preparation for the Second Hungarian Contemporary Epigone Exhibition, plagiarizing the design of the magazines enumerated above, in the spirit of the exhibition to which they were related.

And now, let me turn to the events most authentically representing the art of the last five years. During this period, many important exhibitions were organized both in Hungary and abroad. Of the events taking place outside Hungary, the 1990 Hannover *Inspiration – Sommeratelier* exhibition needs to be mentioned first. Numerous Hungarian artists, mainly of the youngest generation, took part in this event. Probably the most important shows presenting only Hungarian works were the Bremen *Kunst Europa* 1991, the 1992 exhibition, entitled *Budapest!* in Dublin, and the 1992 *Revisions* presented in a number of cities in Australia. Naturally, these events involving a great number of artists exhibited the works of several generations, but the youngest generation was always represented to a considerable extent. Apart from exclusive shows, there were many important

projects where Hungarian artists exhibited their works with those of foreigners. The best examples are the 1990 Danish - Hungarian *Triumph – The Uninhabitable* and the 1991 Slovakian - Hungarian *Oscillation*. The Budapest part of both shows took place in the Múcsarnok, Budapest. It would be desirable to continue these joint exhibitions. In connection with the issue of Hungarian art abroad we have to mention that Hungarian artists participate regularly in the *Venice Biennale* and the 1992 Kassel *Documenta*. János Sugár was the first Hungarian artist living in Hungary to take part in *Documenta*. Other forms of our presence abroad, namely, grants and scholarships have also increased in number during the past few years. More and more young artists have the chance to spend longer periods of time in West European countries. With the liberation of traveling, the need to choose between emigration and final return to Hungary, forcing so many artists to leave the country in the past decades, has ceased to exist.

At home, the events organized by the different museums and groups of artists made participation possible for individual artists and groups as well, and they also created opportunities for comprehensive or thematic exhibitions. The *Spectrum* show held in 1992 at Tűzoltó 72, an exhibition space run by the Újlak Group, and *Dialogue*, the exhibition of the Budapest Gallery, are good examples (originally, the latter was planned as a German - Hungarian joint exhibition). A comprehensive, but not always homogeneous overview was given by such large-scale exhibitions as the 1989 *Symmetry – Asymmetry or The Studios of Budapest* held in the Hungarian National Gallery. A great number of young artists participated in both events. The 1991 *Svb Voce*, the first Hungarian video exhibition, which was organized by the Soros Foundation, and the 1993 *Polyphony*, dealing with the changing environment and circumstances are fine examples of shows built around one theme. At the same time, we have to mention exhibitions presenting almost exclusively young artists, e.g., the 1989 *Szelep /Valve/* series in the Bercsényi Klub, which gave a chance for many young artists to make their first appearance, or the group exhibitions held in the Barcsay Room of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest (*Távolság /Distance/,* 1990; *Fény /Light/,* 1991). There were exhibitions organized by young artists, such as the 1992 *First Hungarian Waterless Beach Festival*, the *Second Hungarian Epigone Exhibition* in Hamburg in December 1993, and the *Almost Third Hungarian Epigone Exhibition* in Budapest in 1994, which, as the name indicates, presents the patterns of being connected to predecessors and traditions.

It is interesting to consider the relationship of the nineties to the art of the previous decades. No comprehensive retrospective exhibition covered the eighties as did the 1980 *Tendencies* series which through the art of the seventies looked back on the events of that decade. Although the Young Artists' Studio and the Székesfehérvár

King St. Stephen Museum held exhibitions of the art of the eighties (the former in 1990, the latter in 1993), these showed only certain segments of the past decade, and, so far, there has been no exhibition offering an overall view. It seems that there is more demand to discover the more distant past. This was the purpose of the Sixties exhibition in the Hungarian National Gallery in 1991, and last year, the Ernst Museum held a show presenting Hungarian pop art. Massive catalogues were published to accompany both exhibitions, but the reaction of art historians indicated that these two attempts of interpretation did not fully and convincingly answer all the questions that emerged. The lack of documentation and research of the last two or three decades creates a serious need for such systematic and analytical approaches. There are no monographs about some of the most outstanding artists.

Let us finally say a few words about artists. Having offered an overview of the changes and the new phenomena occurring during the last five years, let us consider artists from the same points of view. I will not concentrate so much on the artists who were present in Hungarian art life before 1989, neither will I attempt to describe how their lives have changed. Also, I do not intend to write about the fact that many young, or relatively young, artists have died during this period, but I would still like to mention some of them. Tibor Csiky, whose commemorative exhibition opened in June this year in the Hungarian National Gallery, died in 1989. Géza Samu, one of the Hungarian participants in the 1988 Venice Biennale died in 1990. Zoltán Érmezei died in 1991.

I will write about those artists who made their first appearances in the last few years. In his bulletin article about the first five years of the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Miklós Peternák summarized the tendencies of Hungarian contemporary art until 1990. The description of these tendencies and the enumeration of the names end where the new generation begins, so this is where I would like to continue from. The members of this generation were born in the 1960s and they began to exhibit their works regularly during the 1980s. It was their own choice to form groups (Hejettes Szomlyazók /Substitute Thirsters/, Újlak Group, Block Group, etc.), no external forces or persons played a part in their decisions. This kind of group appearance might seem a more successful strategy for them, and the method of group work offers them a wider range of possibilities. (At the same time, we have to note that nowadays, the cohesive force of the groups seems to decrease, some of them have fallen apart, and in others, a kind of differentiation and separation can be felt. This leads to some of the artists gaining more weight and others drifting away from the groups). As opposed to the renaissance of painting in the 1980s their art is characterized by a mixture of art forms. These artists (e.g., Balázs Beöthy, Tamás Komoróczy, Péter Szarka) make photos, videos, performances and installations. Of course, genres can be influenced not only by the developments and

achievements in art abroad, but by the internal conditions, which are rather unfavorable, even now that art trade activities have started. (Although painting has lost its dominance, excellent painters, such as József Gaál, Éva Köves, Attila Szűcs prove that it has not reached the limits of its potential). One of the most important forms of artistic activity at present is creating a work of art for a certain site, at a certain time, which does not become a finished, portable museum exhibit. This tendency and its effects are becoming more and more tangible both in international and national exhibitions. Instead of the work, now, it is the artist who travels. It is the artist's figure that remains constant among the works that are created, change and often disappear.

The reason why I concentrate on the young generation of artists is that they are quicker to react to the new situation and their art reflects the possible answers to the current questions better. The question is what the development of art trade, the challenge of the international market, the new social order, etc. mean to them. We cannot expect them to work following Western European and American examples, neither can we make predictions. Last year's *Polyphony* exhibition showed that in spite of the fact that Hungary also struggles with the problems of poverty, racism, pollution etc., issue based art has not yet become a significant part of Hungarian art (István Szil, for example, deals with poverty in one of his works). It is also interesting that the attitude of social criticism manifest during the earlier decades, in overt or hidden forms, is also missing from Hungarian art. I have hardly seen any works which would reflect the problems generated by the birth of capitalism and the anomalies of growing racism in the region (although some of Csaba Nemes's works are fine examples of the former). And it is not only political and social problems that seem to have become less central in art. There is a lot less humor and irony as well (one exception is Antal Lakner's art).

At the same time, we should not forget that the present state of art is not only influenced by the social and political heritage of the past few decades, but by the old and uninterrupted cultural-artistic traditions as well. And this brings up the old problem of art history, related to the peculiarities of Eastern European and national art. The expectations emerging in Western Europe during first stage of the breaking out of isolation were perfectly reflected by the incredible amount of Lenin portraits and paintings with the sickle and hammer that were exported. Do we have to expect a further adaptation to the requirements of the Western market? There is a rather limited scope between the extremes of the too much Eastern European /i.e., unintelligible, distant/ and the too much Western European /i.e., featureless and familiar/. But is it not the same situation for artists of the Third World, America and even Western Europe? A historical account of the past decades would help a better under-

standing of East European art, which is usually misunderstood and misinterpreted as exotic. However, exhibitions attempting such an account usually measure East European art by the standards of "Westkunst" or of this or that country.

I think that there are a few contemporary artists in Hungary who have already proved that they can become part of international art life. (One of them is Róza El-Hassan). The new situation sets serious tasks for the young generation and no way to solve them is inaccessible. Young artists are free to travel, they can establish international connections, and only the lack of knowledge of languages can hinder them from receiving grants and scholarships. The new constellation of the 90s may prove a favorable coincidence in East European art history: political and social changes are just as transitory and incomplete as the international art scene after the 1980s. The new generation of artists making its appearance in the new historical situation has every chance to create something new in the art of the 90s. These thoughts, however, already concern the future, and it is not easy to avoid indulging in subjective and wishful thinking. It is in the forthcoming years when we will be able to evaluate today's art. The current issues of today can properly be considered only in retrospect. Till then, we look forward to see what the next five years hold for us.