



Adèle Eisenstein, Kuratorin, berichtet über den Kulturputsch der Künstlerinnen und Künstler in Budapest als Reaktion auf die anti-demokratischen Praktiken der ungarischen Kulturpolitik.

Cultural Coup: The State of the Arts in Hungary 2013

Adèle Eisenstein

I am writing this text at the last minute before going to press.

Just as I am curating a show abroad* – and waiting for the last minute in deciding the precise content of some of the new pieces and actions.

Time has taken on new dimensions in Hungary – in a number of different ways. But what I am referring to first is the phenomenon of waking up each day to a new scandal, a new horror, the constant sensation that it cannot get any worse than this – and then it does. The next day, we awake to the next shocking piece of news or new legislation, the next political appointment.

On the other hand, time seems to have retrograded in dimensions previously unseen.

After the political changes of 1989-90, as of twenty years on, Hungary seems to be harking back

Vigyázat Kulturpuccs!
Attention, Cultural Coup!
demonstration of Szabad
Művészek / Free Artists
outside the Műcsarnok/
Kunsthalle Budapest on
28 December 2012
Photos above and right:
Gabriella Csoszó

Hajnalka Tarr
Performance 10 March
Kívül Tágas / Outer Space
Photo: Sára Zagyvai



to somewhere between the 1930s and the 1950s, depending on whom you ask, with the terms „fascism“ and „centralisation“ (think Communism) being thrown around with increasing frequency.

To summarise all that has happened since Fidesz (the so-called Alliance of Young Democrats, their platform long ago metamorphosed

into something at extreme odds with such a concept), led by Viktor Orbán, won the 2010 elections with approximately 52% of the vote, thus gaining a two-thirds majority in Parliament, would require much more space than I have here. It began with a new media law and supervisory board – amounting to a refined mechanism for censorship, and covered the ratification of over 400 new laws and twelve amendments to the Constitution during their first year in power, with the drafting of a new Constitution – or „Basic Law“ – which came into effect on 1 January 2012, containing numerous articles of contention – related to the Central Bank, changes in the Constitutional Court, changes in higher education – and most recently, in March, the ratification of already the Fourth Amendment to this new „Basic Law“, which reinstalls all the articles that have been the subject of debate and negotiation with the European Parliament.

But even to summarise only the situation in the cultural sphere in the limited space here is a challenge. Just very briefly, it begins with the power hierarchy that followed from Orbán's institution of super-ministries: since Orbán took office for the second time in May 2010, there have been two Ministers of National Resources and three State Secretaries for Culture (the current State Secretary took up his post on 1 March 2013) – but there have also been direct appointments and decisions made by the Prime Minister himself, such as the appointment of Andy Vajna as Commissioner of the Hungarian Film Industry (followed by a period of nearly two years without any Hungarian film production), as well as the appointment of Orbán's friend, writer Géza Szócs, as the first State Secretary.

But to move on to where culture stands today, it begins with a particular article included in the new Basic Law, as regards the Hungarian Academy of the Arts (MMA), a civil organisation established in 1992 by architect Imre Makovecz – which incidentally is

also when the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts was founded within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) – which was suddenly elevated to the status of a public body (with a budget of HUF 2.4 billion – while the Széchenyi Academy's budget is now HUF 12 million), and to become the authority on culture.

Following the death of MMA President Imre Makovecz in 2011, applied artist and interior designer György Fekete was elected President, and he apparently took issue with the first exhibition curated by new Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle director (circumventing the open tender, and directly appointed by Géza Szócs) Gábor Gulyás, called „What is Hungarian?“ In November 2012, it was declared that the MMA would obtain proprietary



rights to the Múcsarnok (in addition to the Pesti Vigadó, already acquired and renovated specifically for the MMA), effective 1 January 2013. On 27 November 2012, Gulyás submitted his resignation as director of the Múcsarnok – except that there was no one to accept that resignation.

At this point, Szabad Művészek /Free Artists was formed – initially to protest the appropriation of the Múcsarnok by the MMA. To quote from their founding statement: „Free Artists is an open gathering of university students and teachers in the arts, artists, art historians, aestheticians, curators and civilians, who demand the restitution of the independence and freedom of Hungarian culture. [...] Free Artists demonstrates not in opposition to particular persons, nor in support of them, but rather against the detrimental processes impinging on Hungarian culture. [...] Our actions are directed toward stopping the anti-democratic

practices of Hungarian cultural politics“.

Free Artists has since participated in numerous demonstrations and organised a number of actions, mainly around the Múcsarnok. Gábor Gulyás, meanwhile, who had declared that his resignation would be effective in February 2013, then said in a radio interview in February, that so long as the MMA was not interfering, he would remain director. Shortly afterwards, the 5-year contract of Ludwig Museum director Barnabás Bencsik expired (28 February 2013), with no word of a new tender, and on 1 March 2013 he was simply informed that he was no longer authorised to sign for expenses. The museum currently has the financial director acting as interim director, and Bencsik will re-apply for his position as director.

A number of other actions, groups and initiatives have sprung up on the part of artists and cultural workers in opposition to government developments, including facebook groups, the NEMMA (No MMA) blog, the artist-action series Kívül Tágas/Outer Space organised by art historian József Mélyi and two curatorial students, with weekly actions outside the Múcsarnok, as well as the institution of umbrella group Humán Platform, bringing together those working in culture, education, social sciences and health.

The most recent demonstrations opposed the ratification of the Fourth Amendment to the Basic Law, and focused on elections one year on (EgyMilla/One Million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary). And this must be the focus, as we await the next developments around the Múcsarnok and the Ludwig Museum (and I haven't even mentioned the National Theatre, or the Trafó, or the independent theatre/performing arts sector): a true coming together of all oppositional forces and parties, to insure that Fidesz does not continue their rule from 2014-18 – but is this possible in Hungary?

References/ Further information:

<http://nemma.noblogs.org/> (with an extensive list of other links)
<http://art-leaks.org/2012/12/08/the-antidemocratic-makeover-of-the-cultural-scene-in-hungary/>
<http://www.kivultagas.hu/>
<http://humanplatform.blog.hu/>
 Gabriella Csoszó (FreeDoc): <http://freedoc-gabriellacsoszo.blogspot.com/>

For those interested in more legal detail, periodic posts by Kim Lane Scheppele on Paul Krugman's blog in the NY Times are not to be missed see: <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/08/guest-post-hungary-the-public-relations-offensive/>

* I am curating the show, Out of the Museum and into the Street – Hungarian Contemporary Art after 2010, for Pavelhaus, within the Steirische Herbst (Graz region, Austria) 28 September – 30 November 2013.



Adèle Eisenstein <adele@c3.hu> Following studies at the University of Rochester (Psychology, Film Studies), University of Paris – Sorbonne (French Literature, Art and Architectural History), Parsons School of Design (Architecture, Interior Design) and the School of Visual Arts (Photography), emigrated to Budapest in 1990, where she worked for the Balázs Béla Studio (experimental film studio) and Toldi Cinema, as well as being a curator of alternative art spaces, two of which were represented at the Ludwig Museum Budapest show entitled Budapest Box: underground scene of the 1990's (artist as curator): „Turkish“ Bath and Folyamat Galéria. Was a founding programme coordinator of C3: Center for Culture & Communication (Budapest, est. 1996), following her work for the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts – Budapest (1995-2005). General coordinator of ICAN: International Contemporary Art Network Association, the successor network to the SCCA Network, 2000-02. One of three editors of the Central European contemporary art journal: Praesens (2002-05), and on the editorial board at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (2005-07). Curated: From the Ikon to the Installation at the Benedictine Archabbey in Pannonhalma on view over 2008, and edited the accompanying catalogue; *documenta 2010 – Hungary: Liberation Formula* (together with Áron Fenyvesi) on view throughout the city of Regensburg (D); *Art-in-Fusion* on-going project (2012-13), together with Art Market Budapest, of foreign artists living and working in Hungary. Currently working as curator of a group show at Pavelhaus at the border of Austria and Slovenia, for the Steirische Herbst. Has written, translated and edited numerous books and catalogues, and hundreds of articles. Former Chair and current Board member of Amnesty International Hungary. Russian-American FinnoUgro-ophile. Photo: Béla Dóka (2010)