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## **Budapest's Alternative Scene**

**The evolution and development of the non-profit independent fine art scene in  
Budapest**

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## Abstract

The fine art scene in Budapest bears the ever present marks of history as much as the undeniable Western influence that infiltrated after the political turnabout twenty years ago. The frequent changes in cultural policies make it difficult for the scene to achieve a continuous, straight forward development. While in the early Nineties the alternative fine art scene seemed to have found a ground, today's independent art world in Budapest is in hesitant conditions. In order to fully understand the current situation, and to build a strategy to overcome the present hindering factors, it is inevitable to study the evolution of the scene in detail.

## Abstract

Die Szene der bildenden Kunst in Budapest ist von den gegenwärtigen Spuren der Geschichte geprägt, aber auch der westliche Einfluss, der nach der politischen Wende vor 20 Jahren einsetzte, ist deutlich zu spüren. Häufige Wechsel in der Kulturpolitik erschweren eine kontinuierlich fortlaufende Entwicklung. Während in den frühen Neunziger Jahren die alternative Kunstszene Fuß zu fassen schien, sind die Gegebenheiten der heutigen unabhängigen Kunstwelt Budapests eher zögerlicher Natur. Um die derzeitige Gesamtsituation zu begreifen und eine Strategie zu entwickeln, die aktuell störenden Faktoren zu beseitigen, ist es notwendig die Entwicklung der Szene detailliert zu betrachten.

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## **Budapest's Alternative Scene**

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in Budapest

The independent contemporary art scene of Budapest is exceptional and unique. It is incomparable to Western cities', as it is divergent from other art scenes in the Eastern regions. The international influence is just as much perceptible as the struggles of the past decades. It is between the past and future – a scene that has gone under continuous changes in the last twenty years, and no way is it stranded, yet it has not been able to provide all the necessary bases for it to be considered advanced and prosperous. At a first glimpse it seems exciting and strange, and only after getting to know it just a little bit does the question occur: why is it the way it is? This essay strives to find answers to this general, broad question, and to give some directions to the understanding of the alternative art scene in Budapest.

The answers – first and foremost – may be found in the historical happenings. It is inevitable to examine the Socialist era, to study the then independent, or rather counter-scene, as it is essential not to leave out of consideration the changes brought on by the political turnabout. Through analysing these it is possible to comprehend the situation of today, and to recognize that the transitional period is not over just yet, and with the constant governmental reforms, along, with the economic crisis, the desired, thriving state of the scene seems postponed.

The essay attempts to summarize the political changes that occurred in Hungary in the past sixty years, as well as it tries to give an insight to the supervised art tendencies from the late Forties till the fall of Socialism, especially focused on the artistic activities that were not supported by the state. The officially favoured artistic trends were not satisfying for many young intellectuals at the time, and so they frequently gathered in groups for exhibitions or established clubs. These initiatives, even if they were banned by the state, and were only able to unfold in secret, „underground“ circles, were the forerunners of the independent art scene.

The political shift of 1989-1990 called forth major changes in every sphere of life, such was the gained right to vote, the enabling of free speech and the complete restructuring

of the institutional system. The scheme of state subsidy was set up, and the first signs of the market as the powerhouse of the scene appeared. The first private galleries opened, while other, non-profit, alternative spaces emerged.

The activities of the Újlak Group (1989-1995) are discussed in greater length in this essay, for they are the best representation of the changing period, and became role models to all independent ventures ever since. The group's work method was put in focus, as art managers of exhibition venues and as a collaborating team of artists: their independence from institutional expectations, and their spontaneous yet professional manner in both creating and organizing. Their undertaken social role as runners of notable project spaces earned them a highly respected position in the contemporary art scene.

The last fifteen years can be characterized by slow development and low activity regarding the independent art scene. The numerous obstacles that hinder its evolution seem anything but fleeting. Few initiatives are able to survive due to the outworn system of state subsidy and the infinitesimal private funds. The essay collects examples of ventures that were successful in their approach and mentions problematic aspects of today's independent art scene.

The spine of the historical part of this thesis was based on two textbooks. The *History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*<sup>1</sup> is a schoolbook-like volume chronologically following all tendencies of Hungarian art history in the last century. A *Második Nyilvánosság*<sup>2</sup>, or *Second Public*, a compilation by Hans Knoll, offers texts on every decade starting from the 1910s till the millennium by art historians who are experts of the particular era. Comparing the information gained from these two books determined the direction of further research. Books on specific initiations, exhibitions and periods were used for detailed studies, as well as articles (from art periodicals and

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*, Corvina Books Ltd., 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *A Második Nyilvánosság*, Enciklopédia Kiadó, 2002.

online), personal interviews and online research centers and cyclopaedia, such as C<sub>3</sub><sup>3</sup>, Artpool<sup>4</sup> and Artportal<sup>5</sup>.

It is important to note that the essay does not strive to recite all bottom-up initiatives of the last sixty years in Budapest, rather tries to give a comprehensive summary on the development of the independent art scene and its elements, causes and tendencies.

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<sup>3</sup> C<sub>3</sub> <<http://www.c3.hu/>>

<sup>4</sup> Artpool <<http://www.artpool.hu/>>

<sup>5</sup> Artportal <<http://artportal.hu/>>

## Independent contemporary Hungarian art between 1945-1989

„The needle of the cultural compass would point in the direction of Moscow for some time to come.“<sup>6</sup>

### The Cultural Revolution

After the Second World War artists believed that the chance to elevate Hungarian art into the European scene has arrived. In October 1945 the European School was founded by accomplished artists with diverse interests in Cubism, Constructivism, Surrealism and abstraction. They organized almost 40 exhibitions in a matter of two years, with the hope to establish a base for progressive Hungarian arts and to have the new tendencies of the modern European art acknowledged in Hungary. Due to a shift in power, the European School's activities, like many other civil art groups', were banned.<sup>7</sup>

...in the so-called "abstraction debate" of 1946-48 the opposition (that is, left-wing and Communist critics....), at least in the beginning, employed aesthetic arguments in their war against the European School and the nonfiguratives....."form-shattering" art "influenced by murky bourgeois ideas" advocating a responsible confrontation of the past had little justification to exist in a people's democracy that was rapidly advancing toward becoming a single-party state that radiated a compulsory optimism, denied any ideological continuity with the preceding era and was oriented toward the future. From here it was only one short step to declaring the various "isms" to be reactionary, or "Weimar-period", leading to the eventual relegation of the European School and abstract artists to the margins of the art world. After the union of the two leftist parties in June 1948, events began to accelerate.<sup>8</sup>

After the war many politicians moved back to Hungary from Moscow, and in 1948 the Communist Party, with Mátyás Rákosi, took over the leadership. Their program was

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<sup>6</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.13 5.

<sup>7</sup> Artportal <[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/europai\\_iskola](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/europai_iskola)>

<sup>8</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.123.



based on the Soviet model, and soon they imposed authoritarian rule on the country. Their new policies regarding education and culture was to start a “cultural revolution“ that the party was eager to achieve through serious changes: the nationalization of education and all cultural institutions, the reformation of politics relating to sciences, abolishing of the cultural monopoly of the previous ruling classes’, controlling of all mass communication media, and the realization of a standard governance of the arts.<sup>9</sup> The newly opened cultural centers served the purpose of exhibition venues, however only those artworks were shown that conveyed the idea of the ruling party – everything else was classified as oppositional. As József Révai, Minister of Education and Culture at the time said: “...great paintings are primarily based on intellectual content and on the ideas they contain, and not on colors, compositional or technical elements.”<sup>10</sup>

In the fall of 1949, a largescale exhibition called Soviet Painting was organized at the National Salon in order to demonstrate what was expected from the artists at the time. Here the audiences were exposed to officially selected works by Soviet artists that bore the ideological message of the leading party and illustrated Socialist Realism as the only trend acceptable. The same year the Communist Party distributed a list of favored subjects to inspire artists all over the country. The list included subjects as harvest festivity, working women and men at the workbench or Rákosi chatting with young comrades. Party officials were visiting artists at their studios to provide them advice and of course to control their works.<sup>11</sup> The First National Fine Arts Exhibition was held in 1950 where paintings by Hungarian artists depicting splendid moments of the working class were shown.<sup>12</sup> Since all previous groups, private exhibition spaces and collectors were forced to end their activities, those artists who could not associate themselves with the requirements of the oppression were constrained to change professions.

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<sup>9</sup> Romsics, Ignác: Magyarország története a XX.században (The History of Hungary in the Twentieth Century), Osiris Press, Budapest, 2002. p.359-376.

<sup>10</sup> A kultúrpolitika változásai (The changes in Cultural Politics), online lecture  
<[http://www.google.hu/#hl=hu&source=hp&q=a+kult%C3%BArpolitika+v%C3%A1ltoz%C3%A1sai&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs\\_rfai=&fp=40c8455c6319ea4b](http://www.google.hu/#hl=hu&source=hp&q=a+kult%C3%BArpolitika+v%C3%A1ltoz%C3%A1sai&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=&fp=40c8455c6319ea4b)>

<sup>11</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.160.

<sup>12</sup> Anna, Margit: Bábu, online essay  
<<http://mek.oszk.hu/05500/05527/html/hatter.htm>>

Discussing the happenings and impact of the 1956 Revolution would need another full length thesis, but it is impossible to neglect its importance. While the crushing of the revolt was brutal, it inferred some changes in the art scene that very well can be attributed to the unsureness of the leadership. János Kádár leading the restored one-party government announced a different, more open approach than during the Rákosi-era. A great example is the Spring Exhibition of 1957 at the Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle) Budapest, where “four different juries, of widely divergent views, selected what turned out to be quite a broad spectrum of Hungarian visual art, ranging from naturalist to abstract.”<sup>13</sup> Such exhibitions served as affirmations that the era of exclusive Socialist Realism was over. Although the dictatorship was not about to expire, and certainly over time newer and newer attempts were made to keep the control in the hands of the ruling party, indeed a subsequent period was to begin.

### **The Kádár-era**

The period between 1957-1988 is referred to as the Kádár-era or Goulash Communism. János Kádár was one of the most conspicuous politicians of Hungarian history. During the 1956 Revolution he was a member of Imre Nagy’s Government, although on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1956 he decided to join the Soviets, and was appointed as the leader of the restored dictatorship. Between 1956-1988 he was the head of the country, and served as Chairman of the Council of Ministers twice. The Kádár-era can be divided into two parts: the period till 1963, and afterwards. The focus for the first some years was on the strengthening of the dictatorship and the retaliation after the Revolution, the second part is characterized by the pragmatic practice of Kadarism as well as the ever easing repressive quality of the dictatorship.<sup>14</sup>

After restoring the power, the party must govern all of the arts, even the not-yet socialist arts. The party- and dictatorship-opposing works, and the ones used for

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<sup>13</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.142.

<sup>14</sup> Romsics, Ignác: Magyarország története a XX.században (The History of Hungary in the Twentieth Century), Osiris Press, Budapest, 2002. p.389-402.

oppositional messages, will be repressed by administrative instruments.<sup>15</sup> – József Szigeti

The Rule of the 3-T's, that was practiced throughout the Kádár-era, can be attributed to György Aczél who directed the cultural life of Hungary at the time. The 3-T stands for the classification of artists as totally supported, tolerated or totally banned. The professional requirements remained unclarified, the rule was never carried out with consistency, censoring was personal, the value of an artwork depended on its creator's loyalty to the leadership.<sup>16</sup>

Several cultural institutions were established by the state for various purposes: the "Alap" (Art Foundation of the Hungarian People's Republic)<sup>17</sup> or the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts<sup>18</sup>. To be an Alap member meant access to Alap-owned studios, a registered workplace, rewarded work, pension and social aid. The Lectorate was one of the Alap's establishments, and among its duties were the calling for tenders, managing and distributing the state's commissions, authorizing exhibitions, and practicing censorship.<sup>19</sup>

The Studio of Young Artists Foundation was established in 1958 to "assist the new generation of artists by mitigating the difficulties of starting out, while at the same time it served to indoctrinate and 'test', during a trial period, those deemed, 'politically educatable'."<sup>20</sup> The official artists were members of the MKISZ (Artist Association of the Hungarian Fine- and Applied Arts).<sup>21</sup> The acceptance to the association required,

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<sup>15</sup> Don, Péter: "A proletárdiktatúra kultúrpolitikája nem lehet Guttman-nadrág..." Seneca-Cserépfalvi Press, 1996. p.14.

<sup>16</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.229-231.  
Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.145.  
Havasréti, József: Alternatív Regiszterek, Typotex press, Budapest, 2006. p.78.

<sup>17</sup> Magyar Népköztársaság Művészeti Alap was established to provide legal protection and financial allowance for artists, as well as to maintain collective studios and workshops.  
<[http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magyar\\_N%C3%A9pk%C3%B6zt%C3%A1rsas%C3%A1lg\\_M%C5%B1v%C3%A9szeti\\_Alapja](http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magyar_N%C3%A9pk%C3%B6zt%C3%A1rsas%C3%A1lg_M%C5%B1v%C3%A9szeti_Alapja)>

<sup>18</sup> Képző- és Iparművészeti Lektorátus  
<<http://www.lektoratus.hu/>>, <[http://artportal.hu/intezmenyek/kepzo\\_es\\_iparmuveszeti\\_lektoratus](http://artportal.hu/intezmenyek/kepzo_es_iparmuveszeti_lektoratus)>

<sup>19</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.230.

<sup>20</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.142.

<sup>21</sup> Magyar Képzőművészek és Iparművészek Szövetsége  
<<http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKISZ>>

among other, a diploma from one of the two universities of fine- and applied arts.<sup>22</sup> Although becoming an accepted author did not prescribe formal training, the self-educated artists were either ignored, or, only after a long and humiliating process could they gain admission to the official professional organizations, such as the Studio or the Alap. For actors it was no different, as János Szikora notes: “It was a continuous conflict between those, who already had had experience with these types (alternative / amateur) of theatres or actions, and those who had never dealt with such. For them the training meant the academy.”<sup>23</sup> The idea of unemployment did not exist at the time, and so many artists, especially the avant-gardians, who were not members of the insitutional structure, were considered idlers.<sup>24</sup>

The appointed venues for exhibitions supported by the state were the Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle), the Ernst Museum, the Dorottya Gallery, the Fényes Adolf Hall and the Helikon Gallery. All non-official shows and the tolerated artists were extruded to the peripheries: to youth centers, cultural centers, private apartments. According to an approved permission, the tolerated artists were allowed to self-organize exhibitions, financed by themselves, but only if those were not accompanied by propaganda and did not last longer than one day.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fact that the cultural politics of the Kádár-era was relatively tolerant, compared to the 1950s, many civil initiations were rejected and numerous exhibitions were ordered to close. Artworks were pulled out of shows, even destroyed. Artists were reported, threatened and banned from public showings. The main rule regarding the conflict solving attitude of Kadarism was not to get into conflict, therefore most times these reports, threats by officials were kept in secret. However, this gave way to manipulation, bypassing of regulations, and through personal connections, gestures it was possible not to get charged.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.230.

<sup>23</sup> Törvénytelen avantgárd, Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970-1973, Interview with János Szikora, from 1998, Artpool-Balassi press, Budapest, 2003. p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.14-15.

<sup>25</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.231.

<sup>26</sup> Havasréti, József: Alternatív Regiszterek, Typotex press, Budapest, 2006. p.87.

To get a better understanding, although retrospective, on how things worked at the time, author Péter Don interviewed Tibor Ormos, the then-director of the Lectorate. When asked what the requirements were for an artwork to be accepted, Ormos answered the following: “The funny thing is, that I would not be able to tell you, nobody would be.” To the question why Lajos Kassák was favored while Tihamér Gyarmathy was not, although both of them painted geometrical abstracts, and whether the decision was made according to the mood of György Aczél, the answer was the following: “Yes, that too, and what kind of a personal relationship he had with the artist.”<sup>27</sup>

It is really hard to find political meaning on geometrical shapes. In reality the problem was not with the shapes, but that they represented a certain mentality, the artistic freedom, and this conveyed political meaning. Some people did not undertake the loyalty that was expected from the arts... this was enough for a hostile reception.<sup>28</sup> – Imre Bak, painter

György Szemadám, also in an interview with Péter Don, notes: “Now recollecting the 1960s and 1970s, it may seem that the trends and alignment called avant-garde art movements of the time were consciously launched with oppositional intentions. But that was not the case, it was not true in my art or in most of my colleagues. (...) A person became a maverick while wanting to become an artist.”<sup>29</sup>

Next to the official publicity, that was controlled and selective, lived an illegal, uncensored publicity. The authors and publishers of samizdat publications, and the various types of autonomous cultural groups, such as the avant-garde subculture, all belonged to the second publicity. The official sphere rejected certain trends and discussion topics, that these, illegal channels and activities tackled.<sup>30</sup> Although it was strictly forbidden for artists to form groups, associations or circles on their own, a number of ventures evolved. The Zugló Circle was a groups of young artists who gathered on a regular basis to educate themselves about diverse aspects of art theory

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<sup>27</sup> Don, Péter: “A proletárdiktatúra kultúrpolitikája nem lehet Guttman-nadrág...”, Seneca-Cserépfalvi Press, 1996. p.31-35.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.41-42.

<sup>30</sup> Havasréti, József: Alternatív Regiszterek, Typotex press, Budapest, 2006. p.82

with a strong emphasis on the Hungarian and international avant-garde. They collected literature and articles on the subject and tried to get in contact with the now banned artists of the European School. The group never exhibited together, although many of its members participated in a show called Új Törekvések (New Endeavors) at the KISZ (Association of the Hungarian Communist Youth) Club of the Ferihegy Airport in 1966. The exhibition was immediately closed down by the Lectorate.<sup>31</sup>

The annual show in 1966 of the Studio of Young Artists at the Ernst Museum was different from all previous exhibitions, since it was only the Studio's internal jury who had a saying in what was to be shown. This was the first time the audiences were exposed to such a variety of genres and existing Hungarian contemporary art tendencies. The achieved independence from the censorship of the Lectorate was temporary, the following year the management of the Studio was replaced, and the 1967 show was juried by an external board.<sup>32</sup>

The group of neo avant-garde artists that appeared in the late 1960s is now called the Iparterv generation, referring to the 1968 Iparterv exhibition that took place at a construction company's downtown headquarter in Budapest. Péter Sinkovits, a young art historian invited eleven artists, and organized the show similar in concept to the Documenta 4 in Kassel.



View of display, Iparterv exhibition, 1968



The Iparterv artists, 1968

The exhibition was not in any way conventional as all the progressive trends of the time made an appearance. In the spring of 1969 Sinkovits organized two-week shows for neo avant-garde artists, as a preparation for the the second Iparterv exhibition which

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<sup>31</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.162.  
<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/zugloi\\_kor](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/zugloi_kor)>

<sup>32</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.190-192.

opened in October 1969. Among the exhibiting artists at either of the shows were Imre Bak, András Baranyay, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, Ilona Keserü, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, János Major, Sándor Molnár, István Nádler, Krisztián Frey, Ludmil Siskov, Tamás Szentjóby and Endre Tót.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed these artists have brought earthquake-like changes, dilating the barriers of notions on painting or sculpture. They restored the power of colors and their clear meaning, and painted them with courageously simple geometrical forms (Imre Bak, István Nádler), as opposed to a flat surface, they considered painting a statuesque, plastic composition (Ilona Keserü), depicting figure and the motifs in its surrounding with laconic contour as flat shapes (Endre Tót), and others tried to find new sentiments through bold excisions and repetitions of motifs (András Baranyay, László Lakner).<sup>34</sup>

The exhibitions and the illegally published catalogue called *Dokumentum 1969-70* were a clear, definite strategy in “facing both the realistic, decorative school of the official art and the lyrical expressionism that was considered the continuation of the traditions of the European School.”<sup>35</sup> Both of the *Iparterv* exhibitions were ordered to close by the Lectorate, the publisher of the catalogue was banished to the countryside, and Gyula Konkoly, the author of the text was sentenced to three years in prison (although the artist at the time was living abroad). In the next years, half of the *Iparterv* artists emigrated from Hungary.<sup>36</sup>

In the beginning of 1969 – Gyula Konkoly who emigrated to Paris in 1970 recalls the era – I made a gigantic paintbrush and a tiny one, a giant telephone and in summer (...) I discovered “art conceptuel”. And so did Szentjóby. We were on

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<sup>33</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.196-199.  
Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.166-169.  
<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/iparterv](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/iparterv)>

<sup>34</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.197.

<sup>35</sup> Groupe Iparterv – Le Progrès de L’illusion, La troisième génération de l’avant-garde hongroise, 1968-1969, Institut hongrois de Paris, Paris, 2010. p.14.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.15.

universal time and the same conclusions of the same reasons appeared at the same time. Nothing like that has happened in the capital city for a long, long time!<sup>37</sup>

The dynamics of the neo avant-garde movement was based on such goals as being more up-to-date, catching up to the international scene, or preceding it, resisting the surroundings, and simply experiencing the event and gesture.<sup>38</sup> The Szürenon group, established by Attila Csáji, had a similar approach in wanting to depict the “here and now” through Surrealism and nonfigurative art, the rejection of Surrealism and the surpassing of both (hence the name, that comes from sur at non).<sup>39</sup>

The R-Exhibition<sup>40</sup> of 1970 at the ‘R’ building of the Technical University was the first public fusion of the previously independent trends – so to say the first public appearance of the united front of progressive artists. The then existing trends were all represented by all significant artists of the new avant-garde movement.<sup>41</sup>

The two biggest groups of today’s young artists participated here together: the Iparterv (...) and the Szürenon. This exhibition is important, because it portrays a whole generation.<sup>42</sup> - Endre T. Rózsa, art historian and critic

The paradox regarding the R-Exhibition is that despite the order by the Lectorate to close the show, not only was it opened by the deputy-director of the Hungarian

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>38</sup> Havasréti, József: Alternatív Regiszterek, Typotex press, Budapest, 2006. p.101.

<sup>39</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.175-177.  
<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/szurenon](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/szurenon)>

<sup>40</sup> The participating artists at the R-Exhibition: Gábor Attalai, Imre Bak, András Baranyay, Attila Csáji, Tibor Csiky, Sándor Csutoros, Péter Donáth, Miklós Erdély, György Galántai, István Haraszty, László Haris, Tamás Hencze, István Illyés, György Jovánovics, László Lakner, Ferenc Lantos, János Major, László Méhes, Sándor Molnár, József Molnár V., István Nádler, Gyula Pauer, Oszkár Papp, Tamás Szentjóby, Nóra Temesi, Endre Tót, Péter Türk and Dezső Korniss, a representative of the elderly generation of avant-garde.

<sup>41</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.178.  
<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/r\\_kiallitas](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/r_kiallitas)>

<sup>42</sup> Törvénytelen avantgárd, Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970-1973, Artpool-Balassi press, Budapest, 2003. p.24.



National Gallery, but was also visited by György Aczél and Tibor Ormos, the director of the Lectorate. The exhibition stayed open for three days.<sup>43</sup>

In 1968 artist György Galántai rented a chapel in Balatonboglár to use it as a studio, though by the summer of 1970 the space functioned as a gathering site and exhibition venue for artists, who otherwise had no possibility to show. The first year the majority of the exhibited works was selected from the officially tolerated trends, such as abstract expressionism. In the August 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the county's daily newspaper the chief editor gave way to his unconcealed speculations regarding the activities at the chapel: "It is not the official and recognized involvement of cultural politics what I am missing – albeit it concerns events by a large crowd - ... the conception of this initiative, the unspoken but perceptible plot is what I dispute."<sup>44</sup> The following summer the new invited artists (such as Tamás Szentjóby, Miklós Erdély, László Beke and Gyula Pauer) brought upon a rather radical, experimental direction with happenings<sup>45</sup>, actions and performances, as well as projects formulating institutional critique and political stance. In the next years Czech and Slovak progressive artists participated – without permission – in the Balatonboglár activities along the Hungarian representatives of underground trends.

The invitation for the 1972 program series called Direkt hét (Direct week) stated that the idea was to create direct connection with the audience and less focus was on static works. This was to achieve through the physical presence of the artists and using new mediums. Furthermore the realization of a formerly banned avant-garde festival was also included in the program. This was when Tamás Szentjóby presented his Punishment-preventive Auto-therapy expulsion exercise: in the exhibition space he was sitting on a chair with a bucket



Tamás Szentjóby: Punishment-preventive Auto-therapy at Balatonboglár

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>44</sup> Balatonboglári Kápolnatárlatok – 1970 (Exhibitions at the chapel in Balatonboglár – 1970). <<http://www.artpool.hu/boglar/1970/kronologia70.html>>

<sup>45</sup> The first Hungarian happening was organized in 1966 by Gábor Altorjay and Tamás Szentjóby. The genre was immediately banned after its first appearance. <[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/fogalmi\\_szocikkek/happening](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/fogalmi_szocikkek/happening)>

on his head for one whole week, 8 hours a day, “punishing” himself, providing the possibility for the audience to ask questions from him.<sup>46</sup>

Both local and national newspapers claimed the chapel-artists attitude to be oppositional and illegal. Galántai tried to seek justice based on the permission for self-organized studio exhibitions, but the request was denied. After a long process of appeals and verdicts some Balatonboglár artists were arrested, and other official restraints were carried out. In 1974 the chapel was placed under the state’s control, and the activities were dismissed.<sup>47</sup> György Galántai left the location holding a board, that had been used as an implement for an underground theatre action, with “Friendly treatment” written on it.<sup>48</sup>

Even today art historians and critics do not seem to agree on one question: on the quality of the artworks that had been presented in Balatonboglár. Some say that the chapel was one of the most important venues for the post-war arts in Hungary, while others claim that the Galántai-organized exhibitions were not so significant in arthistorical aspects.<sup>49</sup>

After the shutdown of the Balatonboglár chapel, the avant-garde artists found home at the Budapest Young Artists’ Club. The institution was established in 1960, and for decades it was a gathering space for all officially tolerated and banned artistic phenomena and intellectual utterance. The Club “represented a movement that first appeared at Balatonboglár in the context of a broadly interpreted ‘united avant-garde front’: an alternative sphere that evolved from a politicizing conceptual art, the genres of action, object, environment, and the subcultures of those interested in Fluxus and

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<sup>46</sup> online article by Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László  
<<http://www.korunk.org/?q=node/8&ev=2009&honap=9&cikk=10978>>

<sup>47</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.178-180.

<sup>48</sup> online article by Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László  
<<http://www.korunk.org/?q=node/8&ev=2009&honap=9&cikk=10978>>

<sup>49</sup> Törvénytelen avantgárd, Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnamütermé 1970-1973, Artpool-Balassi press, Budapest, 2003.

mail art”.<sup>50</sup> Among others, Péter Halász, who later emigrated to New York where he founded the famous Squat Theatre, performed frequently at the Club.<sup>51</sup>

Another downtown venue where similar-minded artists met was the Café Rózsa. The Café was right across the street from the University of Fine Arts where the young artists discussed their conceptual work plans, ideas that were rejected at school. Actions and happenings took place at the Café in 1976, although most artists collaborated on other projects throughout the decade. The Rózsa artists are now considered the forerunners of the 1980’s new painting, postmodern and trans avant-garde movements.<sup>52</sup>

We had long discussions before every exhibition and event. We used association to work on our plans (someone had an idea, the others tried associating something on it, to develop the idea). (...) We were deliberating long to specify the titles and texts, we negotiated every single artworks, and analyzed their correspondence and relationship. (...) The various artists’ works were very different, as well as the interpretations of conceptual art. It was important to discuss all works’ plans and references in detail. All artist prepared his/her own performance or video, photo individually, in connection to the concept of the specific event.<sup>53</sup> – Orsolya Drozdik on the Rózsa Circle

The Vajda Lajos Studio is among the most significant self-taught alternative art groups of the 1970’s and 1980’s. The mentality of the two founding artists’, László fe Lugossy and István ef Zábó, determined the attitude of the Studio: a unique mixture of anarchism, sci-fi, surrealism, dadaism and hippie. The group exhibitions of the

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<sup>50</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.205.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.205-206.

<[http://artportal.hu/intezmenyek/fiatal\\_muveszek\\_klubja\\_fmkk](http://artportal.hu/intezmenyek/fiatal_muveszek_klubja_fmkk)>

<sup>52</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.207-208.  
A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.244-245.

<sup>53</sup> Drozdik, Orsolya: Individuális Mitológia, Konceptuálistól a posztmodernig, Gondolat Press, Budapest, 2006. p.49-51.

Studio were based on the ideas of rejecting conventionalism, and praising nonconformism and the art of living.<sup>54</sup>

Toward the end of the Seventies artists Miklós Erdély, Dóra Mauer and György Galántai started organizing creativity exercises where they encouraged the younger artists to use visual artistic expression as thought experiments. Erdély established the InDiGó Group (the name is an abbreviation for interdisciplinary thought) in 1978, whose environments questioned the notion of contemporary arts. The InDiGó artists worked together until Erdély's death in 1986, and are considered as the prefiguration of later groups such as the Újlak Csoport.<sup>55</sup> Inconnu, another group of artists, formed in the late 1970's, organized actions, happenings, performances, following the traditions of the Viennese action art and Hungarian avant-garde. Art was their tool to express their oppositional views, for which they were often persecuted by officials.<sup>56</sup> As artist György Szemadám remembers: "...there was a group, that very consciously provoked the cultural police, this was the INCONNU-group. I did an interview with them in the early 1980's, where Tamás Molnár word for word said, that their audience is the cultural police. Once this police is eliminated, they will no longer be artists. Tamás Molnár and Péter Bokros have not been artists since the political change."<sup>57</sup> In their manifesto the artist group Hejettes Szomlyazók stated their authority-opposing, anti-institutional, spontaneous, erratic art attitude. Their actions, public events and installations from found objects and recycled junk all conveyed a certain staggering behaviour.<sup>58</sup> The Xertox group invented a new genre called active meditation, where

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<sup>54</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.189.

<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/vajda\\_lajos\\_studio](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/vajda_lajos_studio)>

<sup>55</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.208.

A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.244

<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/indigo\\_csopot](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/indigo_csopot)>

<sup>56</sup> <[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/inconnu\\_csopot](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/inconnu_csopot)>

<sup>57</sup> Don, Péter: "A proletárdiktatúra kultúrpolitikája nem lehet Guttman-nadrág...", Seneca-Cserépfalvi Press, 1996. p.45.

<sup>58</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.230.

<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/hejettes\\_szomlyazok](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/hejettes_szomlyazok)>

the action is performed in meditative state, uniting the elements of Western avant-garde and Eastern mysticism.<sup>59</sup>

After the 1975 Helsinki Final Act the Hungarian official sphere was compelled to practice tolerance, which showed in the art field as well. In order to avoid international scandal, various artistic trends became gradually accepted, and exhibitions welcomed works that had been previously rejected. The ever greater tolerance was the first sign of the political decay.<sup>60</sup> By the end of the Seventies it was clear that an era was about to lapse. The 1980s brought upon significant changes: international networks were being built up, getting public exposure inside the country required less effort, and independent initiations were easier to carry through.<sup>61</sup> “The dethronement of the avant-garde happened in the Eighties”<sup>62</sup>, which gave place to New Sensibility, a collective term of introverted works with endeavoring sensuality, resigning the modernity, expansion and conceptualism of avant-garde.<sup>63</sup> While the previous generations’ oppositional attitude for free artistic expression had, no doubt, the character of community forming, many young artists of the Eighties “found resort in subjectivity from the disorder, that was brought forth by the vanishing of earlier values, their unclarified role and the cynical cultural-artistic surrounding.”<sup>64</sup> The New Sensibility was less radical and less unified, but was similar to former approaches in expressing a certain need for freedom: this time it was the freedom of the individual.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.237.

<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/xertox\\_csoport](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/xertox_csoport)>

<sup>60</sup> Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003, p.20.

<sup>61</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.271.

<sup>62</sup> Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003, p.10.

<sup>63</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.218.

<[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/uj\\_szenzibilitas](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/uj_szenzibilitas)>

<sup>64</sup> Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003. p.12.

<sup>65</sup> Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003. p.15.

The New Sensibility was an accurate and sensitive reaction to the new, suspected, not yet evolved possibilities, to the international-turning art market, and to the appearing presense of an audience with partly new, partly renewed expectations.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.15

## After the change

### Transformation

Free speech, the freedom of the intellectual life, abolishing the state's cultural and financial monopoly, warranting social monitoring on actions by the state, the emancipation of all institutional-, community- and private cultural initiations, and ensuring all requirements for a Hungarian intellectual unity were all among the dreams of the late 1980s.<sup>67</sup> The changes that occurred in the political system around 1989 in Eastern Europe were to grant the realisation of these aims. The political change was a shift from being under the block with one-party dictatorship to multi-party democracies. It was a shift to capitalism based on private ownership.

In May of 1988 János Kádár was replaced with Károly Grósz as the leader of the Communist party. Their 'democracy deal' was launched during the summer with enactments and allowances on economic companies and associations. According to these laws private and civil organizations were free to come into existence, which served as the basis for later privatizations and led to a major change in the role of cultural institutions. Free speech was also granted, and the ban on censorship was stated in the law. Information of public interest and utility was ordered to be announced by all state establishments.<sup>68</sup>

On October 23rd, 1989 the Republic of Hungary was acclaimed and the 1949 constitution was replaced by new laws, such as the right to vote. The first round of the parliamentary elections was in March 1990. The main emphasis in the programs of the campaigning political organizations were on the political system, the economic restructuring and the question of ownership. Cultural matters, such as the status of national institutions, the demand for regional cultural improvements, were not among the most stressing issues, although references to these subjects were indicated in several parties' plans. The total freedom of cultural development and art, the remodelling of the institutional sphere and financial aid system, supporting civil

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<sup>67</sup> Kováts, Flórián: *A mi rendszerünk*, Széphalom Kvműhely, Budapest 2006. p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11-17.

ventures, and the importance of teaching foreign languages were among the most significant issues mentioned.<sup>69</sup>

On May 23rd, József Antall, the head of MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), became Prime Minister and the first coalition government was formed along with the FKGP (Independent Party of Small-holders) and the KDNP (Christian Democrat People's Party). New leaders were appointed at the most important divisions. The Ministry of Public Education was in charge of all cultural decision-making. Directors of national institutions were chosen by calling for tenders, which ensured stable professional management.

Several foundations under the Ministry were established, such as the Hungarian Book Foundation, the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation, or the Hungarian Culture Foundation. These organizations have shown steady existence, and most of them are still functioning today. Many artists, authors and filmmakers decided to found smaller initiatives on their own, even if they were members of such organizations as the National Association of Hungarian Artists, the Association of Hungarian Publishers and Distributors – which were effective in enforcing mutual interests. With the new Hungarian Academy of Art and the Széchenyi Literature and Art Academy at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the frequently criticized Scientific Qualifying Committee was abolished. In 1993 the NKA (National Cultural Fund) was established as a financial resource, next to the granted support for cultural provisions on state and local levels. NKA invited tenders according to which initiations were able to receive sufficient financial aid. NKA still functions today.<sup>70</sup>

The institutional changes, new organizations, associations and foundations all affected the art world, which, for the first time in a long while, was not considered as counterscene. It was not the ideological dependence, but the re-modelled system of financial support opportunities that controlled planned projects. Artists and institutions now had to seek alternative ways to fund their events. State support was not sufficient for a whole project, and the structure of various grants and private sponsorships was still evolving.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 18-24.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 25-35.

<sup>71</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.309.



At the University of Fine Arts a new principal was appointed and the Intermedia Department was established. Several artists who had previously been considered banned and oppositional now received teaching positions. At the Pécs University a new visual art program was launched. In 1989 the Ludwig Museum opened, and since 1992 its permanent exhibition of Hungarian and global art has been on show, as well as temporary exhibitions. In 1996 the Museum took on the name and function of the Museum of Contemporary Arts. The Institute of Contemporary Art in Dunaújváros was established in 1997. The Budapest Art Expo Foundation from 1991 on had aimed at awakening the art trade by annual fairs featuring Hungarian and Eastern-Central European contemporary art. The periodicals *Újművészet* (New Art) and *Balkon* were both launched in the early 1990s. A number of private galleries opened at the time (such as the Várfok Gallery, Deák Erika Gallery, Knoll Gallery or the Gallery 56), with the intention to sell the exhibited works. There are no exact data that would show how successful these galleries were, although it is the time, without doubt, when the market conditions and a new circle of collectors were still evolving. The oversupply of art for sale caused many commercial places to close. The non-profit galleries (such as the Studio Gallery, Bartók 32 Gallery, Liget Gallery, U.F.F. Gallery) belonged to local governments or associations, and their activities were funded by cultural foundations. Besides a few exceptions, these organizations were not able to afford honorary fees, and so the artists had to take on day jobs (like graphic design, teaching or manual labor). The private galleries along with the non-profit venues offered space for most artists, while the big institutions preferred inviting already acknowledged artists.<sup>72</sup>

Art management and cultural studies were not taught at any educational institution at the time (the first two university level programs of curatorial studies were launched only in 2009), and given the recent history of the country, artists were not used to the role of businessmen to handle their own careers in the new market-based scene. They soon had to adopt different skills in order to be able to face the limited capacity of both galleries and collectors. The need for applying for grants generated a new, 'project-minded' attitude and thinking.<sup>73</sup>

The first alternative art institution was founded by György Galántai, the artist responsible for the Balatonboglár happenings, already in 1979, although its first public

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.308-319.

Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.249-250.

<sup>73</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.316-319.

introduction was only in 1992 during a week-long open house event. The Artpool Archive has collected documentation, organized exhibitions and art related events.

In the last 30 years, between 1979 and 2009 – Artpool, which started out as an art project, in dictatorship then democracy, illegally then legally, totally banned, tolerated then totally supported, organized, documented and archived, collected, processed and preserved several alternative, underground, subcultural art events, and has made them accessible in its library, archives and on the internet.<sup>74</sup> – Galántai, 2009

The Soros Foundation Fine Arts Documentation Center functioned as a resource center also, offering information on twentieth century Hungarian artists. In 1991, the Center expanded its activities under the name Soros Centrum for Contemporary Art, and in addition to the preparation of comprehensive documentations, organized exhibitions and various art projects, managed a grant-program for contemporary Hungarian artists and art institutions in order to support the organization of contemporary art exhibitions and the printing of catalogues. From 1996, with the foundation of C3: Center for Culture and Communication, the SCCA activities have been incorporated in the programs of C3. The frequently updated artists' portfolios and the audiovisual database have been made accessible through Exindex, an on-line arts magazine launched by C3.<sup>75</sup>

Along the political and institutional transformation the artistic approaches seemed to be changing, as experimenting with installations, intermedial art, video and computer art gained growing popularity.<sup>76</sup> Artists collaborating and forming groups was a characteristic of the Nineties, where diverse styles and ideologies were expressed through common, often site-specific works.

The activities of these groups were largely dependent on alternative or occasional exhibition sites that allowed room for the realization of large-scale, ephemeral installations. (...) by the mid-Nineties it had become apparent that the initially

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<sup>74</sup> Artpool website, a quotation regarding their 30-year anniversary exhibition and happenings.  
<[http://www.artpool.hu/2009/090325\\_1.html](http://www.artpool.hu/2009/090325_1.html)>

<sup>75</sup> <<http://www.c3.hu/scca/>>  
<<http://www.c3.hu/c3/c3bemutatasa-hu.html>>

<sup>76</sup> A Második Nyilvánosság, Enciklopédia Press, Budapest, 2002. p.328.

successful strategies were not always suitable for the realization of individual intentions and ambitions, and so most of the groups have disbanded.<sup>77</sup>

The Újlak Group (1989-1995) is a prominent example of independent ventures from the early Nineties, as they took the initiative and established their own exhibition space, the Tűzoltó utca 72 (72 Tűzoltó street), which, by the mid decade, became the most significant alternative venue in Budapest.

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<sup>77</sup> Magyar képzőművészet a 20.században (The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century), Corvina press, Budapest, 1999. p.255-256.

## The Újlak Group

The Group's name, which roughly translates into "New Dwelling", is in itself a poetic act suggesting that it rejects all weakness; it does not want the support that a program would provide. It does not define itself, instead it is, to speak right from the outset in philosophic terms, self-proposing. The name is utopian because it cannot be associated with a manifesto, does not contain an attainable goal which would mean becoming grounded at the launching point. The group does not expect to get any help from anyone but itself and expresses that in its name as a kind of significance-generator. There is no exertion of effort, yet the name does not reveal anything. It is empty which means it can attach to anything, anything can generate meaning in a space of this kind (and it need not be stressed that that's something rare). This is extremely important, because supplying content to a name is what the group's activity is about, or rather, that is its check-back. Those who question the existence of the group most of all are the group members themselves, and this is a side product of their ongoing self-definition.<sup>78</sup>

The above quotation by artist János Sugár aptly reflects the attitude and approach of the Újlak Group: they were independent from institutional expectations, they were spontaneous, and the process of the formation's maturation was what granted their acknowledged position in the contemporary scene. The seven members of the group, Kálmán Ádám, Zoltán Ádám, Gábor Farkas, Tamás Komoróczy, András Ravasz, Péter Szarka and István Szili first collaborated in the frames of two self-initiated happenings in 1989, after which they opened their own project-space that welcomed other Hungarian and foreign artists as well. Both as artists and art-managers the Újlak Group's purpose was to convey "the narrow zone between the underground and the elite culture, where it is possible to experience not only a certain existential, but also a spiritual independence."<sup>79</sup> At the beginning of their collaboration mutual works were dominant, where the artists harmonized all their individual and differing ideas to a versatile unity. Later the artists' personal works received more attention, although still

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<sup>78</sup> Sugár, János: Az Újlak Csoport mint munkamódszer (The Újlak Group as a Working Method), Újlak Catalogue, Modern Művészetért Alapítvány, Pantaleon Kulturális Egyesület, 1991.

<sup>79</sup> Tardos, Károly: Az Újlak csoport és a Tűzoltó utcai kiállítóter – Független művészeti csoport nonprofit kiállítási térrel a kilencvenes évek fordulójáról (The Újlak Group and the Tűzoltó street exhibition space – Independent art group with a nonprofit exhibition space from the turn of the Nineties), Új Művészet, 1995/4. p.16-19.

as important components of a group effort. “The Újlak members were drawn to empty, transformable spaces, their exhibitions’ conceptual approach was frequently matched with arte povera materials.”<sup>80</sup> The group was seeking to find new ways in visualizing, and their works dealt with the limitations of art. Their installations and environments often were complemented with performances and experimental music.<sup>81</sup>

Unfortunately, to this date there is no detailed study on the group’s activities, only few articles that deal with certain exhibitions. The majority of the information collected for this chapter was through personal interviews with Újlak members.

The first time the later Újlak members worked together was a spontaneous decision: as András Ravasz<sup>82</sup> and Péter Szarka<sup>83</sup> explained, István Szili, who was sharing an apartment with photographer Gábor Farkas, had the idea to organize a one-night happening with other young artists. Farkas was working at the time on a shoot at the building of the former Hungaria Bath downtown Budapest. The enormous empty space seemed like a perfect venue for such an event. Farkas asked Ravasz, with whom he was taking a drawing class, to participate. Szarka was Ravasz’s friend, and Tamás Komoróczy was Szarka’s friend. They both joined the team. The five of them discussed inviting a slightly older, more experienced and recognized artist, Zoltán Ádám, who also brought along his musician brother Kálmán Ádám.

At the event, which took place on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1989, the artists presented their individual works or performances after one another according to a loose script. Based on the article on the happening by artist János Kósa in the *Új Művészet* art periodical<sup>84</sup>, the night started with András Ravasz’s performance-installation, where he burnt different signs on a sheet-iron with a torch. It was followed by István Szili’s action conveying political messages. Standing on a platform, Szili kept turning his jacket inside-out, switching its red and black sides. Gábor Farkas mounted a large piece of photo paper in one corner, and by exposing it to dim red light, a landscape was appearing then

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<sup>80</sup> <[http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti\\_iranyzatok/ujlak\\_csoport](http://artportal.hu/lexikon/muveszeti_iranyzatok/ujlak_csoport)>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.

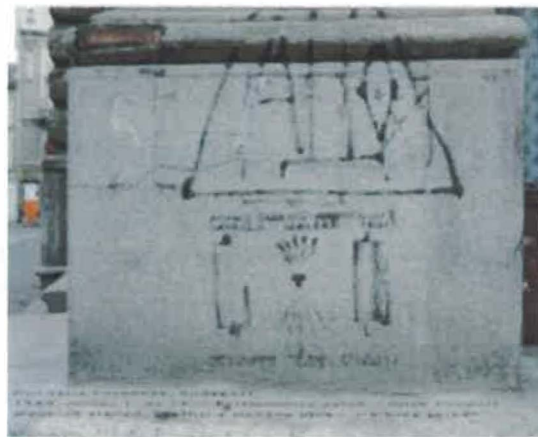
<sup>84</sup> Kósa, János: Újlak Story, *Új Művészet*, 1991/4, p.50-52.

fading away again. Péter Szarka's projected layered composition was displayed as well as other works by the young artists. Tamás Komoróczy's trance performance closed the row of presentation. During the whole night of the happening Kálmán Ádám's VAN band was playing experimental music, "practically representing the same type of intellectuality through music, as the others through fine art."<sup>85</sup>

Despite the fact that the artists did not have money to print flyers, and only sprayed a couple of invitations in the streets of downtown Budapest, the turnout was unexpected. The co-operation between the artists was meant only as a one-time affair, following the first event's success, the group soon joined up again for another night at the Hungaria Bath. The second happening on June 15<sup>th</sup> was just as popular as the first, and so the participating artists were considering a continuous collaboration.



Hungaria Bath



Graffiti invitation by the Újlak Group

By October 1989 the group found a new home for their activities at an abandoned movie theatre in the 3.district on the Buda side. According to Péter Szarka<sup>86</sup>, it was again István Szili and Gábor Farkas who had the vision and worked hard for months to find a permanent project space where they could organize happenings and exhibitions similar to the events at the Hungaria Bath. The building had not been used for years, and after the group's unanswered petition to both the cinema committee and the local council, they squat the space. „They found the house in completely neglected

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.

condition, even the power had to be re-wired from the neighbouring building.”<sup>87</sup> The raunchy surface and the slanting floor seemed more attractive to the young artists than the white walls of institutions, as the group’s mutual drive was the desire of independence.<sup>88</sup>

This space is not built-in, it is not sick, rather ruined but clean – the ruins call forth the cleanliness. Here we are given the possibility, or task, to tackle a large room, to plan something specifically for this site, and to realize it pretty much from one week to the next. It is clear that all of us deal with this space more naturally. At all of the exhibitions we seek to provide a separate, unified experience, through paintings, objects, installations, lights and music. So this cinema means the unexploited areas of art, perhaps the beginning of a new story.<sup>89</sup> – Zoltán Ádám

Upon arrival at the first event at the cinema, on October 10th, 1989, the guests saw nothing, but thin paper strung onto iron scaffolds. Symbolizing the opening of the night and the first of a series of happenings at the new venue, András Ravasz tore through the paper to enter the space. Inside the artists had arranged their individual installations, carefully planning the display, considering the works’ relations to one another. The most spectacular works were Gábor Farkas’ melting ice-blocks representing the metamorphosis of the then-current political state, and Tamás Komoróczy’s carpet-environment in which the artist also gave a performance. Again, just as at the Hungaria Bath events, the turnout was great.<sup>90</sup>

In the following months one-night exhibitions accompanied by performances and music were on view every two-three weeks. Although these showings always featured one artist at a time, „they were all results of group effort”.<sup>91</sup> Suzanne Mészöly, Attila Szűcs, Miklós Pálos and Péter Kis also joined the row of exhibitors, and for a short

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<sup>87</sup> Kósa, János: Újlak Story, Új Művészet, 1991/4, p.50-52.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>89</sup> Szíjj, Ferenc: Ez lett a moziból – Az Újlak Csoport (This is what happened to the cinema – The Újlak Group), Nappali Ház, 1990/2, p.94-95.

<sup>90</sup> Kósa, János: Újlak Story, Új Művészet, 1991/4, p.50-52.  
Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.

<sup>91</sup> Kósa, János: Újlak Story, Új Művészet, 1991/4, p.50-52.

time worked together with the seven Hungaria Bath-artists. They were, for those months, considered members of the evolving group, and their leaving was explained due to personal preference to work alone.<sup>92</sup> The preparation for exhibitions required mutual agreement in forming the concept as well as in working out the display. The process of realizing the vision was in focus as opposed to the finished product, and so it happened many times that right before the opening the artists decided to re-work the whole structure, showing – what it seemed – half-ready installations, which they continued to work on after the public event. There was no common mission-statement or defined goal the artists wanted to achieve together, as they still had not considered themselves as an official group. Their mutual interest in working independently from institutions like the Studio<sup>93</sup>, in the process of perfecting and carrying out an idea and their spontaneity was what brought and kept them together. They were defined as a group by their audience, who referred to the artists as the Újlak team – using the name of the area and cinema where the events took place.<sup>94</sup>



Újlak cinema

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>93</sup> Fiatal Képzőművészek Stúdiója – Studio of Young Artists Association

<sup>94</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.  
Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.  
Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.



During the months of working together, the group evolved from a self-teaching configuration to a professional team. Their activities became more and more conscious and aware. By the time they had to leave the cinema building, because it was destroyed as part of a city-planning project in the Summer of 1990, the need for self-definition and discussions regarding their role and position as an artist-group developed. Their disputes and constant strive to challenge each other were what granted the group the craft to be one step ahead of the city's mainstream tendencies.<sup>95</sup> The Újlak Group is often referred to as the pioneers who acclimatized installation art in Hungary.

In reviving the sweeping wave of installation, the Újlak Group, a young artist-team, played an extremely important role. They specifically turned to installation due to their anti-academic, anti-genre and -style intention, where they considered traditional as conservative. This group can be referred to as one of the most important initiators of the Hungarian installation art: they worked on common and individual installations at exhibitions they organized at deserted, delapidated buildings (Hungaria Bath, Újlak cinema, 72 Tüzoltó street).<sup>96</sup>

Although the rise of installation art had started a couple of decades earlier abroad<sup>97</sup>, its naturalization in Hungary happened parallel to certain Western tendencies, such as the artform becoming institutionally approved<sup>98</sup>. Throughout the Nineties „another increasingly visible aspect of installation art is the artist-curated exhibition“<sup>99</sup> as well as artists starting to place „more emphasis on the viewer's active participation to generate the meaning of the work“<sup>100</sup>. In Hungary these steps in popularizing and accepting installation art happened at once, as a reaction to previous directions: it was

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.  
Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>96</sup> Készman, József: Az elrendezés esztétikája (The aesthetics of display), Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003. p.92.

<sup>97</sup> Bishop, Claire: But is it Installation Art?, Claire Bishop on installations, Martin Creed, The lights going on and off, 2000. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue3/butisitinstallationart.htm>>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

a response to the Eighties' new painting.<sup>101</sup> Before the launching of the intermedia department at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in the early Nineties, artists were trained in rather traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture. Most of the Újlak members finished their studies as painters, although working with the two dimensional flat surface seemed restricting to them. The artists considered a specific space as their canvas, which they filled with found objects along high-tech equipment.<sup>102</sup> Péter Szarka pointed out the correspondence between *Ádám's* lyrical compositions in paintings and installations, and his archaic, mythological worlds in both mediums.<sup>103</sup> A good example is *Ádám's* solo exhibition at the cinema, where he built two slanting paper walls in the main room, creating a narrow path in the middle. The draft caused by people walking by, and the deep beats of experimental electronic music shook the paper just enough for the flower, that was poured all over the walls, to slide down to the center path.<sup>104</sup>

When confronted with an art exhibition, we are dealing with multiple authorship. And in fact every exhibition exhibits something that was selected by one or more artists, from their own production and/or from the mass of ready-mades. These objects selected by the artists are then selected in turn by one or more curators, who thus also share authorial responsibility for the definitive selection. In addition, these curators are selected and financed by a commission, a foundation, or an institution, thus these commissions, foundations, and institutions also bear authorial and artistic responsibility for the end result. The selected objects are presented in a space selected for the purpose, the choice of such a space, which can lie inside or outside the spaces of an institution, often plays a crucial role in the result.<sup>105</sup>

As Boris Groys points out, exhibition organization has several stages and filters. The Újlak Group broke down and surpassed these steps by fulfilling the roles of all filters. The artists, who created the works, selected and curated the exhibitions, which were

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Péter Szarka, 2011 April.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.

<sup>105</sup> Groys, Boris: Multiple Authorship. <<http://idea.ro/revista/?q=en/node/41&articol=469>>

then presented at their own venue. Their one night shows and happenings were popular and frequented, and many young visitors were influenced by the installations presented. The Újlak Group was invited to show at various institutions, that paved the way for the artform to be generally accepted.

The self-organizing exhibition pursuit of the Újlak Group was the first example, which showed that grass-root (or non institutional) initiations may be viable both professionally and in their practical realization. The Group was the inevitable catalyst of the blooming of installation art in Hungary in the 1990s. Furthermore their activities served as pioneers to later art projects, such as Little Warsaw's „Artwork of the Week“ series, or after the millennium actions dealing with institutional critique by Tibor Horváth and Miklós Mécs.

Regarding their curatorial approach it is emphatic that the Group's exhibition practice was object to institutionalized forms, their activities were mainly artist-based and focused, avoiding guided interpretations yet representing a receptive attitude toward open dialogues and problem posing.<sup>106</sup>

Over the summer of 1990, the Újlak Group was invited to the INSPIRATION/Sommeratelier program in Hannover, Germany. All participants were provided by a space and two weeks preparation time.<sup>107</sup> Tibor Várnagy, a fellow Hungarian exhibitor remembers the event:

340 young, European artists, from 24 countries – for the first time (and the last time) – even from East-Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union too. (...) ...it was completely astounding, impressive and shocking, as well as an exquisite achievement all through, that the Újlak members finished a brand new installation every day, (...) albeit their box was one of the biggest, (...) they were not different variations of the same installation, but new, unique works every single day, (...) and at the end the group did not exhibit the best, but left the last one standing.<sup>108</sup>

The political and institutional changes brought along some new possibilities for the artists of the time. The euphoria of 1989-90, when the „world seemed to have opened“

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Orsolya Hegedüs, arthistorian. 2011 January.

<sup>107</sup> Várnagy, Tibor: Újlak s port – Újlak Co., Balkon, 1995/2, p.24-27.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

for Hungarians, also reflected in a slightly more intensive interest from the West: still at the cinema, four different Dutch and Austrian television channels visited the Újtlak Group to shoot reportage on their activities. A broader scale of sources to gain financial support was available, non-profit galleries were able to receive both state and local funding. The Újtlak artists were able to print brochures, and they found a new project-space at the 72 Tűzoltó street with the help of the Budapest Local Government in 1991.<sup>109</sup> The former noodle factory in the 9.district was a 800m<sup>2</sup> building with glass ceiling, and despite its delapidated condition, it was a great opportunity for the artists to establish an alternative venue with a sophisticated program.

Tűzoltó street, (...) is the very first Budapest locale of the kind alternatives have always been dreaming about (and which would also fit in just as well in Berlin, Hamburg or Amsterdam): it is spacious, well lit, well functioning, though a little funky, just like its neighborhoods, not a downtown spot of a luxury hangout. It is half-way between the 35-year-old, familiar Fiala Művészek Klubja (Young Artists' Club), or the hangouts of the Seventies' avant-gard, and today's alternative cafés, (...) <sup>110</sup>

The Újtlak members spared no time and effort to clean and renovate the space, they even built a small, apartment-like corner to provide accomodation for the exhibiting artists. The main idea was to welcome other Hungarian and foreign colleagues with diverse artistic expressions, though the goal was for all shows to convey an independent, fresh intellectuality that reflected the group's approach. They were open to invite both young and already recognized artists as well, as they were curious about how others dealt with the specific space. The Tűzoltó street venue soon became a gathering point for a like-minded community, an independent workshop, where the Újtlak members worked as artists and as artistic managers.<sup>111</sup>

The non-profit philosophy was an important component of the group's program, as it „has meant (...) ensuring an independent space for their independent spirituality, and

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

Tardos, Károly: Az Újtlak Csoport és a Tűzoltó utcai kiállítótér (The Újtlak Group and the exhibition space in Tűzoltó street), Új Művészet, 1995/4, p.16-19.

<sup>110</sup> Beke, László: Tűzoltó 72, Tűzoltó 72 Catalogue, Újtlak Foundation, 1995.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.

Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.

Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

orienting basically towards artistic activity instead of sales“.<sup>112</sup> Although the group received funding from state and local sources, the money received was barely enough to keep the venue going. In hopes for private sponsoring, the Újlak members established a foundation in 1992, which was a step toward their institutionalization and an affirmation of their social role undertaken. The division of tasks between the artists was worked out: András Ravasz was the one dealing with the foundation and finances, Gábor Farkas, being a photographer, was assigned to document the activities, István Szili was in charge of the venue's operation, and the Zoltán Ádám - Tamás Komoróczy duo was responsible of the program coordination. They usually had the exhibition schedule for five-six months ahead, and in a matter of four years they organized more than 50 shows at the Tűzoltó street. The Újlak members worked closely with all exhibiting artists providing support and advice.<sup>113</sup>



Tűzoltó street exhibition space



Tamás Komoróczy's exhibition at Tűzoltó street

Concerning their exhibitions in the Tűzoltó street exhibition space, they were willing to say their opinions, and give ideas about the possibilities of the space they already know better, but they do not intend to influence the exhibitors.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Tardos, Károly: Az Újlak Csoport és a Tűzoltó utcai kiállítótér (The Újlak Group and the exhibition space in Tűzoltó street), *Új Művészet*, 1995/4, p.16-19.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.  
Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.  
Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>114</sup> Tardos, Károly: Az Újlak Csoport és a Tűzoltó utcai kiállítótér (The Újlak Group and the exhibition space in Tűzoltó street), *Új Művészet*, 1995/4, p.16-19.

Many of the slightly older, already known Hungarian artists were frequent visitors of the Tűzoltó street, some of them even showed at the venue. Tamás Szentjóby, who by that time was a teacher at the university, invited twenty-one students to the exhibition he organized based on his lectures.<sup>115</sup> Collaborations with foreign groups and artists, such as the Kassel group or the Dutch Walter van den Crujsen, resulted in a long row of guest-exhibitions at the Tűzoltó street, as well as residencies for the Újlak members in different countries.<sup>116</sup>

During the four-year time at the Tűzoltó street the Újlak artists stayed true to their idea of a high quality program where a broad scale of artistic expressions were introduced and maintaining an independent, non-profit venue, where „one can test what is new in the art world in Hungary.“<sup>117</sup>

The Újlak artists had two group-, and seven solo shows at the Tűzoltó street. While the focus seemed to have moved on to the individual works – though still in the context of a similar-minded team – their mutual installations showed a strong unity inside the group. Senza Colore, their harmonious exhibition at the Goethe Institute in 1993, was „built up from audio- and visual elements. Inside the composition the visual and acoustic elements are undividable, they pervade each other and only on the level of language can they be divided.“<sup>118</sup> The title Senza Colore was a musical instruction invented by Béla Bartók, meaning the performer is expected to play ‘without color’. The basis of the installation was Andrei Rublev’s famous icon of the Trinity, which the artists have distorted by moving the image while photocopying it: this way the angels’ faces deformed to demon-like. The audio installation was a looped magnetic tape stretched across the room, with noisy, scratchy old recordings of folk songs by Bartók.<sup>119</sup> The distortion and the audio seemed coherent, playing with

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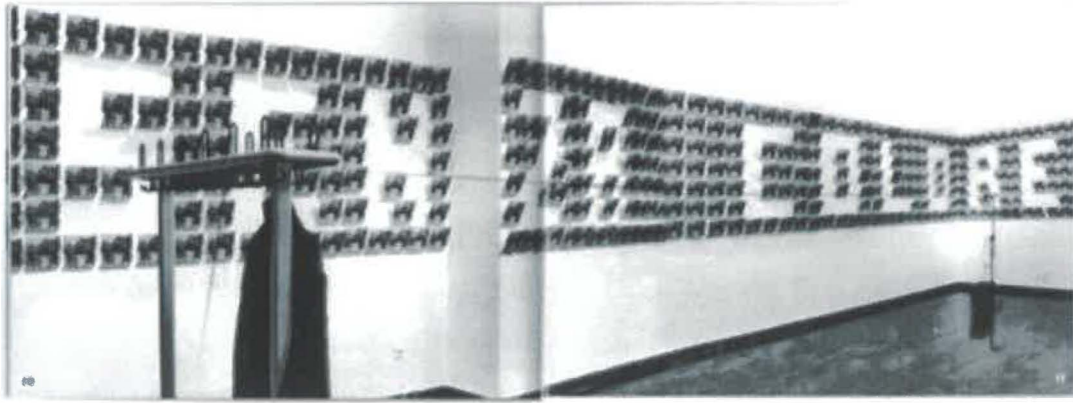
<sup>115</sup> St. Auby, Tamás: Spectrum, Tűzoltó 72, Tűzoltó 72 Catalogue, Újlak Foundation, 1995.

<sup>116</sup> Tardos, Károly: Az Újlak Csoport és a Tűzoltó utcai kiállítótér (The Újlak Group and the exhibition space in Tűzoltó street), Új Művészet, 1995/4, p.16-19.

<sup>117</sup> Beke, László: Tűzoltó 72, Tűzoltó 72 Catalogue, Újlak Foundation, 1995.

<sup>118</sup> Szoboszlai, János: Hanginstallációk – az Újlak Csoport kiállítása a Goethe Intézetben (Sound installation – the Újlak Group’s exhibition at the Goethe Institute), Balkon, 1993/2, p.28.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.



Senza Colore exhibition view

the idea of the material and immaterial state of an image, and the question of timelessness.<sup>120</sup>

In 1994 the Újlak Group was invited to do a farewell exhibition for the closing of the Palme House in Budapest. Here the six artists – as Gábor Farkas had left the team in the mean time – showed individual, quite distinct works in separate rooms. The Újlak s port-titled exhibition „had no theme, and the relation or connection between artworks was not program-like”<sup>121</sup>, yet it was considered a „real group show”.<sup>122</sup>

What is possibly more important, than anything else, is that the vast majority of the Újlak works are site-specific, even in those cases, when they happen to be pictures or sculptures in the traditional sense, and not installations. In achieving that the works compose such a brilliant and unified exhibition, finding the works’ positions in relation to one another as well as to the space – often kicking over exhibition-hall conventions – plays at least as big of a role, as what they are like and what they are worth one by one. In order for such a relation – the group exhibition – to come into existence, one ought not to create too whole, finished and closed up works, and/or one ought to be able to create the space, where these won’t disturb, extinguish each other, but enhance each other. The fact that the Újlak s port turned out to be such a great exhibition from so many, one by one memorable works, shows that the members are one by one incredibly strong

<sup>120</sup> Szoboszlai, János: Hanginstallációk – az Újlak Csoport kiállítása a Goethe Intézetben (Sound installation – the Újlak Group’s exhibition at the Goethe Institute), *Balkon*, 1993/2, p.28.

<sup>121</sup> Várnagy, Tibor: Újlak s port – Újlak Co., *Balkon*, 1995/2, p.24-27.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

characters and individuals, and their collaboration is, henceforward, the most exciting sport and the best company of our contemporary scene.<sup>123</sup>

After the Újlak sport exhibition, the artists showed one more time together at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in the frames of Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe, which was the first American museum exhibition to examine recent art from the region.<sup>124</sup> It was during this trip, that the remaining six Újlak members decided not to continue working together and to end the activities at the Tűzoltó street. Their split was explained by exhaustion and the growing need for solo careers. The artists felt that running a place as art managers, working in a group and trying to succeed on their own was too much to accomplish at the same time. Their collaboration reached the point where the constant compromises hindered their individual development, although they agree that the Újlak years was great education for them.<sup>125</sup> The Újlak Group was „about individuals, who passionately searched the new possibilities of fine art, and who were formed into a group by their desire for acting together and their mutual intellectuality.“<sup>126</sup>

Although this was the end of the Újlak Group, some members continued to work together. András Ravasz and Tamás Komoróczy founded a non-profit exhibition space in 1997. The U.F.F. (United Flying Foundation) Gallery gained financial support from both the state and from private sponsors. The space itself was a renovated 70m<sup>2</sup> gallery, which they received from the Local Government in exchange for the Tűzoltó street venue. In attitude the U.F.F. was a continuation of the Újlak Group's mentality: in a matter of two years they organized approximately twenty exhibitions, and the majority of the participating artists were from abroad. Due to financial uncertainties, Ravasz and Komoróczy decided to close the gallery in 2000.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
<<http://www.mcachicago.org/information/history.php?page=ihist>>

<sup>125</sup> Interview with András Ravasz, 2010 January.  
Interview with Péter Szarka, 2010 September.  
Interview with Tamás Komoróczy, 2010 October.

<sup>126</sup> Kósa, János: Újlak Story, Új Művészet, 1991/4, p.50-52.



One of the most unique parts of culture are those artist groups which do not represent an interest in some form or other. They don't strive to have the backing of an institution in order to ease their way to recognition and acceptance by other institutions. These are artists' groups with open borders, where these borders are undefined, unexpressed, still exactly perceivable and not traversable. This existence rests on fine and unexpressed foundations. Such a group's inherent laws are permanently dynamic because there is no precedent to be referred to, everything is decided by the power balance of the moment.<sup>127</sup>



Members of the Újlak Group  
Zoltán Ádám, András Ravasz, István Szili, Péter Szarka, Tamás Komoróczy

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<sup>127</sup> Sugár, János: Az Újlak Csoport mint munkamódszer (The Újlak Group as a Working Method), Újlak Catalogue, Modern Művészetért Alapítvány, Pantaleon Kulturális Egyesület, 1991.

## Recent past and today

From the mid Nineties, after the euphoria of the transitional period, the pace of the independent art scene's development seemed to have stalled, although the sector's transformation has been constant. Several galleries have opened, numerous ventures have been launched, however many of the bottom-up organizations are not able to stay active for a long time.

It seems clear that, since 1990, the expressed and unspoken hopes for the rapid reformation of the system of art institutions have been replaced by the reality of a slow transformation whose direction was often extremely ambiguous. An even closer look reveals that only a small number of alternative exhibition places managed to enjoy even minor and mostly short lives.<sup>128</sup>

As counter-examples, there are few organizations that went through notable changes in the past two decades and have been able to keep, or even strengthen their position in the contemporary independent non-profit art scene. The most prominent example is the Studio of Young Artists, which was founded in the late Fifties as the Alap's establishment for young emerging artists. The idea to re-structure the Studio as an independent organization evolved when in 1987 the exhibitions were freed from jurying. A group of artists started a petition and soon took over the leadership, and by 1990, the Studio was registered as an independent association.<sup>129</sup>

Western European institutional systems don't have anything resembling the Studio's organizational structure, a large membership base and an artist-run board. There was no model to follow, so the board invented everything, starting from the social-, professional-, or work scholarship system, through the use of ateliers, and to invitations extended to foreign artists. (...) The board was constantly applying for funding mainly to Soros Foundation and the NKA, they also started to look for sponsors: The Hungarian Commerce Bank, for example. By the mid-1990s the

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<sup>128</sup> Mélyi, József: Alternatives to the institutional system, We are not ducks on a pond but ships at sea, Independent art initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p.30.

<sup>129</sup> Folytonosság és átalakulás / Continuity and Transformation, Diskurzusok / Discourses, Studio of Young Artists, 2009. p.8-13.

Studio became a professional organization with a scholarship system, international exchange programs and a grant application program that created opportunities for an entire generation.<sup>130</sup>

The first some years of the new independent Studio was the period of „clarifications and regulations, they had to end the uneven atelier-uses, clear up legal issues, and end conflicts of interest and under-the-table deals.“<sup>131</sup> In 1994 the organization got hold of a gallery space in Képiró street, which was run by Barnabás Bencsik, the current director of the Ludwig Museum. The Studio's next move was in 2007 to its current location on Rottenbiller street.

...starting from the beginning of the nineties, an element of independence from the Studio can be perceived concerning the younger artist generation. The importance of the Studio has become more relative as a professional organization, scene of self-representation, and possibility of support for a certain generation of artists. The Újlak Group for example created their own independent venue. Still, while stressing their independence, they made use of the possibilities offered by the Studio (scholarships, grants) extensively.<sup>132</sup>

In the Nineties the Studio no longer added all graduating artists from the University of Fine Arts as members automatically, but has welcomed applications from artists, art historians and critics ever since. The heterogeneous community reflect on each other's works, and associates often collaborate on projects. „The number of members in the 1990s was around the same as it is now, between 300 and 400.“<sup>133</sup>

The objective of the association is to facilitate the emergence and the work of its members in the cultural and art life. We foster the establishment of professional contacts and experience, our members' presence at Hungarian and international exhibitions and residencies, and we provide them with information and

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Független galéria a Stúdió bázisán: A Stúdió Galéria (Independent Gallery with the Studio as a Base: the Studio Gallery). <<http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/tk04.html>>

<sup>133</sup> Folytonosság és átalakulás / Continuity and Transformation, Diskurzusok / Discourses, Studio of Young Artists, 2009. p.14.

organizational support. The association also helps Hungarian and foreign curators and artists to get in contact with the young Hungarian art scene and to build collaborations.<sup>134</sup>

At the Studio's current location, besides the gallery and office space, there are three ateliers which are open for members as well as visiting foreign artists. Studio associates may apply to use an atelier for a 6-month-period, and they are chosen by an independent jury.<sup>135</sup> The gallery's program involves group and solo exhibitions by the „most talented artists of the young generation“<sup>136</sup>, presentations, discussions, video projections and performances. In 2008 the Studio celebrated its 50th anniversary. For this occasion the 50 Days project was organized, that „featured exhibitions of different artists and groups each day for 50 days.“<sup>137</sup> The idea of this event was based on the annual Gallery by Night, an earlier initiative of the Studio. Since 1991 each year the association organizes a series of one-night exhibitions for several days in a row. The Gallery by Night provides possibility for many young artists to introduce their works to a larger public.<sup>138</sup>

The Gallery by Night is the Studio's most clever, unique program. (...) With its novel way of raising questions, flexibility and openness it constitutes a significant part of the Hungarian art scene in the Nineties. (...) in the case of small galleries - openings were pretty much the only somewhat attended period. This is what made the idea of the exhibition opening-series reasonable. They were in line with the showings at the Újtlak cinema and at the space on Tüzoltó street run by the Újtlak Group, which were only open on the day of the opening as well. (...) With the exhibition series of the Gallery by Night it was possible to expand the art scene, to involve the non-professional, non-insider audience, thereby it took a new generation's alternative events as basis at unusual times.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Fiala Képzőművészek Stúdiója / Studio of Young Artists, Stúdió / Studio, 2009. p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p.28.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>139</sup> L. Molnár, Mária: Gallery by Night, Gyönyörű ez a mai nap, A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek magyar művészete, Magyar Alkotóművészek Országos Egyesülete, Budapest, 2003. p.107-120.

Establishing and developing an international network has been a stressed goal of the Studio since the mid Nineties. The association seeks to build out connections to similar minded organizations abroad, and to initiate long term exchange programs, cooperations and discussions with them. Today the Studio is maintaining relations with institutions from Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Argentina and Finland, to name a few.<sup>140</sup>

By means of these cooperations we would like to map the unknown territories of the international art scene, and to create the opportunity of gaining international experiences for emerging artists – which is crucial and yet hard to achieve merely by self-support.<sup>141</sup>

The Studio Prize, which exists since 2000, is awarded by an independent jury to those artists, who „show exceptionally outstanding performance in the fields of arts, intensively contributing to the developments of the Hungarian art scene with their international successes and presence at individual and group exhibitions.“<sup>142</sup>

Another major institutional transformation, although not a bottom-up initiation, that is worth mentioning from the late Nineties is the foundation of the Trafó House of Contemporary Arts. It was established in 1998 by the Budapest Local Government as a successor of the earlier Young Artists' Club. Today Trafó is a cultural center of quality contemporary theatre and dance performances, exhibitions, as well as a provider of various art training opportunities through a close cooperation with the Workshop Foundation.<sup>143</sup>

The Liget Gallery was also founded by a local government in 1983, although it has become one of the most significant independent, non-profit alternative exhibition spaces. The director of the gallery since its opening, artist Tibor Várnagy „...considers it one of the possible roles of small galleries – moving on the border areas of art, operating as experimental workshops – to phrase questions, propositions about what can be important, determining from one point of view of contemporary art. The Liget

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<sup>140</sup> Fialat Képzőművészek Stúdiója / Studio of Young Artists, Stúdió / Studio, 2009. p. 26-27.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>143</sup> Trafó Kortárs Művészetek Háza. <<http://www.trafo.hu/>>

Gallery, with its independent program, concentrates – instead of the management of the individual artists – rather on the current tendencies, and on groups of artists effected by these, and builds on the strategy of interpersonal co-operation between different institutions.<sup>144</sup>

MEO, a private initiation that was launched right after the millennium, soon collapsed in its approach that seemed to be ahead of its time. It was the vision of collector and gallery owner Lajos Kováts, to establish an institution based on private investments for the sake of supporting Hungarian arts. Once MEO was set up, the founders hoped to gain state support for the majority of their expenses. Although the then Cultural Ministers all seemed to be willing to financially back up the new institution, the promised support was held off. MEO was supposed to provide exhibition opportunities and international connections to Hungarian artists, as well as sale possibilities by expanding its own collection.<sup>145</sup>

MEO is not the only private initiation that was not able to survive due to financial difficulties. Various other ventures have been constrained to end their activities for similar reasons. There are diverse sources for support, state and private grants and tenders, yet the problem seems to be that either the already recognized organizations are preferred by the decision makers, or the money received is not enough to carry out a project, nevermind continuously running a program. The option of finding private sponsors is open, although in today's economic condition companies seem to favour prestigious institutions rather than investing in new, civil, non-profit initiations.

...the underfinancing of the institutional system might give rise to alternative venues as much as impede them. But impediment is generally the case in Hungary, where the shortage of financing faced by the institutions has not been coupled with extensive institutional reform: the state sought the path of least conflict by constantly filling the gaps and practising low-level but all-encompassing financing. With this widely spread financing (while underfinancing the existing institutional system), alternative initiatives and organizations that could connect more flexibly to international trends were practically cut short.

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<sup>144</sup> Tardos, Károly: Alternatív kinövésű független galéria az önkormányzati szektorban (Independent Gallery From the Half-Periphery of the Eighties). <<http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/tardos.htm>>

<sup>145</sup> MEO – kezdeti nehézségek és kibontakozás? (MEO – initial difficulties and dénouement?) <<http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/tk09.html>>

Even if these organizations were formed, the unestablished nature of the structures would mean they could only hope that in the long run they would also fall under the 'watering can' of state subsidy.<sup>146</sup>

According to Tibor Várnagy the problem regarding state financing lies in the lack of long term cultural policy and cultural strategy.<sup>147</sup> As the artist says „the problem of wasting is not that the state is spending on culture, but that it has no idea what it wants with each sum.“<sup>148</sup>

He sees the lack of dialogue between the political and the culture elite as the main hindering factor in order to „phrase sensible, actual goals as far as what we would like to attain with our cultural activity domestically and internationally, and we could make more rational use of the resources at our disposal.“<sup>149</sup>

The lack of communication and collectivity, which „is not exactly a strong suit of the Hungarian scene“<sup>150</sup> as art historian Dóra Hegyi claims, does not eventuate the formation of a common goal. As a consequence, another obstacle in the recent development of the alternative scene may be the still missing, yet undefined cues. There are countless roles in the scene that have not been, or not successfully been filled. Small initiations, even with a distinct focus may end up unable to carry out their missions due to the lack of possibility of emergence.

Transparent and predictable courses of action and the opportunities of making headway are impaired primarily by the unwonted and impervious nature of the pathways among state institutions, commercial galleries and alternative structures. This is due largely to the public institutions' confusion of roles and to the stubborn

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<sup>146</sup> Mélyi, József: Alternatives to the Institutional System, We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p.32.

<sup>147</sup> Tardos, Károly: Email Conversation with Tibor Várnagy about the Past Two Decades of the Budapest Independent Art Scene, From Prohibited to Tolerated and Then to Supported  
<[http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/tk\\_a08vt.html](http://www.c3.hu/~ligal/tk_a08vt.html)>

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> The Black Box of artists' initiatives, A conversation, six years on, about the exhibition Budapest Box: The Hidden Scene of the 1990s between its two curators, Dóra Hegyi and Katalin Timár, We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p.107.

fact that private galleries are still struggling with the problem of an unestablished market.<sup>151</sup>

Maybe realizing the idea of „macro-strategy“ suggested by Tibor Várnagy, where a developed „intensive, broad, common professional thinking“<sup>152</sup> would sort out the roles, as it would generate the missing business federation and efficient representation for the benefit of bottom-up initiations. This, of course, can only be achieved by communication and by defeating the „fear of co-operation among producers of culture“.<sup>153</sup>

A lot of new initiatives have been started, but seem to be too fragmented: disparate islands of new initiatives, without good bridges between them. (...) Every organisation seems to be pioneering, inventing the same wheel at different places, and not benefiting from each other. If only the different representatives of the Hungarian cultural life would sit together once in a while to share their experiences, successes and failures, or maybe even join forces to lift the general cultural life and open the door to international experts, *Operation Paprika* would be born.<sup>154</sup>

Several different approaches were launched in the last decade to overcome the difficulties caused by the segmented nature of the scene and to initiate some kind of a dialogue between the participants of the art world. Most of these ventures share the characteristic of short lifespan. In 2001 the artist duo Little Warsaw started organizing a series called Art Object of the Week. Each Wednesday they introduced an art work, selected by the duo, and invited the artist as well as art historians and critics. The works were consciously chosen in order to induce discussions between the professionals and the audience that reflected on current questions regarding the art

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<sup>151</sup> Mélyi, József: Alternatives to the Institutional System, We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p.30.

<sup>152</sup> Tardos, Károly: Alternatív kinövésű független galéria az önkormányzati szektorban (Independent Gallery From the Half-Periphery of the Eighties). <<http://www.c3.hu/~liga1/tardos.htm>>

<sup>153</sup> Jan Kennis: Operation Paprika, or how to bring the Hungarian Cultural Life to Bubble and Tremble, We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p. 56.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.



scene and art tendencies.<sup>155</sup> The KMKK – Two Artists-Two Curators formation had a somewhat similar approach: their weekly Recycled Attention one-night exhibitions at a small studio was invented to make artworks and artgroups visible to „the fragmented, manipulated and exploited attention of today. (...) The series – in shedding light on the absence of infrastructure that would support contemporary Hungarian art and facilitate its reception – can be interpreted as a ‘provocative community-building action’.<sup>156</sup>

Dinamo was a 3-year-effort by young artists, whose mutual aim was to reflect on the interdisciplinary nature of the contemporary art world. It was an independent, self-organising, project-oriented, non-profit space right next door to Trafó, which also helped Dinamo with its initial difficulties caused by the lack of funds. The program involved workshops, discussions, exhibitions, and collaborations with international art groups.<sup>157</sup> In 2006 Dinamo’s space was occupied by students of the Intermedia Department. They organized guerilla actions and events exclusively from bottom-up under the name of Reaktor.<sup>158</sup> The founders of Dinamo, along with other young experts with diverse professional backgrounds established Impex – Contemporary Art Provider in 2006. The team initiated and hosted projects, organized exhibitions, debates and international residency programs as well as published art books. In 2009 the formation ended their activities after one year of operating without a location.<sup>159</sup>

In 2007 a new collaboration, LABOR, between C<sup>3</sup> Center for Culture and Communication Foundation, the Studio of Young Artists Association, the Hungarian University of Fine Arts and tranzit.hu – contemporary art program was launched. This platform was founded to organize exhibitions, to support emerging artists and to initiate discussions and changes about the structure of the contemporary art scene.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p. 38.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p.61.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p.99.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>160</sup> Fiatal Képzőművészek Stúdiója / Studio of Young Artists, Stúdió / Studio, 2009. p. 10.

LABOR aims to emphasize the social responsibility of contemporary art and its knowledge-generating role. It organizes discursive programs to strengthen the debate- and discussion-culture of the local art world involving other fields of culture. LABOR creates a reading room and a library where current theoretical texts, magazines, and publications on visual culture will be available for research.<sup>161</sup>

The latest trend in the contemporary art world of Budapest is the emergence of ruin pubs. Old, unrenovated buildings are let out by either the local government or private owners, and function as bars as well as cultural spaces. They are open every night of the week and offer programs several times a week. Some concentrate on performance art, and some even organize exhibitions.

These night spots operate in the courtyards of residential and factory buildings intended for demolition or reconstruction, and tend to adapt to, rather than alter their environment. Temporariness leaves its mark on the existence of these garden pubs: they often move, and, in accordance with the peculiar nature of „ruin pub“ operations, following a brief and successful upswing, they permanently close down. These popular pubs appeared in a transitional phase, when the old communal spaces of the city were on their way out but were not yet replaced by new ones. Besides functioning as retro-gardens and night spots, some of these places, typically furnished with used up furniture and beer benches, also serve as venues for cultural programs.<sup>162</sup>

Tűzraktér Independent Cultural Center started out as a civil initiative at an abandoned factory building in 2005. In 2008 the complex moved to a new location thanks to the local government of Terézváros. Here Tűzraktér functions as a bar and a gathering space for artists and art lovers. The concept of the cultural center is to host any creative initiative and provide a broad-scale of programs introducing diverse artistic approaches. They are open to everyone who wishes to share their own performances or artworks. The founders of the Tűzraktér continuously apply for grants, although their main

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>162</sup> We are not Ducks on a Pond but Ships at Sea, Independent Art Initiatives, Budapest 1989-2009, Impex – Contemporary Art Provider Foundation, Budapest, 2010. p. 100.

financial source is the bar. Since 2007 the center has been a member of the Anna Lindh Foundation, an international umbrella organization of 37 countries.<sup>163</sup>

Fogasház opened during the summer of 2009 at a downtown raunchy building. The idea of the founders was to establish a cultural center that accommodates diverse artistic activities, panel discussions, video screenings and exhibitions. Their initial difficulties were caused by the constant compromises with the owners of the pub, so in the summer of 2010 they ended the contract and the Fogasház founders opened their own bar. Ever since they were able to finance a heating system for the winter, better technical equipment and were able to renovate an exhibition space. Demo Galley opened in November 2010, and has been run by two young students of the new curatorial program at the University of Fine Arts. At this space they are planning on exhibiting works of other students, as well as organize showings and discussions based on their theoretical studies.<sup>164</sup>

The events at the ruin pubs attract a large audience, so the appearance of these cultural centers has the advantage to reach out to a public that otherwise would not attend contemporary art performances and exhibitions. However, the quality of the works shown is up for debate, and so the tendency of these centers alone does not solve the problem of the vacant roles, and may only be one part of the solution to fill in the gaps in the independent contemporary art scene.

In Hungary 2010 was marked by structural changes in the area of National Cultural Policy due to a remarkable reconsideration of priorities and focuses. The change of government after the May 2010 elections inevitably brought along the sector's restructuring, most visibly the transformation of the Ministry of Education and Culture into the "mammoth" Ministry of Human Resources along with the health sector, leaving national cultural policy issues to be handled by a state secretariat. The latter restructuring combined with the effects of the World Economic Crisis resulted in a temporary decline of governmental input in the cultural sector. Nevertheless an

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Zoltán Balla, founding member of Tűzraktér Independent Cultural Center, 2009 September.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Dániel Ongjerth, founder of Fogasház, 2010 November.

important challenge and big opportunity of present time Hungarian cultural policy is the half year Presidency of Hungary of the EU Council starting January 1st 2011, that – following a two-year preparation – provides many occasions both on the national and the international level for Hungary, through its cultural values, to be seen in its full glamour.

Whether the restructuring and foreign involvement will benefit the independent contemporary art scene seems – at this point – undefined and uncertain.

## Conclusion

### A Subjective Critique

There is no doubt about the fact that the today functioning organizations fulfill important roles in the contemporary art scene, nevertheless they do so with dedication and proficiency. Events organized by the LABOR and Studio attract the active participants of the art world, their activities are professional and informative. The audience at discussions and lectures is the same crowd who visits the openings of most galleries, commercial or non-profit, and attend all happenings in the scene. Artists, art historians, critics, and workers of art institutions form this isolated subculture, that may seem intensive for an outsider.

Doing a study on why this circle is so closed would be an exciting research, although even without any knowledge on the particular reasons one may conclude that the education system has something to do with it. Just to mention a couple of possible reasons, the lack of visual education, the lack of contemporary art studies, and the lack of incitement for creativity should be noted. Generally speaking people who are 'outside' this circle, rarely ever take courage to enter a contemporary art exhibition, as they fear they do not understand this subculture. And even if they enter, or buy an art magazine, or go see a lecture, their encounter with the intensive use of terminology might discourage them.

On the other hand, the ruin-pub cultural centers, that offer a relaxed environment for those who are interested in learning about contemporary arts, often are destinations for their bars rather than their events. And so the question remains: how to bridge the gap between the isolated subculture and the general public, or is it at all necessary? There are, of course, numerous answers, as this is a subjective issue.

Taking the notion into consideration, that the greater the interest the higher the possibility for support, trying to involve a larger audience may be a good idea. There have been attempts at reaching out to the general public, such as the Ludwig Museum's well communicated exhibition descriptions (along with discount tickets on certain days), or the Várfok Gallery's posters on the streets with information about their artists. In the media Népszabadság, a daily newspaper, Magyar Narancs, a weekly periodical,

or Index, an online news forum (<http://index.hu/>), for instance, all have regular cultural sections where they often report on contemporary art happenings. Also, it should be noted, that today's children have better options regarding art educational programs, (both at school and at art institutions), as well as the significance of inducing creativity at schools has gained more focus.

There are, of course, countless other ways to bridge that gap, as there are countless other problems to be solved. The relatively low activity of the independent art scene in itself is such. Looking at it from one side, artists of today's Budapest have a hard time making enough through sales and grants to survive. They take on day jobs to supplement their income. They have little or no time to get involved with the formation and development of the art scene, and they are less likely to initiate an independent project with no stable income. Also, today's generation, who grew up after the political change, has had the comfort not to fight for free artistic expression. Many artists are represented by commercial galleries, who organize exhibitions for them. There is no dire need to establish new, alternative spaces for showing, unlike in the Nineties, when it was crucial for artists such as the Újlak members. Another reason might be why artists take less part in the formation of the contemporary art scene is that the activist nature of (political, sociopolitical) art seems intensely unpopular. At this point the slim appearance of political art at all should also be mentioned. Tibor Horváth, Miklós Mécs and Csaba Uglár are among the few artists, who are recognized for addressing current issues and voicing their stances through art.

Furthermore, another significant deficiency of the today's scene is the absence of discussions on contemporary theories from abroad. There are only few lectures, workshops, conferences that deal with current theoretical approaches from the West. Most of the now working art historians rely on the materials by the older generation of Hungarian art historians. There are few places where foreign publications are available, mostly in foreign languages, however these do not make their way into the scene's everyday. For those, who are up-to-date regarding the foreign theories, there are no forums and no partners to discuss and develop the ideas.

There are plenty of problems to sort out regarding the contemporary independent art scene of Budapest in order to achieve the desired thriving state, where initiations find

their place in the art world, are backed up with adequate representation, gain sufficient funding and are competitive on both national and international levels. The potential is there: following the recovery from the economic crisis, that may grant a more stable subsidy, and with the new generation of curators at the recently established university level curatorial programs, the prospects are decent.

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CV

Nora Vera Gogl

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|----------------|--|
| 2009 – present | acb Contemporary Art Gallery, Budapest   |
| 2008 – 2010    | ecm Masterlehrgang für Ausstellungstheorie und –praxis an der<br>Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien |
| 2007 – 2008    | Universität Wien, Kunstgeschichte  |
| 2005 – 2007    | Friends of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest   |
| 2004 – 2005    | Exit Art, New York City  |
| 2001 – 2004    | University of Massachusetts in Amherst, USA  |
| 2000 – 2001    | University of Pécs, Hungary  |