

**Lajos Németh**

Introduction to Contemporary  
Hungarian Art

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Hungary



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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto:info@institute.hr).

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

## Lajos Németh

### Introduction to Contemporary Hungarian Art

In order to understand the situation of contemporary Hungarian art and follow the development of its tendencies, we have to turn to the specifics of Hungarian history and culture. The destiny of Hungarian art is obviously parallel to the whole development of Hungarian society, replete with hiatuses and interruptions, unable to achieve the chance of organic development which "logically" established the luckier fate of Western art and culture. We must delve into the past centuries to find the causes, and especially to the one hundred and fifty years of Turkish domination. Until then, Hungarian society had been organic, as was its cultural development, indeed it can be said that it belonged to the forefront of European culture. During the time of the Turkish occupation, the country decayed, both its cultural institutions and its culture suffered: a historical and social trauma that even today Hungarians have not overcome. This was apparent in the formation of art. The Hungarian Renaissance was still a direct descendant of the Italian, and grew deep roots in the country's soil, providing at last the opportunity for the cultural basis with both a universal and national orientation. During the decades of the Turkish occupation however, the Hungarian Renaissance was forced back into the region of Transylvania, which maintained a relative national independence, and although it established values on a provincial level of its own, these could not effectively determine Hungarian development. The leading works and imported products of the Baroque brought mainly into Hungary by foreign

workers -- mostly Austrian works -- filtered into the national soil but remained largely provincial. All this meant that, for example the most important formal problems of Baroque art, like new perspective, expressivity, movement, scenic and architectonic considerations and their joint synthesis, failed to enrich Hungarian culture. However, this lack was significant in the formation of Hungarian sculpture; Baroque sculpture with its spatial activity, which proved to be so fruitful in the development of modern Western sculpture, did not emerge in Hungarian sculpture, not even in the endeavors of the Hungarian avant-garde.

The result of this wretched historical past and distorted development was that the tendencies of the established styles of Western art arrived here only in phases, so that they often congested each other and prevented the formulation of certain relevant questioning. No that Hungarian art in the course of the centuries could not be measured against universal standards, but these were rather individual flashes of brilliance, doomed to failure, lacking an organic soil or the basis of a strong sculptural-visual culture. Outstanding artist of the time were often exhausted in undertaking the role of transmission. Their role in the projection of Hungarian culture was extraordinarily important, integrating Western artistic tendencies and enriching Hungarian culture, but at the same time from the aspect of Western art they were merely epigones who added nothing to the tendencies formed in the west, nor may their work be qualified as idiomatically provincial variations, as were for example those of the Czech Cubists.

This whole problem can be seen in the development of modern Hungarian art as well. At the turn of the century and in the beginning of this century, the creation of a modern Hungary was an enormous undertaking, with Hungarian science, industry, popular education and art all trying to catch up with advanced Western European levels. The choice of title of the journal of the era's most progressive literature was of symbolic value: *West /Nyugat/*. There was a similar process in the fine arts. The "Nagybánya School" attempted to introduce elements of impressionism simultaneously into national Hungarian art. Rippl-Rónai worked in Paris for a time as an honored member of the Nabis group. Later he tried to transplant the results of Art Nouveau into Hungary. "The Eight" mixed elements of Cubism, Expressionism and Jugendstil, while the "Activists" arrived at Constructivism, on the boundaries of non-figuration. Thus Hungarian art caught up with modern European tendencies, although most significant were those oeuvres in Hungary that could not be connected to school or movements, such as those of Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka, Lajos Gulácsy or

József Nemes Lampérth. Through their unmatched intuitive talent and geniality they were able to create independent artistic universes.

After World War I, however, Hungarian society and culture was once again seized by a deep trauma. Two thirds of the country's territory and one third of the Hungarian speaking population were cut off from the mother country by the Treaty of Trianon -- and there were many cultural centers among these areas. The "carved up", struggling country lost its links with bourgeois progression, and this affected the formation of modern art in a tragic way. The country became culturally closed and isolated through exaggerated nationalism, and the unhealthy long life of national historicism entailed the strengthening of a conservative intellect and provincialism. The two decades between the wars turned out to be the period of a great diaspora of modern artists: in the years of the counter-revolution a large majority of progressive artists emigrated for political reasons, the Constructivists guided by Lajos Kassák were for many years detached from the country's artistic life, as were the representatives of Expressionism. The thirties saw the emigration of a rebellious generation opposed to official artistic policy and conservative, anachronistic art education. Moholy Nagy, Beöthy, Schöffer, Vasarely, Kepes, Péri, Kemény, Forbáth, Breuer and Hajdu - to mention but a few of the original Hungarian artists to be spread across the world - all left Hungary at this time. Their art was only reconnected to Hungarian culture once again in the sixties. The great movements of European and American art between the wars, like Surrealism, the activities of the second generation of non-figurative artists, the programs of De Stijl and the Bauhaus, all these barely touched Hungarian art, and the connection with progressive Western art established in the last century died. The development of the avant-garde was cut short, and again only a few exceptional figures, like the expressionist Gyula Derkovits or the tragically short-lived Lajos Vajda's work, amalgamating Constructivist and Surrealist, rational and irrational elements, can be measured by the most rigorous universal standards.

These days it is fashionable in Hungary to disregard the significance of the historical turning-point of 1945, although this moment represents a genuine historical and social change. This turning-point is manifest in the fine arts as well. Initially it seemed as if Hungarian culture would once again catch up with the progressive art of Europe, recovering the loss caused by the conservatism of the inter-war years. Again there was a symbolic choice of name: the era's most important artistic group was known as the "European School". The School wanted to revive the progressive traditions of Hungarian art and embark on the integration of modern Western trends all at the same time. The founders declared: "The European School represents

Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Abstraction and Surrealism in Hungary," and they eagerly strove to include all those left out and group them as one, once again establishing a cluster of Western patterns, which also characterized the beginning of this century.

The program itself was perhaps more significant than the realized works. From among the members of the European School perhaps only Dezső Korniss' mature art revealed the aesthetic system of values inherent in the newly developing Hungarian avant-garde. But they had little time to mature, in the unmerciful turn of social events progressive art was condemned, along with the avant-garde, to vegetate in the catacombs of art, as the Soviet model of socialist dictatorship was established.

Change only occurred in the sixties; after a hiatus of fifteen years Hungarian art once again attempted to catch up with contemporary trends in a time when modern Western art was witnessing the changing flow of ideas and attitudes of a great generation. At this time the era of the "classic" avant-garde closed, the activity of sovereign artists creating great artistic "universes" ended, and the process of artistic creation took a direction towards reflective or medial investigation. The work-centeredness of artistic creation ceased. Hungarian art, which intended to renew the broken connections, found itself facing an artistic way of thinking which had been transformed in its essential components.

The great Hungarian artist of the sixties were representatives of a "universe-creating", work-centered art, as is shown by the work of Jenő Barcsay, Endre Bálint, Béla Kondor, Dezső Korniss, Lili Ország, Erzsébet Schaár, and Tibor Vilt. It is only with great reservation that these artists can be linked to the tendencies of Western art or be regarded as continuing the progressive wings of Hungarian fine art traditions. Amongst them perhaps Barcsay had the strongest connection with the endeavors of Hungarian Constructivism which had been an inherent underground current in Hungarian painting for decades, or Erzsébet Schaár's quasi-scenic compositions are to a certain extent comparable to the pop-art inspired scenes of Marisol. Korniss rather continued the Bartók metamorphosis program, while Kondor was intellectually related to the writer Camus. These artistic achievements were neither nourished by the organic development of art, nor by a close connection with modern Western tendencies, but through individual intuition and artistic sensitivity. Their genre was therefore uncontinuable, not even on the level of epigonism. They bore universal values, but they also became isolated.

A change in this respect only occurred with the appearance of the so-called "Iparterv generation". In December 1968 an exhibition opened in the foyer of an architectural planning office (IPARTERV), which has since become a myth, and is remembered with nostalgia through attempts to reconstruct the original exhibition. There were eleven exhibitors: Imre Bak, Krisztián Frey, Tamás Hencze, György Jovánovics, Ilona Keserü, Gyula Konkoly, László Lakner, Sándor Molnár, István Nádler, Ludmil Siskov, and Endre Tóth. A year later another exhibition opened at the same venue, with the addition of András Baranyay, Miklós Erdély, László Méhes, János Major, and Tamás Szentjóby. In 1980 the organizer of the exhibition, Péter Sinkovits remembered the aims of the show: "The IPARTERV exhibitions were closely connected to those programs which during that time were being organized in different cultural centers, university residences, and public spaces. There were two main aims: firstly to display all those works of avant-garde art previously forced back into the studios, secondly that these events should encourage the artists themselves to search for new forms in which to express their thoughts and intentions, to awaken a liveliness and cut through passivity." The exhibition did not intend to present similar styles. The significance of these exhibitions was at once more and less than the presentation of a relatively homogeneously styled group. Less so, because the newly-awakening Hungarian avant-garde still was not strong enough to establish a thought-out and coordinated program that could be outlined in manifestations; and perhaps that was a lucky thing, as this might have been the reason why it was able to present more than just an interesting fine art show. This process of rethinking everything gathered together the young generation of artists, who in a prominent part became the determining factor in Hungarian fine art in the seventies and eighties. The Iparterv generation artists were separated from the great individual styles of art of the sixties partly in that they started from the sphere of problems of international modern art, speaking that language (of course in an often provincial, or local dialect). They did not simply follow the new visual/sculptural formations, but reflected on them. The relationship with modern Western European and American artistic trends and the art scene once again became organic in the art life here.

The significance of the Iparterv exhibitions, however, went even further, and cannot be simply measured within the order of fine art relations. Undoubtedly, the growth of the new avant-garde had its intellectual basis in the student movements of the sixties, inherent in the Prague Spring, at a time when progressive thought attacked both the alienation of consumer society and the inhuman dictatorships of Eastern Europe. At the same time, these two exhibitions were the first steps of a modern Hungarian culture, which recognized its own tasks, the first achievements of Hungarian

intellectual life. The personal creativity and innovation, the provocative and proclamative undertaking of the sovereign rights of the individual, the demands drawn up then seem like clichés today, but in the political and social situation of the time they were regarded as genuinely revolutionary. The demands and rights of the "alternative" -- or individual -- thought can also simply be called freedom.

The Iparterv generation still has a determining effect on Hungarian art today. The cultural policy of the past fifteen years, employing the criterion of support – tolerance -- banning, has practically forced the avant-garde to go underground, and because of the bitter circumstances numerous exceptional artists have gone abroad, like Csernus, Lakner, Szentjóbó, Konkoly, Méhes and Tóth, nevertheless an expert consensus has formed, completely independent of official judgments, that accepts as authentic only the avant-garde movement. The avant-garde movement became increasingly clearly defined, synchronized with contemporary Western endeavors. Starting at the beginning of the seventies, summarily, there unfolded the following lively movements: Plane-Constructivism, Minimalism, the research of sculptural/visual vocabulary, Conceptual and Project Art, Beuys-like pan-creativity, Performance Art, and for a certain time, Happenings. If we want to recall the names of individuals and their practices, then Pál Deim, Ilona Keserü, Tamás Hencze, Imre Bak, Miklós Erdély, Tibor Hajas, Tibor Csiky, István Nádler, Sándor Molnár, György Jovánovics and Gyula Pauer, and it is possible to go on, should be counted, as those who engaged with Western endeavors while preserving their own character at the same time. In the eighties there unfolded a grotesque-surreal movement, radically querying the frameworks of traditional forms (László fe Lugossy, András Wahorn, István ef Zámbo), later the endeavors of "New Sensibility" could be ranked in the intellectual circles of the Post-avant-garde and the Post-modern. Beside this there is a virulent formation of environmental subjects, often rural, provincial and folkloristic (Mihály Schéner, Imre Bukta, Géza Samu). Textile, and later glass arts similarly achieved their independent characters. Amongst the very latest practices are the private mythological creations (El Kazovszkij) and a new examination of area and space in the quasi-architectural formations of Bachman, Rajk, Kovács and Szalai.