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Who Is (Was) the Victim, Who Is
(Was) the Culprit and What
Happened? (Hungarian Art in the
Eighties)

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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.

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.

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.

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Who Is (Was) the victim, Who Is (Was) the Culprit and What Happened? (Hungarian Art in the Eighties)

On December 17, 1982, Ákos Birkás, painter, gave a lecture in Budapest titled "Who is the victim? Who is the culprit? What is the deed?" at the Rabinec Studio (later called the Rabinext Studio, an exhibition space in a private flat that existed for a few years). Birkás announced a program for the present and near future and outlined the intellectual climate in which an artistic transformation could take place. I select two points from it:

"The avant-garde has lost everything. Authority has deprived it of its space as well as its time. [...] At the cost of great sacrifice and with great energy we should not make art in Hungary, which is doomed to failure and predestined to die. This is the most fundamental and decisive consequence. ..."

"In as much as there is the possibility of artistic development in Hungary in the eighties, this more or less depends on whether an awareness takes shape that we, a group of artists here and now, with a certain public, create art history."

Looking back, we can say now that such an awareness as indicated above developed, an unfolding program did take place, although not entirely in the

way and under the circumstances envisaged at the time, and perhaps essentially faster than was expected. The movement and group known as "new sensibility" or "new eclecticism" gained ground in such a short period of time that at one point -- in the mid-eighties -- it seemed correct to assume that they were alone on the scene. Surprisingly, something which no one expected but everyone hoped for happened: cultural administration began to falter, and then died, as a foretaste of the changes in state power another five years later. It is important that these two processes (the gaining ground of artists with post-modernist tendencies and the discontinuance of the cultural policy) happened in a parallel fashion, rather than in a mutually dependent way. In a similar way, at least up to now, the decline of communist power has had no decisive effect on artistic developments.

The initial quotation above however was not vindicated: in the second half of the decade we have not only witnessed the survival of the avant-garde, in an increasingly public form, but it seems as if a group from the new artistic generation provided exactly that "sacrifice", "with great energy", and created from the outset a form "doomed to failure", as a methodology. Undoubtedly, the strong social and moral connections of the "classic" avant-garde were pushed to the background, along with its scientific and technological aspects, although they did not entirely disappear, and a framework for a more effective and valuable model developed.

It is worth making a brief mention of the means by which the economic-social-political change took place: economically we could perceive a rapidly deteriorating structure, which at the beginning of the decade was only whispered about, or discussed in closed circles. By the end of the decade it was having a decisive effect on every citizen's life. Naturally this was unable to be kept a secret. This was especially important because in Hungary -- given the internal "logic" of the planned economy -- art and culture in general were held to be "non-productive", "non-profitable", as it were.

And so it happened that money allocated to art was regarded (either announced or unannounced) as money thrown away; in itself this is not a problem, but they considered that it yielded no "benefit" whatsoever, and herein lies the fundamental misunderstanding. Money allotted to the arts is "wasted money" in the very sense that it is necessary to waste it, since the results of such a gesture are incalculable. It can have a determinant effect on the whole of society and quality of human life, often going beyond any given boundaries. Since any diverging, influential forms of artistic support other than that which comes from the state were almost completely unknown in Hungary, "culture" was especially lucky in this country during

the changes that took place over the last decade, with the establishment of the Soros Foundation. (Maybe this is not the most suitable place to write about this now, but it's enough just to look at the lists of programs and publications).

Briefly, the changes in cultural policy and power relations can be summed up as such: until the end of the seventies certain exhibitions and publications were banned, often without any hesitation, and certain individuals and groups were deprived of the chance to appear before the public. From the middle of the decade however, after a short spell of uncertainty, not only those peremptory, authoritative gestures, but the previous period's entire systems of concepts began to break down, becoming unemployable, and inducing a state of "anything goes". Currently a certain uneasiness can be felt, owing to the perceived reintroduction of certain cultural directives.

Concerning the arts, simply looking at what happened, one can see that state supported (official) art of earlier decades rarely lacked some kind of provincial or directly propagandistic character, while those works that were banned, represented 'modern' and 'international' art. This encouraged the perception that state supported art was bad, and defined 'forbidden' art as good, and not making the distinction between ethical and aesthetic concerns.

Given this, it is strange that new experimental art suddenly found itself in the position of official art without either receiving support from cultural policy or confronting it. It should be added that this occurred without compromises being made.

To contextualize 'new sensibility' we have to place it not in the working of a centralized planned economy, but in the dynamic of the 'reform' or 'transition' process. By 1983, parallel to the limited introduction of private enterprise, new civic values and lifestyles were emerging, ones unrecognizable to the previous generation. The characteristic features of these were the shifting away from the model of "enforced tolerance" and towards "positive (or desired) example". It could be said that the expression of this is the "new eclectic" art in Hungary, which always laid emphasis on the individual character. (It was by no accident that in a performance in 1985 Miklós Erdély drew a parallel between the "new painter" and the "private taxi-driver").

The "new sensibility" as the most explicitly influential movement of the decade, did not in itself signify a homogeneous style or a unified form, and

as has been mentioned above, it was not an exclusive style either. In order to get clearer picture of art in the eighties, we should look at which artistic concept/s/ was/were current, as this seems a suitable viewpoint for outlining the groupings and describing them. We have to examine the diverse answers to the questions "what is art good for" and "what is art meant for": at least three answers are clearly perceptible, and a fourth seems to be about to take shape, providing a foretaste of the nineties.

Beginning with the representatives of the "new sensibility" (or occasionally "new sensitivity"), there is a defined aesthetic direction. The aim of the art is art itself; its task is to keep alive the "aesthetic dimension", that is, "creating art", which is primarily realized in objects. Art is material and form, from which the artist's spirit and technical grounding generates the artwork, and interacts with its audience through galleries, museums, and theoretical-critical interpretation. Characterized by autonomy and autarky, through the associated work of galleries and managers it becomes art for the market; an "investment" and medium of accumulation (cf. art market prices). It has a function of social stabilization too, in that it does not aim at causing "derangement" in either the private sphere or for the public. In the spirit of "l'art pour l'art" -- broadening it with the program of the "radical eclectic" thematic -- its expressive territory is formed essentially from the world of the salons. Its representative medium is painting, but its presence is conceivable in any other medium. Amongst their representatives -- and naturally I am not attempting a complete enumeration here -- Imre Bak, István Nádler and Tamás Hencze (after a period of constructivist work), Ákos Birkás, Károly Kelemen, Károly Halász and Sándor Pinczehelyi (in the wake of their work related to the seventies' conceptualism) reached "new painting", particularly in their works created in the early eighties, often utilizing conscious references or allusions. Such a reference is Imre Bak's use of a sign-like geometrical painting style, or Birkás's mirror motif employed as a compositional technique. As regards the younger generation, János Vető and Lóránt Méhes had already come forward in a spirit related to a post-modernist approach by the end of the seventies, and their later works were a "declarative" expression of this fact. By the end of the eighties they had both distanced themselves from this direct "passion-painting", reaching out for "cooler" media (such as drawing and photography). For them, and for others such as János Szirtes, it was common to pursue different artistic branches, and completely natural to ignore normal "boundaries". This is true also of István Zámbo, András Wahorn, László fe Lugossy (in particular their film and video work, their writing and the music of AE Bizottság -- Committee). For these artists, and specifically in Szirtes's performances and his paintings related to his performances, the artistic intention may be summarized as that of "private

mythology". The most unambiguous and perhaps the single most original representative of this in Hungary is El Kazovszkij. (In recent years, the work of Áron Gábor has been approaching this direction). One of the most important organizers and participants in the movement and achievements of the Hungarian "trans-avantgarde" is the art historian Lóránd Hegyi, to whom we are indebted for the fact that the last decade has been the best documented period of Hungarian art, as well as for his organization of exhibitions and managerial activities. He has given a profound theoretical elaboration to the movement, and placed it within an international context.

It is also possible to connect to the so-called purely "aesthetic" artistic conception with a kind of art, which very loosely could be termed "trans-avantgarde". If we compare for example one of the most typical representative painters of "new sensibility", László Fehér, with let's say Gábor Roskó or László Révész, or perhaps Károly Klimó. These last three artists produce different painterly conceptualizations, but what they have in common is that they are not related to expressive styles of painting, and their choice of themes indicates a hidden, powerfully intellectual outlook. The work of Zoltán Ádám and József Bullás in the mid-eighties, or the painting of Gábor Ősz can provide those links of the chain which could join the endeavors of new painting, like that of András Bernát and Erzsébet Vojnich. The richness of tone and the monochrome quality of these last two artists' paintings are not all that far from Ákos Birkás's latest painterly "period", which perhaps surpassed in quality all his previous works (I am thinking in particular of his works exhibited in 1989 at the Knoll Gallery in Vienna). These works by Birkás, together with the published catalogue, can be regarded as the highest achievement of the decade, to which, in our grouping of work that characterized by "pure art", only the work of György Jovánovics is comparable. The "Berlin color reliefs or the picture story, "On the road of painting with Turner in Biblical Lands," show the boundaries of this grouping in that these works could be also categorized as representatives of another artistic approach to be discussed below. However, they gain their most particular meanings within the totality of the life work of Jovánovics. There are artistic oeuvres which are stronger than transitory categories (of style).

This is also true for the work of Miklós Erdély (1928-1986), which can be positioned in the next, "cognitive group", to borrow his designation, Erdély was perhaps the most significant figure of the past decade's (avant-garde) art in Hungary, and his practice clearly showed an artistic approach which conceived art's essence and task as being a particular form of cognition -- different from scientific cognition. This "cognitive" art practice manifested itself differently in the eighties than in the previous decades, but at the

same time it could integrate itself with the surviving conceptualist, minimalist and especially "new medium" related tendencies of those previous decades. The group, as much as it was a group at all, was called INDIGO (InterDIszciplináris Gondolkodás = Interdisciplinary Thinking). In the early eighties, in joint exhibitions and actions, they represented their artistic approach as was indicated by their chosen name. Here, art was theorized in terms of a free activity, open towards the unknown, whose basis was that "everybody stands alone in the face of the non-understood", from this there resulted a particular level of equality, a recovery of dignity.

A characteristic example of this concept is the work of Péter Türk with his research into "the birth of the image" (Psychograms and Phenomena) which renders comprehensible how art should be conceived as research and discovery, making use of these concepts in their widest sense. From this point of view we can say that this cognitive approach can be linked with the decade's almost entire output of work relating to new pictorial forms, taken in general, not as the totality of concrete, individual works. The majority of the works belong rather to the already mentioned group or to the one to be discussed below, which embraces the experimental approach as well, disregarding such exceptions as András Baranyay or Zsigmond Károlyi, and lately the works of Péter Kiss.

With regards to the art that utilizes new technical media, it is a decisive question, in Hungary at least, how it is possible to resolve the conflict between a technically underdeveloped environment -- where even making a telephone call can mean a serious problem -- and the considerably higher level of demands made by this field. This demands a pragmatic approach and the making of virtue out of necessity. Quite characteristically, due to the technical background, the appearance of video art for a wider Hungarian public, occurred only in the middle eighties. It is of significance that Gábor Bódy (1946-1985), who has been the most important artist in this field, was involved only as a practitioner. It is without a doubt that until his death he exercised a greater degree of influence in this field outside Hungary, we just have to think of the launching in 1980 of INTERMENTAL, which until today stands alone as an international undertaking. In addition to the technical background, it was the Hungarian "disadvantageous situation", arising from an anachronistic cultural and artistic outlook that has up to the present compelled artists to work abroad (perhaps it is sufficient to refer to the examples of Gusztáv Hámos and more recently Ágnes Hegedűs).

After video, the appearance of computer art can be also situated in the second half of the eighties. The breakthrough, after an early period of sporadic experimentation (László Csizy, Gyula Száva), can be linked with

the exhibition "Digitart" organized in 1986, and developments in the nineties are suggested by the international success of Tamás Waliczky for example. It can also be noted that in the second half of the last decade there was a noticeable quickening in the more "traditional media, such as photography and film. With regards to the latter, mention should be made of the reorganization of the K3 group of the Béla Balázs Film Studio under the name K Section. And also the amateur film movement was transformed into an independent film movement. Last year the exhibition "Más-Kép – A Different View," for the first time since 1976 attempted to present a summary of such innovative tendencies within photography. It integrated artists of the younger generation, partly those connected to the Academy of Applied Arts and partly those related to the Liget Gallery. (It is also a fact that the Esztergom Photo Biennial has been established as a biennial representation of experimental photography).

Apart from all this, it has to be emphasized of course that within this so-called cognitive group, the artists can be ranked not according to the utilized media but according to their artistic approach. Often as with Ernő Tolvaly and András Lengyel and in the case of Gyula Pauer, particular works and groups of work can be ranked within this category and not their whole career. Between this "cognitive" group and the next group which is constructivist in spirit, we can place János Megyik's work, which can be interpreted from both viewpoints, and also mention a fourth group, including the installations of János Sugár.

I wish to place the roots of the third group in a tradition of Bauhaus functionalism and of Constructivism, a tradition existent since the start of this century. As regards its tradition, it is unequivocally the richest in Central Eastern Europe, although this inspiration emanates naturally beyond this region. Not only the geometric "purist" concept resides here, but experimentalism in the classical sense. Every form of experimental artistic ideal as well as "architectonic vision", and also the numerous forms of "spiritual" and social design maintaining a direct connection with the social sphere or with environmental culture are detectable. Similarly, the numerous manifestations of 'communication' art may belong here, from mail art which was revived during the early eighties, through radio to the sphere of documentation or collection-publication.

A new understanding of the constructive spirit becomes apparent if, viewed from the domain of post industrial societies, we identify its "humanist" systems of proportions and measurements. These may provide a remedy against the unperceived aggression of an over-rationalized medium by calculating not only the "material", but the intellectual and even the spiritual

dimensions of the construct. Similarly, in a post-socialist, feudal-industrial environment -- like Hungarian society -- radicalism, mobilized by the unerring sense of form, or new functionalism, is able to point to the stifled spheres of deformed social development. The basic attitude mentioned earlier can be connected to the work of Dóra Maurer, András Mengyán, and Tibor Gáyor (without enumerating all the others), while the latter attitude can be connected primarily to the activity of Gábor Bachman and László Rajk. Bachman's career figures as a special 'chapter' during the eighties, the analysis of which offers not only artistic but social and moral bearings as well. The constructivist-functionalist background provides a useful viewpoint for the work of Attila Kovács and Tibor Szalai as well, as it does for the interpretation of the 'art mechanics' of István Haraszty. The work of György Galántai can be linked to this sphere, through his conception of art's function as being a relationship (including both his ARTPOOL and the AL, that is the "intermedial artistic work" which registered the first half of the decade) and Róbert Swierkiewicz, who as a member of the Xertox organized in this field performances and actions (for example nearly 100 "industrious meditations" with Jenő Lévy and Imre Regős).

And even if it may seem surprising, and perhaps exactly in order to cause surprise, as well as to mark the boundary of this category: the sculptures of Géza Samu, being constructed from the ecosphere, must be mentioned here as well as Imre Bukta's peasant-existentialism, because of their social implication.

The spirit of constructivism which is only fugative in the above examples is gaining strength owing to a greater interest in the archaeology of technoculture, and the growing use of computers.

I have left till the end of this short review (to maintain chronological order) the newest, and the less easily analyzable, development: the appearance of the group "Újlak" - The New Inhabitants and a number of closely associated artists during the academic year 1989/90, through a series of "one-night" shows. Although previously they had appeared together in joint and/or thematic presentations ("Plein-Air", or the "Szelep" - Valve, at the Bercsényi Gallery), they found and displayed a new quality with the discovery of a dilapidated, empty cinema to which they gave a new function transforming it into a meeting place for installation art. It is characteristic that this was not done in the framework of some existing institution, rather it was a "found space", far removed from galleries (although Zoltán Ádám is an already experienced exhibitor). The duration of the exhibitions was certainly not "audience-centric". Instead, they attempt to redefine the conceived "uniqueness" of time-based art through the single night duration

of the exhibitions. Some of the group members, Tamás Komoróczy and Attila Szűcs and two other artists, Zsolt Veress, and Csaba Nemes held a joint exhibition -- outside the Újlak --, titled "Distance", where their four installations signaled a complex artistic form that can be seen here paradigmatic. (The medium of installation is the most frequent form of presentation also of the group exhibiting under the collective name "Substitute Thirsters", who are drawn towards the spiritual peripheries and towards the aesthetics of "bad art"). I do not want to draw a distinct lesson from all of this. However, from the examples given, it is obvious that Hungarian artists in the eighties feel free to work concurrently in many different fields. This approach has informed that of the Újlak group, however this is not a sign of utopianism, merely perhaps of a 'calm' and 'understood' disillusion.