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“We don’t demand. At least not yet.” – Interview with OFF-Biennale art event leader Hajnalka Somogyi

October 2, 2017 - [Krisztina Orbán](#)

OFF-Biennale is a large international, independent grassroots contemporary art event. The second OFF-Biennale, “Gaudiopolis 2017, The City of Joy,” opened last Friday and will go until November 5 at some 50 locations in Budapest and other towns. The Budapest Beacon spoke to Hajnalka Somogyi (pictured), leader of the OFF-Biennale Association, about what the event is all about, and what makes it different from other, state-sponsored art events in Hungary.

Was the first [OFF-Biennale] board personally picked by you?

“No. I invited two colleagues who I really wanted to work with and with whom I also worked before, and they suggested other members. And this group of seven changed a lot, and four people are still in there from the starting group. We felt that by organizing this biennale we can basically capitalize on the assets that we have, which is professional network and professional experience. So we could invite international artists and editors of global art magazines who only came because of our professional authenticity.

Not applying to the Hungarian state is certainly a political statement but it also had a practical reason. One of the reasons the art scene has been so vulnerable to these changes that the government initiated from 2010 is the exclusive dominance of the state over the arts. Despite the political changes 23 years ago [...], there hasn’t been a considerable alternative to state financing in the arts. There hasn’t been real corporate or private sponsorship.

I think it’s a very important message of the biennale, to the civil scene, to artists, that even though we are absolutely convinced that what we do is worthy of public funding, we also believe that you don’t have to accept certain compromises.”

Who do you want to send the message to?

“The civil scene. I think that was the energy behind the first edition [of the Biennale], and also [...] the scene wanted to prove to itself that it’s willing to move out of its comfort zone. Whatever we do is important enough to try and work among these conditions.”

And you proved it with the first Biennale?

“Well, we proved you can realize really ambitious large-scale projects this way. But this doesn’t mean that this is a sustainable operation, and everyone is very much aware of that. For example, the sources that provided more than fifty percent of our budget two years ago are not available for art projects now in Hungary anymore: the Norwegian Civil Grant and the Open Society Initiative for Europe. The question before the second opening is how to make it sustainable.

You don't aim for profitability at all?

"This is not a profit-oriented thing, the whole Biennale is for free for the audience."

How have you found the sponsors?

"The majority of the money comes from international sources. We proudly declare ourselves being a civil organization supported from abroad. We think that it is really a great achievement that such a small civil organization is able to bring such international attention and trust and money to Hungarian art today."

It wasn't a question then that you were going to register as a "foreign funded organization"? What is OFF-Biennale's opinion on the civil law?

"That's a whole different question. I'm talking about international financing, this is my competence. I don't really want to talk about the law."

Did you get any response from the state-funded institutions?

"At the time we were preparing the first edition it was announced that the Hungarian Academy of Arts organized the opening of their first National Salon, which was their flagship art event, at the Kunsthalle the very same day when the Biennale was to open by accident. And we announced it publicly before they did. So the chief curator of the institution called me, asking 'Are we having the opening the same day?' So he said okay, we are going to move to another date, and so they did."

This is a very small and a very symbolic thing. Sixteen months before that when people were demonstrating in Ludwig Museum and in front of Kunsthalle and no one cared, no one would have thought that they would move the opening of their largest event because they don't want the competition."

So they finally listened?

"OFF-Biennale never issued an official statement about cultural politics. We never formulated an open letter saying this and that are going wrong. We don't demand. At least not yet. We demonstrate the possibility of a different [way of] working, one that we can stand for."

Why Gaudiopolis?

"We decided to have a thematic frame, because we agreed that one of the problems has been that new production is not happening. In art you need a little spark so that other people get inspired. And my colleague Katalin Székely who has been part of the curatorial board since the beginning came up with this story of a children's republic that was founded by Lutheran pastor Gábor Sztehlo after WWII. He not only provided shelter for these kids, but he initiated the build-up of a democratic system on a micro level."

When we got to know this story it brought together many thoughts we find important. The idea of personal commitment, making important decisions in times of crisis, community-building, education, solidarity, and the role of kids, creativity and art."

And how can you reach the public with these ideas and questions?

"Schools are targeted directly with our educational programs, we do that a lot. Also this year there are quite a few projects that work with kids directly. Partly art projects where kids are involved, and workshops. British performer Marvin Gaye Chetwynd is reworking the idea of [the film] 'Somewhere in Europe' that was based on the story of Gaudiopolis, and she works with children. Manuel Pelmuş works with teenagers thinking about monuments in public space."

The public performances are also intended to reach out to the wider public?

“Yes, absolutely. But it’s not like the Biennale decides that there’ll be an element in public space. The artist gets the invitation and he or she naturally feels that such issues could be played out in public.”

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