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Art in Hungary Goes Back to the Future

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A revival of interest in Hungarian neo-avant-garde art of the 1960s and '70s is helping to bring the nation's current practice into focus.

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Is the recent renewal of interest in Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists who worked under socialism in the 1960s and '70s connected to the work of today's young artists and curators, with their eye on the rise of the nationalistic right? A look at four international exhibitions and the second iteration of OFF-Biennale Budapest may provide an answer.

In the Hungary of the 1960s and '70s, an authoritarian government with close ties to the Soviet Union categorized artists in three ways. Those deemed a threat to the regime were prohibited under threat of deportation or imprisonment; those considered supportive to the socialist regime were given commissions and exhibitions; and the rest were simply tolerated (though kept under close watch). And while Hungary was considered more open than other Eastern bloc countries, this was still a period of censorship. For many neo-avant-garde artists of the era, the only appropriate strategy was to push boundaries—but quietly.

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How does this history illuminate Hungary's art world nearly thirty years after the collapse of socialism across Eastern Europe, when artists work in a relatively open society that is digitally connected to the rest of the world?



Karoly Kismanyoky, *With the Eyes of Others*, 1973. veinnacontemporary, Focus section. Courtesy acb gallery

Starting about seven years ago, a new right-leaning regime in Hungary began to exert itself on cultural institutions with the mandated merger of the Museum of Fine Arts and Hungarian National Gallery; a broadening of powers for the conservative [Hungarian Academy of Arts](#), which controls much arts funding; and a takeover of the historic *kunsthalle* [Műcsarnok](#). Then, in 2013, the government installed a regime-friendly director at Budapest's Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, prompting the "Ludwig Stairs" protests, in which artists, curators and gallerists staged a two-week Occupy-style sit-in at the museum's entrance. (Such activism has continued in various forms since, most often under the Free Artists banner.) The intense closeness of participants led to better information sharing and a broader comprehension of how deeply the government was trying to transform and control its cultural institutions.

It was back to the future.

2013 also saw the first of a string of exhibitions looking back at the subtle subversion that characterized the Hungarian neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and '70s. In 2013, three leading Hungarian galleries—[acb](#), [Kisterem](#), and [Vintage](#)—co-organized *Bookmarks: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Post-Conceptual Positions in Hungarian Art from the Sixties to the Present* in Budapest. The show's title evokes a missing chapter in the unfolding narrative of Eastern European art history. Cologne Art Fair director Daniel Hug saw *Bookmarks* while traveling in Hungary as head of the foundation devoted to his grandfather, Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, and decided to produce an iteration of the show at his the fair in 2015, working with the same three galleries. Last summer, New York gallery [Elizabeth Dee](#) mounted the well-received show *With the Eyes of Others: Hungarian Artists of the Sixties and Seventies*. And in September, Hungarian art historian and critic József Mélyi organized—again in conjunction with the same three galleries—a similarly themed tribute for [the Focus section of the viennacontemporary](#) fair.

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Artist Endre Tót and Kristóf Kovács of Telep Gallery, restaging of Tót's *Gladness Demonstrations* of the 1970s, October 8, 2017, OFF-Biennale Budapest

But before these last two international shows, back in Budapest, an intergenerational group of more than 150 Hungarian artists and curators had decided to address government interference by presenting a decentralized series of exhibitions in and around more than 50 venues. A key goal was to "offer an alternative to the network of government-funded art institutions" and "to encourage, support and celebrate an independent art scene," one of the seven lead curators, Tijana Stepanovic, told me at the time. The initiative was partially funded by Budapest-born billionaire George Soros's progressive Open Society Foundation, and pointedly eschewed government funding and government-funded locations. Those exhibitions became the inaugural edition of OFF-Biennale. And they too also included yet another iteration of *Bookmarks*. This time, the historical neo-avant-garde work was mounted in what had once been a leather factory, later a private museum.

Fast forward to this year's OFF-Biennale, which included yet another a look back, this time focusing on the public art of the neo-avant-garde garde from

the '60s and '70s. An exhibition of documents, photographs and re-stagings recalled some of the interventions, performances and spontaneous events that took place in that era, particularly in response to official events.

What is it that artists today, as they look warily to the rise of right-wing extremism, are looking for in forebears such as Endre Tót and Imre Bak, both of whom made the trek to viennacontemporary? Curator András Szántó, in a thoughtful essay for the catalogue that accompanied the aforementioned show at Elizabeth Dee, helps answer that question by identifying four strategies of evasion that artists of the '60s and '70s used to avoid censorship. The most essential of these may have been abstraction, which could maintain an apolitical aura even as it signaled a coded kinship with the West. Other artists staged ephemeral performances, often in informal venues, that were over before anyone could get in trouble. Yet others created artwork so conceptual that only a few other artists could identify the dissidence baked in, or so seemingly lighthearted that anyone who took it seriously enough to censure would look the fool.

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Boglárka Mittich and Patrick Urwyler of Chimera-Project Gallery in their booth at viennacontemporary 2017. Courtesy: viennacontemporary / A. Murashkin

GARAGE spoke recently to Patrick Urwyler and Boglárka Mittich, who founded Budapest's [Chimera-Project Gallery](#) in 2013. Both gallerists are 36, and their roster is, with just two exceptions, made up of artists born in the 1980s. One of those exceptions is Géza Pernecky, who was born in 1936 and is often cited alongside neo-avant garde artists. "From an artistic point of view," Urwyler explains in relation to Pernecky and his peers, "this conceptual heritage is important for Hungarian art scene today." He hastened to add that artists today have freedom of movement and assembly and the right to protest, as OFF-Biennial itself demonstrates: "The system is not so stupid to directly harm the artists."

Currently, Urwyler and Mittich are organizing an exhibition for next autumn at [Kunsthau Kunstverein Potsdam](#) titled *IF YOU ARE MANIPULATED, MANIPULATE BACK!*—a phrase that dates from a 1972 "manifesto" by Hungarian conceptual artist Gyula Pauer, whose work, "underlines the conceptual heritage of Hungarian art, which is currently being rediscovered under the buzzword Hungarian 'Neo-avant-garde,'" the couple said in a statement about the planned show. Retributive manipulation has, they told

me, become an operating strategy for younger artists. "The government at the moment in Hungary, it's full of fake news, manipulative of the people," says Urwyler, but the exhibition will equally address "not just political manipulation but also selfies, social media, Photoshop."

The couple pointed as an example to work by one of their artists, [Mark Fridvalszki](#), who questions truth and reality. "One strategy of his is to confront us with materials that look real, like stone for example, but it's made digitally and it's fake," said Urwyler. Then there's Áron Kútvölgyi-Szabó, who is also, Urwyler explains, "interested in disinformation." And Budapest-based Kútvölgyi-Szabó creates what Urwyler calls "graphical metaphors"—impressive graphs and grids—"to show how we perceive information and to show subjectivity and multiple perspectives on so-called facts."

These methods also fit squarely within the same kind of subterfuge in which the artists of the '60s and '70s engaged. Both generations of artists worked or work in a state where dissidence carries risk, necessitating the invention of diverse and sometimes playful opposition to social, cultural and political constraints. I asked the organizers of this year's OFF-Biennale what had changed since the inaugural edition two years ago. Hajnalka Somogyi (a former Ludwig Museum colleague of Stepanovic's) and Katalin Székely, two members of the 2017 curatorial board, responded:

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"By 2015, the institutional restructuring has been more or less implemented, and censorship internalized by most institutional leadership. Since then, the autonomy of the National Cultural Fund has been dissolved and international funding has been made more difficult. As well, as it has been stigmatized (as a form of, according to the government, exerting foreign influence on the country's internal affairs). Therefore, while the state art system mostly ignores contemporary artistic positions that bear a relevance on current social and political issues, it is becoming ever more difficult to produce and present these works independently. Precarity and disillusionment, but also anger and determination, is on the rise among artists."

Perhaps the reason that East Central Europe holds such fascination now is that the West is just beginning to understand how art thrived there in decades past, taking paths of its own even under repressive circumstances. But there could be another reason for this interest, which comes at a time when even democracies from Germany to the US are seeing nationalist causes gain

traction. "These artists knew a thing or two about life in an authoritarian state," Szántó writes, "and many of them are still actively making work, injecting their hard-earned perspective into a situation that sorely needs it."

"Whatever may happen next," he concludes, "the Hungarians remind us that the creative spirit will flourish under even the hardest rock, and that good art will outlive those who seek to bend the world to their warped beliefs."



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