

LETTER FROM BUDAPEST

The Castle and the City

On the road into Budapest from the airport this autumn one could not miss the giant billboards graced with a close-up of a laughing George Soros, part of a government campaign calling for a 'national consultation' about a mysterious 'Soros Plan'. Warning the people not to let him 'have the last laugh', this crusade set out to vilify the 87-year-old Budapest-born financier and philanthropist, insinuating that he is responsible for masterminding the overrunning of Europe with millions of illegal migrants. His actual self-proclaimed plan is to further the principles of the Open Society, an agenda closely associated with the spread of neoliberalism but which also entails encouraging 'vibrant and tolerant democracies', and therefore poses a fundamental threat to right-wing populism. Earlier this year the authorities also moved to disrupt the Central European University, a singular post-graduate institution in the post-communist world founded by Soros in the early 1990s that until now has managed to preserve its intellectual autonomy, by passing the notorious Lex CEU amendment to the National Higher Education Law that set unfeasible conditions for the university's continued existence.

This was just the latest episode in the silencing, takeover and remaking of cultural institutions in Hungary, exemplified by the establishment in 2011 of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA), a neo-traditionalist body with a tight grip on arts funding and a portfolio of palatial buildings, including the city's largest exhibition space, the Kunsthalle. Notably, among the 43 venerable members of the Fine Arts section pictured on the MMA website there is not a single woman artist. Structural changes to the artistic landscape have also seen the forced fusion of art institutions and the building of a new museum district in City Park, concreting over parts of one of Budapest's precious green spaces in order to free the current seat of the National Gallery in the Buda Castle for government offices in a suitably regal setting.

'You hold the castle, but we have the city' was the combative slogan with which the second Off Biennale Budapest was launched this autumn, a grassroots biennale organised on the principle of preserving artistic independence by eschewing government funding and avoiding state-run venues. While

the first edition in 2015 was an extensive survey of the resilience and vitality of the autonomous art scene, this time round the team of seven female curators led by Hajnalka Somogyi proposed the more closely defined theme, 'Gaudiopolis – City of Joy', after the self-governing republic of children run by a Lutheran pastor in postwar Budapest, reflecting on its ideals of trust, generosity, care and responsibility.

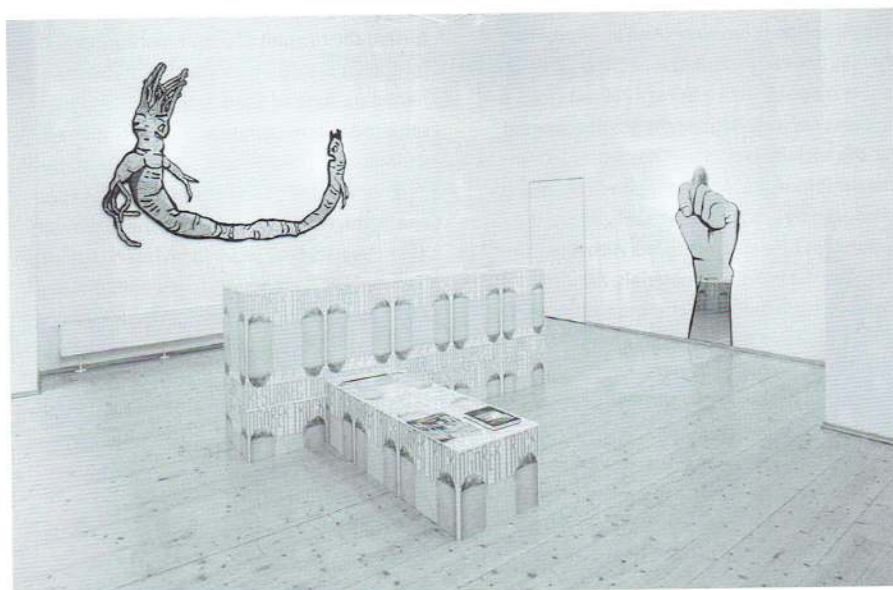
Featuring 40 projects with more than 120 Hungarian and international artists, both through its choice of theme and self-organisational collaborative format, the Biennale could be seen as a practical exercise in rebuilding the culture of democracy through contemporary art. Along with a central exhibition, 'People Players', in the premises of a three-storey cafe under renovation, the Biennale inhabited a variety of off-site venues, with for example an astronomical observatory

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in the Buda Hills used for the show 'Flying Kajak' on art and science. The street provided the setting for a collective re-enactment of Endre Tót's *Gladness Demonstration* from the 1970s, with participants carrying banners with smiling photos of themselves as a 'joyful' protest against the oppressive ambience.

Docufiction films that re-narrate national myths and a fictitious museum installation of historical objects, including irredentist souvenirs, postcards and military paraphernalia, were the components of Szabolcs KissPál's trilogy *From Fake Mountains to Faith*, which traces the origins and denouement of the 'state religion' of nationalism, a ritualistic faith celebrating the nation's mythical birth, tragic crucifixion and eventual resurrection. The show was tellingly hosted by the leftist Institute of Political History, the windows of which look out onto the Hungarian Parliament on Kossuth Square, an ideologically charged public space that was recently reconstructed to restore the pre-communist look of 1944.

Taking a more personal approach to the construction of memory, Sári Ember's *The Taste of Difference*, 2017, is a two-channel video projection following the activities of the politically diverse community of second-generation Hungarian exiles living in São Paulo, who perform their estranged cultural identity through poetry readings, theatre and dance. At a time when feelings of national identity are routinely manipulated by populist politicians and with many Hungarians, including artists and curators, choosing for political or economic reasons to forsake their





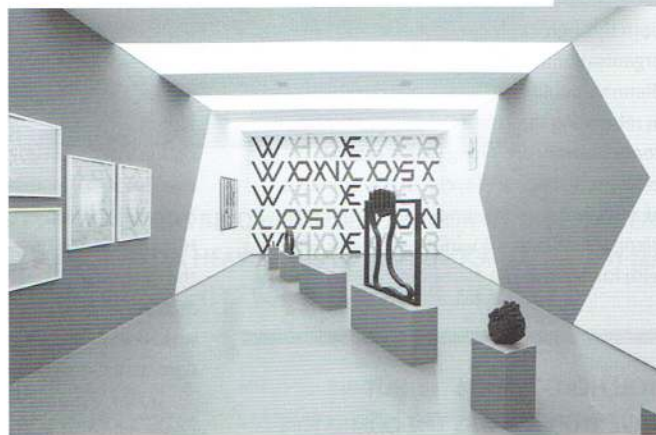
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Slavs and Tatars
Society of Rascals 2017

Péter Forgács,
Zsolt K Horváth,
András Péterffy,
István Rév,
István Sinkó,
István Jávör

Pedagogical Partisan
Action(s) 2017

Pakui Hardware
Creatures of Habit 2017

Ferenc Gróf
X 2017



homeland for the multicultural capitals of Europe, these tender observations on the embodiment of belonging in language and literature are especially poignant.

The marginalised legacy of the social struggles and political culture of unionised labour was explored in 'Bookfriendship', for which four curators and seven artists engaged collaboratively with relics of the working class found at the headquarters of the Union of Steel and Metalworkers of Hungary. Upended tables in a reception room were used as improvised display boards, including for a frieze of potato prints made by Bence György Pálkás for the cover of an independent political journal for the socially excluded. The centrepiece of the exhibition was an arrangement of objects produced by workers as one-off gifts for the union that fuse abstract forms with references to industrial tools and materials. Almost 30 years on from the fall of communism there is here no nostalgia or serious attempt to historicise, but rather a marvelling at the reassuring strangeness and familiar otherness of the heritage of socialism.

Although not dealing directly with politics, Sven Johne's film *A Sense of Warmth*, 2015, exhibited in the new private project space Studio Hidegszoba, could also be seen in the Budapest context as offering a comment on

the dilemma of the creeping normalisation of an abnormal situation. It follows the story of a woman who seeks refuge from the dehumanisation of modern life by joining a community of conservationists studying migratory birds on a remote island. What first appears as an idyllic existence, however, increasingly begins to resemble the callous world she sought to escape.

Some of the private galleries in a burgeoning market-oriented scene that has turned the turmoil of public institutions to its advantage also took part in Off Biennale: non-state-funded spaces, they fulfilled the required criteria. While ACB Gallery offered its main venue for Ferenc Gróf's project, three neighbourhood galleries – Kisterem, Trapéz and Vintage – collaborated on the exhibition 'City Theatre' that focused on interventions by conceptual artists into the public space of east European cities in the 1970s. Neo-avant-garde practices are indeed the main agenda for these galleries, with ACB, Kisterem and Vintage now regularly organising collaborative presentations on the international stage, putting aside competitiveness to promote Hungarian art abroad.

Coinciding with the opening weekend of Off Biennale was the inauguration of Glassyard, a new gallery run by former director

of the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Barnabás Bencsik, who, due to local circumstances, ended up swapping sides from the public to the private sector. The first show was a site-specific installation by István Csákány, who made a life-size wooden replica of a retro bourgeois interior complete with vacuum cleaner, record player and potted plants. The relative strength of the Hungarian gallery scene is reflected in its regular presence in international art fairs, as well as signs of dynamism at home, with Ani Molnár Gallery, for example, set to open a new street-level gallery space this winter.

The youngest generation of artists, who are as turned off by the traditional mechanisms of the art world as they are by mainstream politics, gravitate towards the non-profit Trafó Gallery, which under the curatorial direction of Áron Fenyvesi has nurtured practices such as post-internet and abstract art that are catered for neither by the local museums nor by commercial galleries. Symptomatically, their current exhibition, 'Creatures of Habit by Pakui Hardware', anticipates the coming of automated societies run by a transitory species of hybrid non-organic labourers. Through the efforts of artists creating their own parallel worlds, private galleries devising strategies to prosper in challenging conditions and bold curatorial initiatives such as the Off Biennale, contemporary Hungarian art, and hopefully society too, is seeking a path to cultural redemocratisation and renewal. ■

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