

OFF – F. A. Q.

What is OFF-Biennale Budapest?

OFF-Biennale Budapest has a dual purpose: on one hand it is creating an independent, international, contemporary series of exhibitions and art events, which run between 24 April and 31 May 2015 and attracted 35.000 visits. More than 200 programs took place in 136 places in Budapest, throughout Hungary, and abroad.

On the other hand it is a professional platform (OFF-Platform), based on an unprecedentedly large collaboration that is without parallel in Hungary. Its aim is to rethink the role and competence of contemporary art within the challenging political circumstances and searching for new working methods and common learning. OFF-Platform unites discursive programs, workshops dealing with civil-social –development, trainings, and lectures. The OFF-Platform has a longer duration than the biennale. Since mid-2014, we have been organizing platform programs, and the end of OFF isn't the end of the OFF-Platform.

It is important to add that the idea of the OFF-Biennale is not based on the biennales abroad, but is built on the nature and needs of the Hungarian art scene and the local problems. This is why OFF operates as an umbrella organization, which brings together various autonomous initiatives.

What are the most important purposes of the OFF-Biennale Budapest?

The long-term purpose of the OFF-Biennale Budapest is to create a contemporary civil scene in Hungary that is internationally embedded and diversified and to facilitate self-organization. To achieve this we must widen the audience of contemporary art, reinforce our international connections, create new operational models, and involve new funding sources and partners into financing contemporary art. We would like to contribute to greater numbers of people to learn, self-organize, become proactive, and develop new skills that are indispensable for decreasing their / our vulnerability in relation to the state; we want each participant to grow strong and achieve their own aims.

What does OFF-Biennale do to achieve these aims?

OFF organizes an international contemporary series of exhibitions and art events. It is introducing a new cultural brand in Hungary and in the international art world.

Besides a synchronized communication campaign during OFF, strong art-mediation programs help the public to engage with contemporary art.

Beginning in mid-2014, the OFF-Platform has continuously organized professional forums, workshops and meetings that create opportunities for conversation between the different participants, and for developing skills which are not only helpful in organizing the OFF exhibitions and events, but also help to maintain the individual practices on long run.

OFF applied to Hungarian and international foundations to raise funds and involved many private supporters. This ensured the financing of the activity of the umbrella organization (communication, art mediation, international connections, professional forums, etc.) and, where possible, helped to create projects as well.

In order to create a sustainable scene in the long-term, OFF presents many different practices which can inspire self-organization in Hungary. In connection with this, we started an online research hub, and organize an international conference entitled “Communities of Practice”.

What tasks did the OFF staff not assume?

OFF-Biennale Budapest didn't assume the tasks of organizing or financing the projects, or searching for the locations; these were the tasks of the project managers of individual projects. OFF strives to help in the search for sponsors (such as, for example, locations, partners, in-kind support), but OFF did not assume responsibility for these tasks. We would like to prove that this high-quality collaboration is possible and that, collectively, we can create a very professional international program. For this, it was necessary that all of the participants were active, self-motivated, and assumed responsibility for the projects, and created the programs in cooperation with each other.

What is the structure of the OFF-Biennale team and who takes part in it?

The foundations of OFF are self-organization and the team network. It is an umbrella organization: the active and committed players of Hungarian contemporary art organizing their programs by themselves, which OFF brings together as a series of art events with coordinated communication.

To create the OFF-Biennale we organized the team of 7 curators: Nikolett Erőss, Anna Juhász, Hajnalka Somogyi, Tijana Stepanovic, Borbála Szalai, Katalin Székely and János Szoboszlai. Later, we gradually built an organization that by April 2015 consisted of around 90 persons. Many of the curators are managers of the management teams: OFF-projects, OFF-Platform, international programs and connections, communication, fundraising, art-mediation.

Around 100 volunteers have helped to realize OFF as “staff members” and organizers, but in fact there are many more organizers, because OFF is based on partly separate units: everybody is responsible for their own project.

What fees get the curators and contributors of the OFF-Biennale Budapest?

Artists and experts who are working on OFF, including professional staff and project managers, do not accept payment for any of the work, including artistic, curatorial, and managerial tasks connected to the OFF-Biennale’s organization. They work pro-bono for the biennale with passion, some since as early as December 2013.

How is the program constructed?

How do artists become involved with OFF?

How is it possible that even before the open call there were participants in OFF?

Unlike conventional biennales, at first we did not ask artists to be participants, but asked some 80-100 Hungarian and foreign curators and art organizers to apply with a self-developed, independent project that reacts to the questions raised by OFF. The invited curators then invited artists with whom they would like to collaborate; in this way we aimed to build a decentralized, network based structure, which offers and ensures a varied program as well. The OFF curatorial board selected from the proposed projects. In addition the curatorial board acted as professional consultants. The curatorial board also made its own project, “Check Your Head!” For this we invited nine foreign and three Hungarian artists. We consider Check Your Head! as one of the programs—not the central exhibition—of the biennale. In addition to projects that are created in Hungary by foreign and Hungarian curators, some colleagues living abroad organized locations for OFF-satellite events.

The next step was initiating an open call for artists. We initiated this for several reasons: to begin with, we felt that there were several artists who were not invited as part of any of the curator’s projects, but we wanted them to have the opportunity to participate. In addition, we wanted the structure of the OFF to be open, giving opportunities for others to join.

The amount of open call applications exceeded expectations; more than 160 artists applied.

Is there a central exhibition location?

There is no central exhibition location because we want to emphasize the decentralization of the structure. OFF is made from a network of projects and exhibitions, which are created in

different parts of the city. There is a central meeting point however, which provides a venue for some of the art programs, and functions as the curators' office and press office during OFF.

Why is it necessary that projects are independent?

The main purpose of the biennale is to mobilize Hungarian participants: we would like to show the energies that are motivating Hungarian contemporary art to the public and to the international scene. Therefore we asked these participants to work on their own projects, and entrusted them with bringing their positions, tendencies, and themes to OFF. Besides, at the beginning of the project, there was no infrastructure, this was the only method to get OFF started.

Why doesn't the OFF-Biennale Budapest accept Hungarian state support?

Organized without any institutional backing, the OFF-Biennale Budapest does not use any local state funds, stays away from state-run art venues and relies on pro bono professional work. In the absence of any significant private and corporate support for contemporary art, the state's funding and infrastructure have had a decisive, almost exclusive power over the local art scene. This influence, when centralized and abused for the sake of a political agenda, becomes a restrictive, debilitating force in a weak civil society. In order to reduce dependence, the scene needs total realignment, new partnerships and new methods of operation.

We do not accept Hungarian state support because we did not want art to be in a vulnerable situation; we believe art should be the responsibility of the art community. For this we should learn to stand on many legs, and not let ourselves depend on only one source. This contradicts economical considerations. It is necessary to be self-sufficient, find new partners and sources of funding, and elaborate new strategies.

It is important to emphasize that we do not wish to imply that culture (and supporting the contemporary art) is not the task of the state; and we are not suggesting that state sources should be neglected in the long-term. In the long term, it is hard to imagine contemporary art in Hungary without state support; however it is also hard to imagine its future depending only on state funding.

Not to accept money from the state is a noble gesture, but where does that thinking lead? Is OFF really trying to send a message to the state that it doesn't need their support?

The aim of the biennale is not to create a cultural scene in which there is no place or role for public resources. By staying away from state support, OFF would like to inspire proactivity,

standing on more legs, and independence. We think that it is indispensable for the community to develop self-organization—it is our responsibility. OFF is an opportunity for this. We don't think that omitting the state is a long-term purpose, but are instead focused on thinking through deliberated cultural strategy for supporting contemporary art.

What support did the OFF-Biennale Budapest receive and from what sources?

OFF applied successfully for the following support:

EEG/Norwegian NGO Fund: 64 700 EUR

From this support – according to the policy of EEG – we can implement projects that relate to improving democratic skills and that aim to strengthen civil society. The grant didn't make it possible to fund the production of new art projects, therefore we used it to develop the civil infrastructure and educational programs. In addition, the support of EEG makes the common communication and website possible.

OSIFE –Open Society Initiative for Europe: 24 990 USD

The support of OSIFE can be used for calling for a new public and partly finances projects that are improving education and communication.

Erste Stiftung: 12 000 EUR

We received this grant for creating the Check Your Head! project of the curatorial board.

Furthermore we received generous support from cultural institutes of different countries in Budapest and more than 10 million HUF (ca. 32.000 EUR) from private supporters for creating and publicizing the professional program.

