

In Search of Identity: The Influence of Democracy on Young Hungarian Artists in the Late 1990's.

**Stephen L. Pelláthy and
Stephanie S. Donlon**

During the summer of 2000, the authors travelled to Hungary in order to interview individuals directly involved in the Hungarian art scene, including eight top contemporary artists. The main theme of the interviews was the question of identity among young artists. Following the fall of communism in 1989-90, art critics, art historians, and curators have spoken of a 'crisis of identity' among Central and Eastern European artists. Vast changes have occurred during democratization. Overlapping international and domestic economic, political, and historical shifts have led to a questioning of identity among young Hungarian artists, both within and without the country. The transition continues to affect the Hungarian art scene in many respects. For instance, public funding has both declined and changed focus, while private institutions and a well-developed gallery system have not yet filled the resulting support gap.

In this paper, we first review commentary concerning the identity crisis. We then address those components of Hungary's political and economic changes that may contribute to the question of identity. We explore how the transitions that occurred within Hungary and the changes in Hungary's relations with other nations resonate in the art scene. Next, we present the comments of witnesses to this time of change. We categorizes their answers into three types:

1) Perceptions on the identity crisis from an insider's point of view. In this part, we investigate how those participating in the current art scene perceive their roles. The artists themselves generally dismissed the question of identity, whereas other interviewees affirmed the notion of a crisis.

2) An overview of the current situation of young artists regarding the art market. The ambiguity of artists' roles and their relationship to other players in the art market constitutes one aspect of the alleged crisis. Hungary's newly developing art market has not received enough attention. Briefly, the comments of the interviewees describe an art market in flux, within which the identity of young artists cannot be definitively articulated. Artists and gallery owners struggle to survive continual change, at a pace Westerners are unaccustomed to. Economic changes have created and continue to create a new art scene.

3) The future impact of entry into the European Union. Future entry is seen by some as a stabilizing process, while others fear dominance by other European Union nations. We conclude with comments on the current situation and the future.

Background on Identity

Opinions identifying an "identity crisis" have come from both inside and outside of Hungary. Within Hungary, for instance, László Beke, the former director of the Műcsarnok [*Kunsthalle*], wrote in 1995, "I sensed that the artists, curators, critics and art historians of East Central Europe are in a transitional (or acute) identity crisis."¹ Commentators outside of Hungary have made similar remarks. American art critic, Susan Snodgrass surveyed the Budapest art scene and questions, "How does Hungarian culture reconstruct its fractured identity, while at the same time make a place for itself in the international mainstream?"² The Hungarian art critic Edit András writes, "Thus it sometimes happens in this ambiguous, transitory period... [that] theory and practice conflict with each other..."³ A series of more recent exhibitions have explored the identity crisis as well. Central and Eastern European countries that have recently emerged from communism have been grouped together by Hungarian and other curators in exhibitions. These exhibitions have toured both in Hungary and internationally.⁴

In order to investigate identity, we must first define it. Identity is "an abiding sense of the self and of the relationship of the self to the world."⁵ This identity makes life predictable. Identity provides a set of ready-made interpretations of social issues or events. When habitual structures are realigned, when massive transitions occur, individuals and groups adjust their identities to the new circumstances. Periods of change

are normal, but periods of extensive, intense change are not, and may lead to crisis.

We now wish to highlight some of the components of internal and external transitions during the last decade that may have contributed to this crisis of identity. The following list is not exhaustive, but rather points to several interrelated domestic factors and global influences that shape the art scene. Within Hungary there have been vast structural changes. To begin with, the "3 T" system of support under communism, "támogatás, tűrés, tiltás," in which an artist was either (respectively) supported, tolerated, or prohibited, based on the ideological position of the artist and his/her art, has been replaced by full freedom of expression. In terms of economics, Hungary has endorsed a free market system. Coupled with this, state support for artists has lessened.

Countrywide, changes in the Hungarian system for the state support of culture affect artists at the individual level. Artists now must compete for grants and scholarships, seek out domestic and foreign galleries, file tax returns, and look for means of advertisement.⁶ Snodgrass agrees that Hungary's economic transition to a market economy and private sponsorship leaves many cultural institutions, galleries, and artists "in a tenuous position with limited resources."⁷ The Soros foundation, which played a seminal role in supporting Hungarian culture during the democratic transition, has withdrawn most of its support for the arts.

Due to the democratic transition, leadership and institutional changes that endorse this new freedom of expression have also occurred. Árpád Szabados became president and rector of the Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem [Hungarian University of Fine Arts] in 1995 and a new Intermedia department was established there. Szabados had already shown his works abroad and by the late 1990's he was with a gallery in Germany. The Ludwig Múzeum [Ludwig Museum] was founded in 1991. Founded by a German philanthropist, it focuses on American Pop, German and Italian Neo-Expressionism and the Russian avant-garde, movements with very little representation in Hungary prior to the democratic transition. The second floor of the museum, housing contemporary art, was founded in 1996. Under the directorship of Katalin Néray, it provides another venue for young artists. The leadership of the Műcsarnok, initially under Néray in 1990, and later successively under Katalin Keserü and László Beke, has contributed to the promotion of the work of young artists. Another new player, founded in 1997, is the Kortárs Művészeti Intézet [Institute of Contemporary Art] in

Dunaújváros. Also, a semi-private gallery called MEO Kortárs Művészeti Gyűjtemény [MEO Contemporary Art Collection] opened in Újpest, a suburb of Budapest. Artists now in their late twenties and thirties have lived through these many changes, feeling the effects in a variety of ways. This summary of developments indicates major changes within a brief period of time. Though the list of events may not seem long, almost every major institution was affected, and several new institutions were created and took their place of importance along side more established institutions. The scale of the change is difficult to fathom in the United States. Imagine five museums of national importance opening in New York City within five years, not to mention the number of private galleries and changes to other institutions that would need to occur to effect a similar change.

Hungary has historically aligned itself with the West, but was forcibly realigned towards the East during the time of communist rule. After the fall of communism, Hungary's westward looking tendencies were once again able to assert themselves, and this had a strong impact on the arts. Hungary has already joined NATO, and in May of 2004, the European Union. Formal negotiations began with the EU in March of 1998. Hungary's motivation to enter the European Union brings both hope and uncertainty for the arts. As noted in an annual speech given by the then Administrative Under-Secretary of the Hungarian Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Gergely Pröhle, "Hungary's entry into the European Union will not only have economic consequences, for entry will create a new situation for the country in virtually all fields of life, including culture."⁸

Economically, it is thought that entry into the EU will help level the economic playing field. However, Hungary will also be more vulnerable under the competition of the single market. Artists may face marginalization as well. As Jeremy MacClancey states, "Non-western artists, by entering the capitalist world-system, in however marginal a manner, surrender a degree of autonomy, and may well end up minor actors in a play scripted and directed by others."⁹ It remains uncertain how EU entry will affect Hungarian cultural and national identity. Hungary's art community is influenced by paragraph 128 of the Maastricht Treaty, which states that the "EU supports cultural concepts which strengthen common European awareness."¹⁰ In the speech mentioned above, Pröhle called for specific criteria by which to judge the cultural activities that would qualify for European support. He called for

culture to take the initiative stating that, “At the end of the 20th century, the task of cultural policy must surely be to create markets for culture as well.”¹¹

In light of the above perspectives and documented changes, we undertook a survey of how young artists now manoeuvre in this new art scene within Hungary and internationally. If, as the above comments suggest, the question of identity arises in a time of transition rather than being a chronic condition, then up-to-date information becomes increasingly important. The interviews explore what artists and others involved in the art scene think about these commentaries on identity, how artists survive in an open market economy, and how future shifts toward EU membership will affect artists.

Methodology

To answer these questions, between June and July 2000 we interviewed fourteen individuals in Budapest involved in the arts. Eight were young artists, mainly painters. We also interviewed two gallery owners, one art historian, a critic, the directors of the Műcsarnok and the Ludwig Museum, the rector and president of the Képzőművészeti Főiskola [Academy of Fine Arts]. A sampling of perspectives provided for a more comprehensive study. We chose a non-schedule structured interview format that lasted approximately one hour. Some of the interviews were conducted in Hungarian. Previously drafted open-ended questions guided the discussions. Once the interviews were transcribed, the content was analysed using NUDist *Nvivo* software, to uncover patterns of responses in the data. The software coding highlighted several categories that a majority of interviewees addressed, providing a framework for our analysis.

Data analysis and discussion

We categorized responses according to three major themes. The first two address the current situation, while the third deals with the outlook for the future. Most or all of the interviewees offered remarks on the above themes. Their comments are presented anonymously.

1. Perceptions on the identity crisis from an insider's point of view.

Respondents did not give an overt, uniform answer as to whether or not there is a shared feeling of identity crisis among young Hungarian artists. Seven of twelve respondents mentioned a crisis of identity directly. Of these seven, three respondents indicated that there is a crisis of identity among young artists. One respondent felt that this crisis was more important for the older generation, in their sixties and seventies, than for young artists in their twenties and thirties. Three respondents did not feel that young artists were experiencing an identity crisis. Thus, responses were fairly evenly divided among the seven participants, either believing in or rejecting the presence of an identity crisis. In the following discussion, we explore these responses further.

Of those who held that there was an identity crisis, one respondent placed young artists into a much larger context of crisis in Hungary: "Hungary these days has an identity problem in everything. That means that you have an identity problem in [the] art field, too."

Those who dismiss the identity crisis also rejected the idea of a uniform identity in favour of individualism. For one respondent, a "mask, an image, a façade means death!" This artist favours originality and uniqueness over belonging to a group. His/her sense of security derives from knowing that he/she is not in any one category. His/her use of the word "mask," or "façade," indicates his/her belief that a unified image is false, something that veils a unique persona. At least one other artist concurred in this view: "Most of the people learned that the question is in you. You should not just base yourself on being Hungarian, being Eastern block." Yet another artist's comments supported the idea of a lack of unity among artists, without, however, considering this lack as a negative factor. Rather than finding artists engaging in communal activity, this artist and teacher finds individualism in the students he/she teaches: "Nowadays, everybody is working to find a gallery where he could sell his things, to find a scholarship so that he could travel abroad, maybe there he would be more successful." Once again, in this comment, it is the factor of individualism that is being stressed.

2. An overview of the current situation of young artists regarding the art market.

Due to the narrative nature of our data, we chose to synthesize our results into a fictitious composite artist we have named "Edina." The following overview of the art market will be presented in the form of

Edina's narrative (in italics), with commentary based on our interviews. Her story relates six important issues concerning Hungary's young artists: 1) funding, 2) marketing, 3) the gallery system, 4) short-term versus long-term goals, 5) national concerns, and 6) the international market.

Edina, our composite artist, finds time to paint a series of new paintings, despite working full time at another job. She has had several local exhibits in the last year. Yet, she cannot sustain herself by her painting alone. Exhibiting one's art is not enough, as one artist stated, "In Hungary, even though you have exhibited many, many times, you cannot quit your job."

The Studio Yearbook reports that only 14% of an artist's income derives from sales of art.¹² To subsidize living expenses, the artist might pick from several other professions or grants. Eleven percent of support comes from the artists' families. The artists we interviewed were also teachers, web-page designers, graphic artists, or storyboard illustrators for films. Some artists took on two or more jobs to meet their minimum standards of living. For one artist, teaching alone is not enough: "The money I get from teaching is nothing. I could not even buy [a] soda for my kids [from it]."

Economic hardship may constrict an artist's choice of materials, such as the size of her canvasses or the quality of her paints. Some of our respondents have family support. Half of the interviewees mentioned grants as a funding source. One artist interviewed lived in his/her family home and was supported by a state grant, the Derkovits prize. Only one artist claimed to live on the sale of his/her art alone.

Our fictitious artist Edina has made enough money to paint. She has painted a new series, and she is ready to sell. She wants to create a catalogue; lack of a catalogue hinders Edina's ability to attract buyers. Yet, she runs into several obstacles. The catalogue is the main form of advertisement. However, the infrastructure to support artists in this regard is weak. Only three artists we interviewed even have catalogues, one of whom created and produced a catalogue by taking his/her own photographs, writing the text, and paying for the printing. Others do not have such resources. A grant or a gallery can in some rare cases pay for catalogues, but even then the artists must do much of the preparatory work for the printing.

Edina then contacts several galleries in order to show her works. Ten years ago, there used to be mainly state support of the arts and artists. With the dissolution of state subsidies, an art market developed,

extending beyond the handful of existing private galleries that dealt mainly in historical art. Our research indicates that there has been a positive, though slow, progression. There now are between thirty and fifty galleries in the country. Artists and gallery owners feel the stress of the changes, and have yet to settle into clear roles. Our background research indicated that artists do not have allegiances to galleries.¹³ This commentary was supported by the results of our interviews. All twelve respondents indicated that the gallery system is in transition. One respondent, a commercial gallery owner, finds a challenge in changing artists' perceptions of the gallery's role in a free-market world.

Edina shows her art simultaneously at several galleries to better her odds of selling a painting. She has no contract with any particular gallery; no gallery has exclusive rights to her work. Instead, she shows work on 'consignment.' Because there is no systematic way of showing and selling art, she finds it more appealing to sell out of her studio than to show at a gallery. In fact, by looking to make money in the short-term, artists undercut themselves by ignoring the law of supply and demand. Showing art at several galleries floods the market, and paintings actually lose their attractiveness to potential buyers. There is no anticipation or suspense in revealing everything at once, rather than releasing one's artwork incrementally and thus building demand. Selling on consignment (receiving money only if the painting is sold) hampers the continuity and security of an artist's work. Not knowing when the next sale will occur places tremendous stress on the artist. Typically in the West, artists have contracts with galleries, ensuring a stable working relationship. Resorting to selling paintings from one's studio, though beneficial in the short-term, also undercuts the developing art market. The galleries need the income generated by the sale of paintings by artists to in turn offer support to artists.

It takes a great deal of money to successfully publicize an artist by producing a catalogue, advertising in magazines, and holding exhibitions. Hungary is not yet ready for this level of expense. Artists' main complaints are that there is no system by which to promote artists due to a lack of funds. Because the gallery system is still developing, attracting buyers, nationally and internationally also poses problems for artists. Nationally, there is a need for education of both potential buyers and gallery managers. There are few Hungarians seriously collecting contemporary art of the last two decades and there are limited attempts to educate and cultivate potential buyers. At the level of the gallery

manager, there is no schooling in arts management. The creation of a viable art market necessitates the creation of a commercial 'art culture', including better advertisement of exhibitions, hosting gallery walks, and the education of a new generation of art professionals.

Edina also tried to make her way in the international scene. International acclaim does not better her position in Hungary. In fact, she shows at an International Biennale and returns to Hungary with no more added value to her work, nor additional sponsorship. As one artist stated, "You notice there is a progress[ion] in the West." But in Hungary, "They took very young artists to the Venice Biennale, which is a very important thing, but their life hasn't changed!"

In the international art market, Edina faces economic discrimination. Many foreign buyers want to pay well below Western prices for equivalent art. One artist lamented,

I am using the same materials as Western artists do. I even buy the material at a higher price. But when I want to sell my work, for example through Knoll, the buyer says the price is high! Because I am from the East! And I am using the exact same material.

Another interviewee commented,

When you ask a French [artist], you don't ask: Why don't you make a French piece? That isn't a question. But if they [foreigners] come here [to Hungary, they ask]: Why don't you make an East European [piece about the] cultural life.

Throughout this narrative, one theme remains clear: The main concerns for the success of this system are economic. The success of the art culture rests upon the artist's ability to survive economically and to continue art production. Obstacles include an undeveloped art market, emphasis on short-term gains, lack of education among buyers and dealers, and economic inequality between Hungary and international art markets.

Entry into the EU.

In looking toward remedying economic problems, several commentators trust that entry to the European Union will advance the Hungarian

economy. This projection would, in turn, quickly propel the Hungarian artist into the mainstream. Here, we present our interviewees' opinions on the changes the EU will make on the Hungarian art market, and specifically, on their lives, some time before actual membership was realized in 2004.

Three interviewees connected the euphoria surrounding the changes of 1989 with the euphoria surrounding pending entry to the EU. However, with the new democracy and transition, immediate improvements did not appear. Likewise, as Hungarian entry becomes imminent, "the faults are getting more visible," according to one respondent. Some of the excitement about changes accompanying EU entry has worn off.

In tandem with the discussion of current problems with the art market, there is also a great hope that entry into the EU will stabilize the Hungarian market in general, and will improve connections for the art market. Two thirds of respondents felt that this would be a gradual process. One respondent indicated:

But also, gradually, if the country became more capable and more educated about art, and contemporary art and sponsorship and that kind of stuff, maybe other things will happen, collections and corporate collections, those things which you can't find, or which you can find but it is not working properly.

Another interviewee indicated a foreboding that Hungary is not planning ahead. Hungarians in the art community should be visualizing the future. And yet, the interviewee states,

Hungary does not have teachers who know late 20th century art. We have brown bag lunches to talk about this. The scene is difficult. We don't have gallery walks. In five years, when Hungary is part of the EU, they [current Hungarian curators and teachers] could be working in Berlin for other galleries, but they are not thinking ahead.

Suggestions were also given for better promotion of Hungarian artists within the EU system. One interviewee advocated using an existing network, "Cultural attachés could use their connections to promote Hungarian art throughout Europe." Another suggested setting up an office in several countries in Europe that would "promote Hungary in the cities

throughout Europe... put the word out more [about] what is going on.” While there are generally positive feelings about entering the EU, the Hungarian artistic community is also cautious about this transition. While it presents opportunities, the community will need to prepare in order to take advantage of the benefits of this union.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed several areas regarding the ‘identity crisis’ of young artists—present and future—the present being the artists’ perception of this crisis and the economic impact on the art market, and the future being the impact of joining the EU.

Concerning the first point, we end with a comment on the exhibition “After the Wall,” that sums up some of the results of our research:

Wherever we look in Eastern and Central Europe, be it Russia, Hungary, Latvia, or Macedonia, as these governments open up we see political hotbeds in the throes of short-term triumphs and misfortunes. “After the Wall,” too, is an expression of something provisional. Perhaps at the moment, we should expect nothing more, for as social, economic, and political conditions continue to adjust and readjust, so too will the interim state of the culture.¹⁴

This passage stresses the quickly changing atmosphere of the Hungarian art scene. What was and is still by some referred to as a “crisis,” does not have all the signs of a crisis. “Crisis” implies a lack of a system. At present, however, a system is visibly in formation. Hungary has chosen to pursue the construction of an open market system. Likewise, Hungarian art is finding its way in a Western style art market. The blueprints are in place. What remains to be done is the actual construction. Ten years ago, the question was “What are we going to do?” Now, goals have been formulated. The current question is, “*How* are we going to reach our desired goals?”

In the narrative, several problems with the Hungarian art market have come to light. Simultaneously, we can see that the art market, as it develops through the activities of a series of players, is solving some of those problems. We gathered some positive information that supports the

idea that this construction of a system is underway. Prior to the democratic changes, the art world was dictated by governmental and hierarchical demands. Now, support structures developed through artists and patrons, complement the state system. For example, young artists belong to some collectives or unions, such as the Young Artists Studio. The Center for Culture and Communication Foundation, C3, a derivative of Soros' support of the arts, provides space and supports artists at the forefront of innovation in new media. The Institute of Contemporary Art, co-directed by a young, energetic János Soboszlai, supports art production, shows, and residencies for young Hungarian artists. A leading gallery, Knoll, run by a Viennese gallery owner, creates a viable link between Hungarian artists and other European markets. Despite growing pains, these examples show that the construction of a comprehensive system for the support of the arts is progressing.

One final aspect of the Hungarian art scene which has not been discussed in the role of state foundations. The role of foundations did not come up in our interviews; the focus was mainly on the gallery system. Regarding state funding, museums started receiving less money during the 1980's, forcing changes in response, such as better service to the clientele.¹⁵ More specifically, in 1992 the state-run Art Fund was divided into the Hungarian Art Foundation and the National Association of Hungarian Artists, the latter which now has a special section for young artists. Through these foundations, museums and cultural institutions still receive some subsidy. A more detailed exploration of the changes and influences of state funding would help to fill in the picture of the current scene, though it is clear from our interviews that direct support of artists by the state is limited and insufficient.

Continued research is necessary to document changes as they occur. The impact of the transitions of the past decade on the lives of Hungarians continues. As more studies are done, Hungarian artists and others in the art scene will be able to read analyses of their situation from outside perspectives. In our view, the successful future of artists depends on at least three factors: 1) Artists' ability to continue to create, 2) Interest in their work in terms of buyers and researchers, 3) Meta-level analysis by all concerned parties of the art scene as a whole. Our study falls into the second tier and allows the third tier to be founded on accurate data and suppositions.

NOTES

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¹ Lászlo Beke, "East Central Europe from the Perspective of a Hungarian Curator," in *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 87.

² Susan Snodgrass, "Report from Budapest: In a Free State," in *Art in America*, 86, no. 10 (October, 1998): 85.

³ Edit András, "A Painful Farewell to Modernism: Difficulties in the Period of Transition," in *Omnia Mutantur: The Catalogue of the Hungarian Pavilion at the 47th International Biennale of the Visual Arts* (Venice, 1997), 22-29. Also in this catalogue, see Gábor András, "Beyond Modernism: New Generations and Shifts in Perspective in the Hungarian Art of the 90's."

⁴ Recent shows include: "After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe," originally at the Moderna Museet [Modern Museum] in Stockholm in 1999; "Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe," originally at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1995; "Artists of Central and Eastern Europe," at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh in 1995. For commentary, see, for example, Judith E. Stein, "Out of the East: Two Shows Recently Introduced American Audiences to the Stylistic Freedoms and Provocative Content that Infused East Central European Art after the Collapse of the Iron Curtain," in *Art in America*, 86, no. 4 (April 1998). Another important show in this series is "Europa. Europa," held at the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn in 1994, which focussed on the past century of avant-garde art in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁵ Terrell Northrup in *Intractable Conflicts and their Transformation*, eds. Louis Kriesberg, Terrell Northrup, and S.J. Thorton (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 55.

⁶ Beke, "East Central Europe from the Perspective of a Hungarian Curator," 92.

⁷ Snodgrass, "Report from Budapest: in a Free State," 85.

⁸ Gergely Pröhle, "The Task of Cultural Policy is to Create Markets," in *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 40, no. 155 (August, 1999): 26.

⁹ Jeremy MacClancey, "Anthropology, Art and Contest," in *Contesting Art: Art, Politics, and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Jeremy MacClancey (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 15.

¹⁰ Pröhle, "The Task of Cultural Policy is to Create Markets," 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Stúdió Évkönyv 1994-95* [Studio Yearbook 1994-95] (Budapest: Fiala Képzőművészek Stúdiója Egyesület [Studio of Young Artists Association], 1996), 65.

¹³ See, for example, Snodgrass, "Report from Budapest: in a Free State," 10. She writes, "Although artists may be represented by one gallery, they think nothing of showing at another, and most sales take place in the studio, bypassing the gallery altogether."

¹⁴ Ronald Jones, "After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe," in *Artforum* (March, 2000).

¹⁵ Agnes Kovacs, "The State of the Art: Hungary," in *Artmargins*, 1999. Online. Available: <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/kovacs.html>.