

# Hungary—A Post-Socialist Conflict Zone

by Edit Andrés

After the election in Hungary, carefully tailored to be favorable for the ruling party, nothing can stop FIDESZ, a conservative, right-wing party, from completing the creation of a retrograde, ethno-nationalist state-system with semi-feudal, semi-socialist features, the foundation of which had been laid down during the previous four years. The 2012 Democracy Index qualified Hungary as a “flawed democracy,” however, on the basis of the latest measures of the government there is a good chance it will be downgraded into the category of “hybrid” or even “authoritarian regime,” as it has happened with Putin’s Russia, a regime close to present-day Hungary.

The populist rhetoric of the administration to complete the deconstruction of socialism is in sharp contrast with the sensation of déjà vu experienced by the people, who feel they are witnessing a return to “socialism with a national face” by means of a rapid, systematic removal of the basic institutions of democracy. Upward control, the main guarantee of democracy, is disregarded, as the final decisions are in the hands of the freshly re-elected Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in this centralized and highly controlled country. Following the fundamental changes in the constitution and in the political and economic spheres which will fortify the ruling party for decades, there have been transformations in education, art, and culture. The authoritative and systematic transformations assure state control in each and every segment of culture, eliminate transparency, and exclude participation.

From this situation, a culture war began, and is still going on.

The art scene here, especially in comparison to other post-socialist countries, has been quite apolitical for almost two decades. This is due to the mistrust of political art, and the stronghold of modernist and neo-avant-garde strategies. However, cultural politics have become divided along political and ideological lines, with the arbitrary measures of the regime lacking professionalism and favoring its own clientele, creating an over-politicized art scene. It is not possible anymore to step aside and ignore the political struggles and remain a neutral studio artist or idealistic critic. Culture was handed over to the Hungarian Art Academy (H.A.A.), a shadow ministry that has full power and authority to decide and administer public support for art and culture, including state



Raining Money at Vigadó, Budapest. Demonstration co-organized by Tranzit Action Group and Free Artists, March 14, 2014. Photo: Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.

subsidies. There is an option to gladly accept the boundless opportunities and financial support in exchange for sharing the dream of the leader of a conservative, Christian, and nationalist Hungary. But for those who wish to connect to the global art scene instead of the local, parochial one, and who have not yet left the country, the air is being sucked out of the room, and opportunities for making and exhibiting art are diminishing.

As the internationally acknowledged philosopher Miklós Gáspár Tamás rightly stated, contemporary Hungarian culture is not against the ideology of the recent administration, rather against its acts. Although there are artists who reflect the nationalist ideology, the cult of folk art, and the manipulation of history, the majority of advanced critical art is a kind of visual activism instead.

A grassroots organization against the empowerment of H.A.A. was initiated by the artists Szabolcs KissPál and Csaba Nemes. Curators, critics, and other artists joined them, and Free Artists was formed, whose first action was an intrusion into the meeting of H.A.A., demanding autonomy for arts. The process of replacing art professionals with commissars loyal to the ruling party to assure self-censorship, neglecting open competitions at the Kunsthalle, and appointing the new director of the Ludwig Museum in Budapest in a non-transparent and orchestrated jury process have triggered new forms of visual activism. When the Kunsthalle was given to H.A.A., the young curators Márton Pacsika and Eszter Kozma along with their professor József Mélyi, a curator and respected critic, initiated regular actions and events outside of the building, called Outer Space, demonstrating against the invasion of an independent art institution by party politics. In response to the non-transparent process of appointing the director of the Ludwig Museum, the group United for Contemporary Art was established by the art and theory network tranzit.hu, and subsequently occupied the steps of the Ludwig Museum. The occupiers, comprising acknowledged artists, art historians, curators, and students, demanded complete transparency of the selection process, autonomy for cultural institutions, as well as dialogue between professionals and ministry officials. The most hard-core of the occupiers—including many members of the Free Artist group—were sitting, eating, sleeping on the steps, and organizing forums and events.



Drawing of an art student Péter Donka after the journalist photography (István Huszti) taken on the interruption of the first meeting of Hungarian Art Academy by Free Artists, at the moment when one of their representatives, Csaba Nemes, was attacked with a folder by a poet member of H.A.A. Dec. 2013. Courtesy of the owner of the drawing: Csaba Nemes.

As part of the nation building, the rhetoric of the ruling party is based on the idea that the state socialist period was illegitimate and the previous government did not accomplish true political transition. The current administration picks up the political threads of 1944, as if a symbolic gesture would erase the period of state socialism and rewrite history. Thus, all the monuments connected to the democratic, liberal, or slightly leftist tradition are falling victim to this second

wave of purification of public space; vulgar and commercial bronze figures, like “Girl Feeding Dog,” or depicting the television detective Colombo, are mushrooming in the city. Selective memory keeps only what are considered the “successful” events in Hungarian history in circulation. Failures or events demanding collective responsibility are not considered. The debate around the controversial monument to the German occupation of Hungary in 1944 in Budapest’s Freedom Square culminated around the time of the governmental election. According to the official government website, it will pay tribute to “all Hungarian victims with the erection of the monument commemorating the tragic German occupation and the memorial year to mark the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust.” However, the protesters regard it a falsification of history, as it does not differentiate between the victims and the perpetrators and does not acknowledge the responsibility of Hungary in the Holocaust and World War II. On the designated place of the monument, a counter-monument, a living memorial was established. People put personal objects and stones there. The action was initiated by a small civil group including a few members of the Free Artists, András Rényi, an art historian and chair of the art history department of the Eötvös Loránd University, as well as the respected neo-avant-garde artist György Jovánovics. The process is still going on as I write this report. The fence erected around the construction site by the workers during the day is demolished by the protesters every evening.



Occupy Ludwig, May 2013. Organized by United for Contemporary Art and Free Artists. Photo:Anna Vörös / Photography and Activism

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EDIT ANDRÁS, Ph.D, (Budapest and Long Island, U.S.A.) is an art historian and art critic, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. Her main interests concern modern and contemporary Eastern and Central European art, gender issues, public art, art theory, and activism in the post-state socialist countries. She has published numerous essays and has participated in various international conferences. Her latest book is *Cultural Cross Dressing. Art in the Ruins of Socialism*, 2009 (in Hungarian). She is editor of *Transitland. Video art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 - 2009*, Budapest, 2009.

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