

# VIGOROUS FLAGGING IN THE HEART OF EUROPE: THE HUNGARIAN HOMELAND UNDER A RIGHT-WING REGIME

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Nationalism is not just in Hungary's backyard, it is in every corner of the house from the basement to the roof. It gets inside with the air and has completely soaked through the orifices of the building: the front door, the windows, the chimney, and the front yard. For this reason, Kriszta Nagy, a Hungarian painter who exhibited her work last spring at Godot Gallery in Budapest, feels she has no other option than to paint the leader of Hungary on bedsheets and table covers. She explains the reason for her 57 pop art portraits of Viktor Orbán: 'The prime minister sleeps in our bed. He is on our table cover.'<sup>1</sup>

Nationhood is constantly and vigorously flagged: national symbols are everywhere. Even protesters and activists opposing the regime's politics feel a pressing need to take back the national symbols – currently appropriated for official use – because those not regarded as Hungarian enough are excluded from the notion of the nation. Among other tools used for building nationhood, the reproduction of the nation's visual culture is constantly recruited. Hungary's authoritarian regime, with its centralised, highly controlled system, is replicated in the administration of the arts. It is hard to grasp this complex and overwhelming phenomenon.

## Flagging Nationhood in Everything Sacred and Profane

After reconfiguring electoral rules in favour of re-election, and pursuing an aggressive, populist campaign amidst apathy, the right-wing regime won the Hungarian election on 6 April, 2014. Now, it is finalising what it began building under the previous mandate. According to the party's programme, this can be condensed to just a single sentence: 'We continue.' Concerning the arts, the goal is to achieve a traditional, conservative, Christian



x-T Kriszta Nagy, *Since 1989 No. 32.*, 2014, acrylic, digital print, spangle / canvas , 35 x 65 cm

culture, conveying a historically rooted image of a strong and proud Hungary. Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary, suggested this image on the billboards that were part of its campaign for the European Parliament elections. The message ‘We are sending the word to Brussels: Hungarians demand respect’ stood beside the portrait of the prime minister – the same portrait that is replicated 57 times in Kriszta Nagy’s paintings. Viktor Orbán regards the EU as a colonising power. ‘Bravely’ talking back to the coloniser is presented as the main task of the charismatic leader of a nation that is at the heart of Europe. The idea is to project an image of a tough, resistant nation-state within the EU, using EU money, with the attitude of the heroic outlaw who robs the rich to give to the poor. In reality, the meaning is slightly, but crucially, altered from the fairytale version: ‘To rob the external rich to give to the internal rich.’

Funded by European money, the newly inaugurated football stadium and the Puskás Ferenc Football Academy are in the backyard of the leader’s residence in his hometown of Felcsút.<sup>2</sup> They are emblems of the current cultural politics, which prioritises sports, especially football, at the expense of the arts and education. ‘Politicians can, when waving the national flag, advocate sporting policies, so that sport’s flag-waving becomes another flag to be waved’, comments Michael Billig, who coined the term ‘banal nationalism’ to indicate that nationalism is not removed from everyday life, but is constantly flagged

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://444.hu/assets/felcsut-01.jpg> , [http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancho\\_Ar%C3%A9na](http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancho_Ar%C3%A9na) [accessed: 19 September 2015].



Poster for the European Parliament election campaign reads, 'We are sending word to Brussels: Hungarians demand respect'.

through banal habits.<sup>3</sup> According to Billig, this is how the phenomenon is omnipresent in Western, affluent countries. He points to sport and its relation to masculinity as some of the customs and cultural traits that enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced.

Nationalism is flagged literally on public buildings as well. At the Hungarian parliament, the Székely (Szekler) flag is now commonly hoisted next to the Hungarian one, while the EU flag is conspicuously absent, demonstrating clearly that neo-nationalism has reached the mainstream. The message is that minority communities of ethnic Hungarians abroad (for example, the Székelys in Transylvania, Romania, which once belonged to Hungary) are now being reclaimed by the Hungarian government – quite a disturbing and destabilising message in the time of the Ukrainian-Russian crisis.

Another guiding principle of the current administration is Christianity. Football stadiums are to be consecrated, as was the case with the Felcsút soccer stadium last Easter. However, this revival of religious sentiment in a generally secular post-communist country inevitably comes together with a variety of prospering new religions, among them shamanism and the cult of pagan Hungarian mythology. All of these religions can now apparently coexist without any conflict.

The revival of the symbolic imagination of Hungary as *Regnum Marianum* has been combined with the cult of the Turul, the mythological bird of ancient Hungary (and later the symbol of Greater Hungary in the revisionist ideology of the interwar period, following the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1921). Thus, the four-metre-high statue of the Virgin Mary, erected on the Cortina Wall of the Buda castle, facing Pest on the other side of the Danube, is also in peaceful coexistence with the many Turul statues around the capital and throughout the Hungarian countryside.<sup>4</sup>

A statue of an eagle swooping down on Angel Gabriel – symbolising Germany and Hungary, respectively – is also to be erected in Freedom Square in Budapest. It has an utmost importance for the regime’s symbolic politics in setting its historical genealogy. The statue, which is supposed to commemorate the Nazi occupation of Hungary, has stirred a heated debate about monuments dedicated to historical events, which are usually erected on the basis of a broad social consensus. However, the opposite is true in the case

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the history and recent revival of the Turul symbol in Hungary, see: S. KissPál, *The Rise of the Fallen Feather: The Symbolism of the Turul Bird in Contemporary Hungary*, in: *e-flux journal*, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-rise-of-a-fallen-feather-the-symbolism-of-the-turul-bird-in-contemporary-hungary/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].



Policemen guard the monument to victims of the Nazi occupation under construction in Freedom Square in Budapest, March 2013



The monument to victims of the Nazi occupation, erected in the middle of the night on July 20 2014 in Freedom Square, Budapest

of this statue: in Hungary, the politics of memory is ‘muscle-flexing politics.’<sup>5</sup> Hence, the prime minister does not mind stating that the ‘artwork is precise and immaculate from an ethical point of view, and also from the point of view of its form as [well as] the historical content it articulates,’ in an open reply to an art historian who wrote him a letter; its exact contents of which are unknown but presumably emphasised the highly sensitive nature of the controversial monument.

According to the government’s website, the monument 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 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust.’ However, activists as well as historians and social scientists in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences regard it as a falsification of history, because the monument does not differentiate between victims and perpetrators and does not acknowledge the responsibility of Hungary in the Holocaust. Near the site designated for the monument, a counter-monument entitled *Living Memorial* has been set up by a small group that includes members of the grassroots organisation Free Artists.<sup>6</sup> People have placed personal objects and stones there and engaged in conversations about historical traumas. Since their defeat in the latest election, leftist and liberal politicians have been criticising the monument to their own advantage.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Eckholm, ‘Hungary’s Identity Crisis Fought in Concrete and Bronze,’ FailedArchitecture.com, <http://failedarchitecture.com/budapest-freedom-square/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].

<sup>6</sup> For the group’s blog *no MMA!*, which provides news coverage and commentary about the monument controversy in multiple languages, see <http://nemma.noblogs.org/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].



*Living Memorial, ongoing project started March 23, 2014*

Moderate politicians regard the constant protests as hysterical and untimely, while the ruling party completely ignores the debate. If anyone among the conservative supporters of the government were to have any doubt or hesitation on this specific issue, an ideological guideline is available in the form of the PM's 'private letter.'<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the rhetoric of the ruling party is based on the idea that the socialist period was illegitimate and that the previous government did not accomplish the political transition that the country needed. The current administration picks up the political thread from 18 March, 1944, the day before Hungary, as the claim is, lost its independence with the Nazi occupation of the country. Given Orbán's view that this independence was not regained until 1989, the socialist period has thus been erased from the country's history.

### Museums as Fortresses of the Nation

The new right-wing government has realised that museums, as privileged spaces of national self-representation, had to be more closely controlled, since they were perceived as too cosmopolitan and independent. Some institutions dared to argue against bureaucratic decisions, as was the case with Imre Takács, the director of the Museum of Applied Arts (Iparművészeti Múzeum). Takács opposed the moving of the Esterházy collection to the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd. After Takács's resignation, the Museum of Applied Arts fell into a state of interregnum, not an unusual condition in the local art

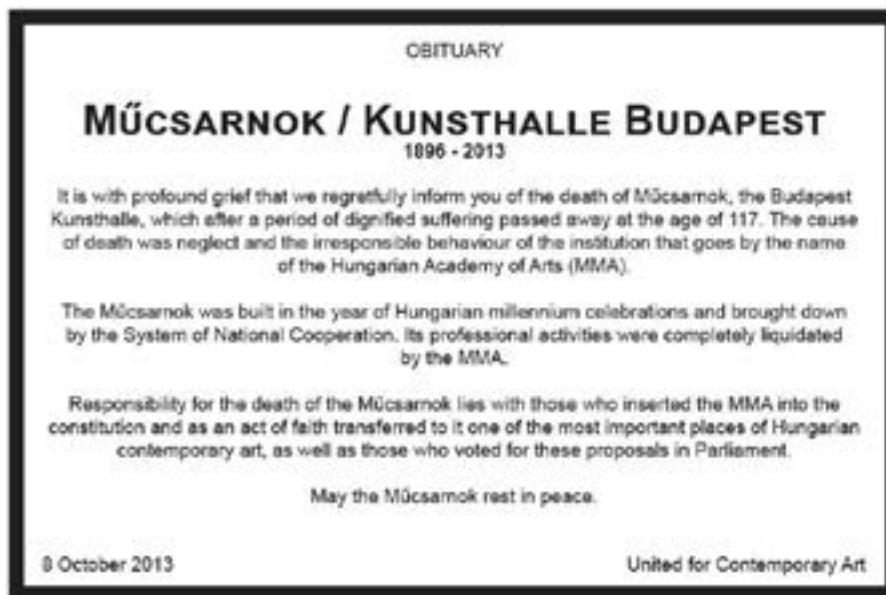
<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.origo.hu/attached/20140430davidk.pdf> [accessed: 18 August 2015].

world. One of the Ministry of Culture's first measures following the spring 2014 election was to delegate the task of the 'professional, organisational, and operational renewal' of the Museum of Applied Arts to László Baán, a former employee of the Ministry of Culture. At the time, Baán had already been controlling the three major art museums in Budapest. His promotion was quite extraordinary, especially considering that he has no training in art history. One by one, museums were taken out of the hands of professional directors and were placed under his authority.

The Hungarian National Gallery, located in the Buda Castle, was annexed on 31 August, 2012 by the Museum of Fine Arts (Szépművészeti Múzeum), a showcase museum that receives lavish financial support at the expense of other museums struggling to survive. A smaller but highly important museum of strategic interest, the Ferenc Hopp Museum of East Asia Arts, has also fallen prey to Baán, director of the Museum of Fine Arts. After the re-election of the Fidesz Party, it became clear why this seemingly marginal museum was incorporated. Baán, besides overseeing the ambitious creation of a museum quarter in Városliget Park in Budapest – a plan called the 'Liget Budapest Project'<sup>8</sup> – has also been assigned to develop an Asian art center crucial for opening diplomatic relations with the East.

The Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle has operated without a professional leader for quite a while after his previous director, Gábor Gulyás – who had been appointed to that post without any competition from other candidates – resigned (only to be promoted afterwards to a higher position), under the umbrella of the Hungarian Art Academy (Magyar Művészeti Akadémia, MMA), a kind of shadow ministry that grew out of a private organisation. This ultraconservative institute is gaining full power over cultural issues, controlling the subsidies given to the arts while it favours 'national culture within the culture of the

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ligetbudapest.org/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].





„Ceremonia żałobna” przed Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle w Budapeszcie, 8 października 2013 roku  
 ‘Mock mourning’ in front of Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle, Budapest, 8 October 2013

nation.’ How this programme will affect the Múcsarnok, the most important venue for contemporary art in Hungary, is still unclear.

### Protest Movements against the Vehement Flagging

Some cultural activists and other protesters, however, have been disrupting the image of Hungary as a ‘clean garden, proper house’ by boycotting self-congratulation occasions organised by the new official culture. The internationally known philosopher Gáspár M. Tamás accurately stated that contemporary Hungarian culture is not against the ideology of the recent administration, but rather against its acts. Although some artists have merely reflected on the nationalist ideology, the cult of the leader, and the falsification of history, other artists have produced collaborative, critical, and socially engaged work – a kind of activism.<sup>9</sup>

The artists Szabolcs KissPál and Csaba Nemes, among others, initiated Free Artists in opposition to the empowerment of the MMA. Their first action was an interruption of MMA meetings to demand that art be autonomous from party politics. When the Múcsarnok was taken over by the MMA, young curators, as well as the respected art critic József Mélyi,

<sup>9</sup> M. and R. Fowkes, *Hungarian Art in the Eye of the Storm*, in *no MMA!*, <http://nemma.noblogs.org/2013/07/23/hungarian-art-in-the-eye-of-the-storm-3/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].





*Occupy Ludwig*, organised by United for Contemporary Art and Free Artists, May 2013

initiated regular actions and events outside the museum. These events were entitled *Outer Space* and were protests against the right-wing invasion of an independent art institution.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the nontransparent process behind the appointment of a new director at the Ludwig Museum, a few dozen artists and art professionals established the group United for Contemporary Art. In May 2013, the group occupied the Ludwig Museum. The occupiers – artists, art historians, curators, and students – demanded complete transparency in the selection process and autonomy from political power for cultural institutions, as well as a dialogue between museum professionals and ministry officials. Many of the occupiers – including many members of the Free Artist group – slept and ate on the stairs in the museum, besides organising forums and events there. When the director of the Műcsarnok, Gábor Gulyás resigned and the Műcsarnok, contemporary art's fortress in Hungary, was taken over by the MMA, Free Artists, in response, organised a kind of group performance: a burial ceremony for the flagship institution of contemporary art.

At the time of the occupation, the new right-wing museum officials held an event at the Vigadó Concert hall on the banks of the Danube, one of the most beautiful art nouveau buildings in Budapest. Artists disrupted the celebration to raise awareness of the financial imbalances in the art scene and the absolute power of the ultraconservative museum regime. This protest was similar to the one that took place at New York's Guggenheim Museum, where activists sprinkled fake money and leaflets on museum visitors to protest against the inhuman labour conditions at the construction site of



Drawing of an art student Péter Donka based on a press photo (by István Huszti) taken during the disruption at the first meeting of Hungarian Art Academy by Free Artists (MMA), at the moment when one of their representatives, Csaba Nemes was attacked with a folder by a member of MMA. December 2013



*Raining Money*, Vigadó, Budapest, demonstration co-organised by Tranzit Action Group and Free Artists, 14 March 2014

the new Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi. Although the Budapest protest was called *Raining Money*, the key element here was not money, but rather the defenceless bodies of the protesters lying on the stairs and floor of the building's entrance.<sup>11</sup> All had their mouths stuffed with money, in accordance with the visual and verbal violence that is one of the side effects of the vigorously flagged nationalism that fills everyday life at the heart of Europe.

### Consolidating the Nation-(re)building Project

Concerning the most recent condition of the Hungarian art scene against the backdrop of the vigorously flagged nationalism, though there are similarities – in the moral dilemmas, artistic strategies, and forced decisions to take sides in a totally divided (art) scene – between the social and artistic climate of the Socialist time and that of today, it is still difficult to adjust the heroic Cold War era countercultural discourse to recent

<sup>11</sup> For coverage of the action, see the no MMA! blog <http://nemma.noblogs.org/2014/03/17/money-rain-opening-festivity-of-the-mma-hq-in-vigado/> [accessed: 18 August 2015].

times. Owing to the changing social climate lately, the process of ‘normalisation’, a kind of consolidation, more and more people formerly critical of systematic centralisation and rightist transformation of society and the cultural sphere are losing their edge. They are gradually accepting the reality of recent developments in Hungary. Certainly, nowadays those in power are more cynical than in the Socialist times, and the methods have also changed, have been ‘updated’ if you will; they became much more sophisticated. There is no need for censorship anymore when financial support (or lack thereof) does the job perfectly in parity with the proper (or improper) attitude of the actor on the scene. Existential endangerment could also be a good excuse for crawling back under the umbrella of the state-supported cultural system, the criticism of which is declining in tune with the process of gradual acceptance of the new configuration. The once so clearly marked borders have become blurred. Fear of losing state support, commissions or advertisements, depending on what is at stake for the actual company, organisation or venue takes its toll and results in the taming of radical, critical thinking or in withdrawal from alternative events. Due to the general burn-out, the protest movement has also lost its vigour, compared to the heyday of Free Artists and United for Contemporary Art – no more than just a few people; the hard core has kept the radical and uncompromisingly critical position of the upheaval of the protest movement. Other people, who once sat on the stairs of Ludwig Museum protesting against the selection procedure based on political rather than professional agenda, and demanding autonomy for art institutions, are now happily collaborating with the institution one way or another. Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle also tries hard to explain away the animosities developed when the main venue of contemporary art was handed over to the MMA, which favours the outdated, out-of-touch with reality artistic practice, demonstrated in National Salon-type exhibitions. However, for now the strategy of MMA has changed a little as they have got everything or even more they have yearned for. What had once been a private circle of friends with traditional and nationalist ideas has transformed into a powerful public body with huge state subsidy, buildings, institutions and control over jobs, state-subsidies, visibility. Now, it seems, is the time for gaining professional acceptability on the local (art) scene. Thus, they are beginning to embrace artists and art professionals from outside their circle, even those who once stood for criticality, and for the autonomy of art. Esteemed neo-avant-garde artists of the Socialist times whose respect once came from their opposition to the official art, blindly accept membership of the MMA (and also the generous monthly salary attached to it), or do anything (exhibiting and performing in the National Salon of Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle) in compensation of their ‘renegade’ (feminist, abstract, émigré etc.) past for being accepted and embraced (as for example Orshi Drozdik). When Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle calls for ‘cultural roundtable discussion’, inviting the Hungarian section of AICA to held its meeting in their Salon exhibition to discuss the issues of painting and sculpture of the time, as if nothing had happened in Hungary, and as if it had been such a thing as ‘pure art issues’ beyond politics, it is a clear sign of consolidation, that is, a desire for not just having monopoly over the financial sources, cultural institutions and positions, but on the top of it, gaining professional legitimisation as well: a desire to have it all. The AICA leadership that many times had protested against the conservative turn, favouritism, unprofessional decision making and multifaceted control over the cultural life, as well as against the centralisation of the museums could not accept the invitation, as it could have been expected. The response from Kunsthalle, accusing the AICA of building

trenches, in many points replicates the psychodynamics of nationalism. In-group favouritism and out-group devaluation springs from the inherent need of nationalism: from the differentiation between ‘us’ and others. The affirmation of positive self-image is as central to the construction of social identities as it is for personal identity. Fear of losing that identity – conceived to be coherent and flawless – is a strong psychological drive. ‘The wider the gap between what we think we are, and what we want to be, the more we are going to be ashamed of ourselves, the more anxiety we are going to feel, and the more we will try to take steps to rid ourselves of those feelings’.<sup>12</sup> A well-known psychological strategy to get rid of shadows and flaws in our self-image is to project all those traits that we do not like in ourselves to others, to our ‘enemies’. However, to keep in motion the nationalist machine going, to know the enemy inside and outside is a systemic need.