

# Some thoughts on guilt and blame

Orshi Drozdik

Here is a citation from an article by a reasonably well-known and we assume reasonably well-respected art historian. It alludes in a parenthesis to a reasonably well-known and we (might have assumed) reasonably well-respected artist. It does not build on respect, however, but rather takes upon itself the task of taking respect away, of disrespecting. I'm interested here in examining this scene – its methods and assumptions – in which respect is, as it were, decommissioned or subtracted. How and why does this come about, and on whose authority?

Esteemed neo-avant-garde artists from socialist times, once respected for their opposition to official art, now blindly accept membership of the Hungarian Art Academy (as well as the generous monthly salary attached to it), or do anything (such as exhibiting and performing in the National Salon of Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle) to compensate for their "renegade" (feminist, abstract, émigré etc.) past in order to be accepted and embraced (for example, Orshi Drozdik). Other highly appreciated artists resign from their posts as a sign of solidarity with the more advanced contemporary art scene, only to quietly re-enter the fray, once out of the spotlight (Bukta Imre, for example). So it is not currently all that clear anymore who the Stranger and who the Other is in the Janus-faced art scene, while those born into the position of Strangers and Others in society can scarcely shrug off the hatred and marginalization they gained once upon a time."<sup>[1]</sup>

Let me add to this quotation another that can serve as a reflection and possibly an antidote:

Two sorts of truth: profound truths recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth, in contrast to trivialities where opposites are obviously absurd.

– Niels Bohr<sup>[2]</sup>

**"Renegade"<sup>[3]</sup> [a deserter from one faith, or cause, who professes allegiance to another]**

In her essay "They are so very different from us": Who is the stranger, who is the Other in Hungary's (art)scene?, Edit András identifies, in effect, the treacherous woman, the disloyal woman artist viewed as a traitor, the object of something abject, a person who has deserted her Party, her duty and the presuppositions made, always implicitly, on their behalf. In this turn, this turning-on or against, the critical method of post-feminism has been transformed into a mere device: it now aligns, quite easily and un-reflexively with patriarchal socio-political and critical discourse. In her recourse to pure judgement as a minimum morality, András resorts to stigmatization, passing (on) a verdict from a position of power assumed with little self-examination to inform virtually every subject addressed in her article, including the woman artist – the woman artist in parentheses, just her name and the negative she has become. Nothing will be said (of course) about her own writing, her pedagogy, about a woman who has struggled and occasionally succeeded: above all, nothing is said about her art.

In the normative patriarchal system, woman is the symbol of fidelity, a place incarnated by Penelope. Is there still anybody today, after the travails and exhilarations of feminism and the "neo-feminism" that has taken it on (and over), who expects fidelity from women artists? Is the demand for "fidelity" by the art historian a general call, does it apply to everyone, and all the historian's work, or is it reserved only for this article (or even this one artist)? What anyway is this fidelity – a kind of chastity delivered by something imagined as historical? The woman artist, however, wishes to be free. She wishes to be free to decide what she does, for what reason and at which place, as well as what social or artistic phenomena she responds to. She wants to be free to think and feel, and to make. She wants (and welcomes) the same freedom of response to her work.

Having become unfaithful, the work of the woman artist no longer deserves to be taken seriously within the context of art. She has become the whore of a nineteenth-century imagination. She, but even more so, her work must be denied visibility. It is for this reason that András does not write a word about the art work of the woman artist, which becomes the signal absence of a technique of voiding and removing. The process here is sadly familiar to many of us. The "feminist" art historian absconds with the methodology (really a tactic not a method) of power politics, identical, really, to that administered by patriarchal historiography or colonialist discourse: everything is couched as an a priori, the work cannot exist, just the name, a token, a dirty word. The name of the woman artist and the noun and adjective that carry her away, mark her as a danger, a temptress or corrupter of some imaginary purity, of proper conformity to an ideal that is also never stated: the woman artist is a *renegade*.

In the realm of the symbolic, the subject deprived of her/his values, the object of contempt, becomes the *abject*, the object of the reader's repugnance. Embracing the socio-politics of patriarchal value, the art historian presents the woman artist as an object of contempt, deprives her work of visibility, and disparages it. Living in brackets The authorial "subject" creates a context in the essay through which she disparages the "object" or the subject of her criticism ("for example, Orshi Drozdik"). By referring to her past, she deprives the woman artist of her present ("Esteemed neo-avant-garde artists from socialist times, once respected for their opposition to official art"). But there is a sliver of context presented at this point, a mote delivered to the eye of discourse. For the art historian suggests that within the construct of a Janus-faced Hungarian art scene, the woman artist belongs to those who "now blindly accept membership of the Hungarian Art Academy, (as well as the generous monthly salary attached to it)". Here, at last, there is a proposition, a contention, masquerading as fact. Here, at last, we can examine the factual basis of the art historian's assertions. Only there are no facts here, just half-truths and intimation spliced from the larger context of facts and protected from truth by their calculated abbreviation. What pass for facts are in fact prejudices and second-guesses, hints and allegations, designed to create suspicion – with the reader left to "fill-in" the story.

There follows a preposition on which these suggestions pivot into farce. Having disparaged the artist, her art work and her very being, the art historian adds an "or": "or do anything (such as exhibiting and performing in the National Salon of Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle)." "Do anything"! The wanton excesses of the woman artist clearly know no bounds. The amoral woman artist would do anything – but to what end? Surely, she would not have the temerity to commit the ultimate outrage, a sin against life and morality itself, of helping the young artists with whom she works to exhibit in a certain art space? And, even, to perform there herself? This is the end, the collapse of everything ("anything") into a pure negative that yet inhabits the world of petty politics and name-calling. Degenerate art, in a degenerate space by a degenerate artist who must have infected the young artists by association.

The woman artist is said to be compensating for her past – perhaps through a generous fee or an exhibition or a performance. Longing for such compensation seems to be the reason why she surrendered her loyalty. She would do "anything" to be compensated. But the woman artist is also excommunicated and shown contempt because she did not manifest solidarity with what someone has decided on behalf of a history not yet established is "the more advanced contemporary art scene" – a scene that demands solidarity and economic surrender, with no questions asked, a scene in which artists must "resign from their posts as a sign of solidarity with the more advanced contemporary art scene." Again: Renegade!

But did the artist actually give up her position in the "more advanced contemporary art (scene)", or was it the art historian who expelled her from that anointed place? Does it matter that the woman artist is not a member of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and does not receive a generous income? Does it matter that the woman artist has spent 40 years making art in difficult times, learning about the world, taking Hungary to that world, and trying to bring it back? Does it matter that the woman artist struggled to make art with and about the body in places and at times when this was almost impossible? Does it matter that the woman artist helped to teach and communicate for most of her career about feminist theory and practice? (Does it matter that the woman artist gave books and advice to the art historian at the beginning of her career and tried to foster in her the kind of informed independent thinking that she has failed so conspicuously to deliver?) Does it matter that the artist has made it a priority in her life to work with young artists and help them to think intelligently, creatively and independently? Does the work of the woman artist matter one jot, its experiments, its failures, its passions, its commitment for four decades to something that can never be reduced or defined (and that must grow and change): women's art? No it doesn't, according to this article.

- <sup>[1]</sup> Edit András, "They are so very different from us': Who is the stranger, who is the Other in Hungary's (art)scene?", Eurozine, 28 July 2015 [eurozine.com/articles/2015-07-28-andras-en.html](http://eurozine.com/articles/2015-07-28-andras-en.html)
- <sup>[2]</sup> In: Stefan Rozental (ed.), *Niels Bohr: His Life and Work as Seen by His Friends and Colleagues* (North Holland, 1967), 328.
- <sup>[3]</sup> András Edit, Op. cit.