

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
Doctoral Programme

THE BUDAPEST EYE

**Changes in the Commitment to Painting During the Beginning and Middle
of the 1990s in Contemporary Hungarian Fine Arts**

Theses of a DLA Dissertation

János Kósa

2007

Consultant: Árpád Szabados, Full Professor

Thesis 1.

Presentation of the Budapest Eye as a phenomenon

There was a new phenomenon in Hungarian fine arts in the beginning and middle of the 1990s, namely that the voice of painting, especially figurative painting, became much more audible compared to the preceding periods. The characteristics of this phenomenon are well worthy of processing with the methods of art history. This has not happened yet, even though it would be of crucial importance.

I borrowed the title from Bojár Iván András, who wrote the following in a catalogue displaying the pieces of Szűcs Attila made between 1999 and 2000: *“There is a painting tradition that also exists in Hungary... Perhaps it was started by a Nazarean rhetoric of representation, the Gödöllő group, or the work of the Rome School influenced by Novecentismo, and it flowed into the pathos-heated realism of Social Realism... Then ... the epic possibilities of realism unfolded... And there, where propaganda art and the commercial realism of advertisements—ennobled in pop-art—found each other, that is, in hyperrealism, something sprung up; a set of problems that proved essential for us, Hungarians... Szotyory, Szépfalvi, Baranyai, Kupcsik and others have created a very peculiar local approach together (I would call it the Budapest eye) that serves as a field of interpretation for Szűcs’ art.”*

This phenomenon is important because this was the generation that set Hungarian painting in motion again with its activity, directing it towards a renewal.

Thesis 2.

**The Budapest Eye is a phenomenon that needs processing in art history.
As I am personally involved, I will try to serve with some additional data to this work.**

Be a painter

I organised my first individual exhibition in April 1990 in the Barcsay Room. That was the time when I first discovered what later became an important element of my art. I created pieces of art by mixing and recreating quotations taken from art history. Connection with the avant-garde, or, rather, clarifying my relation with the avant-garde was of a primary importance to me then. I was preoccupied with conceptual art and those chapters of conceptual art that dealt with painting. The statements of J. Kosuth about art radically changed my views on art. Thus the conceptual basis was very important for me and still I was interested in traditional painting.

Hang by a hair

In Autumn 1990 I had an exhibition in the Bercsényi Club, where I built a multi-part installation. The installations did not draw my attention away from painting; my explorations in other fields had the aim of finding answers to the questions that had arisen in painting.

Motorcycle Near Vilna

This is the complementation and adaptation of a story made up by Tamás Szentjóbby. Also a reference to the nature of human thinking based on analogies and a critique of the avant-garde’s intention to create something absolutely new.

The Life

In 1991 the time came for me to take a decisive step in painting. That is how the painting titled *La Vida, La Vie — The Life* was born. At that time I already knew for sure that I would devote my life to painting. “*There is so much trouble with painting—I thought—it is so impossible to do it that the whole thing is already equivalent to a symbol. We can understand the momentum of painting-that-has-become-impossible as a source of information having an effect on the totality of culture. That is: we have to toil with painting.*” The picture titled *The Life* is the exact copy of Picasso’s 1903 painting. First I thought that I had not copied Picasso’s canvas but had ‘re-painted’ it. The difference came from my position in that particular situation. I tried to place myself into the painter’s position. I felt in 1903 when I was painting. I called my technique plagiarism then, but today I know that what happened to me was the story of Pierre Menard who wrote the history of *Don Quixote* again: exactly the same way as the short story had been written by Borges.

Plagiarism

I labelled the next period ‘the period of plagiarism’ for myself. I was preoccupied with creativity as a problem. Plagiarism was interesting for me out of the same point of view. Plagiarism is one of the most important taboos in today’s art. The plagiarist commits a crime today when he marks another person’s intellectual work of art as his own. These questions attracted a widespread interest at that time. I read about Stewart Home, an English cultural worker, whose ideas had a profound effect on me. Home worked out a programme named Praxis according to which we have to turn against human creativity as our whole faulty world is operated in the name of creativity. According to Home, the next task of the avant-garde is to reject and demolish creativity. The Praxis has three pillars to rely on: 1. Multiple Names. 2. Plagiarism. 3. Art Strike. In the name of this programme I plagiarised J. Beuys’ picture titled ‘*Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet*’ in which it was only the title that changed compared to the original (‘*Das Schweigen von Stewart Home ist nicht zu überbewerten*’). The piece titled *Je t’ [Én téged]* was also born in 1992. It was not direct plagiarism this time, it could rather have been called a persiflage. In his last picture, *Tu m’* (1918) Duchamp had a decorator paint a hand pointing to the right. I had a decorator paint a hand pointing to the left. This last piece of my plagiarism period was the beginning of my new ways in painting. An allegory, *The Death of Painting*, was born in 1993. I made a fictitious Picasso-canvas. Just as in the case of *The Life*, I appropriated the style of Picasso’s blue period.

Low budget

After the plagiarism period I began to think of any artificial activity with a certain resignation. Resignation took the place of my militant, instant problem-solving activity. If someone has an inborn urge for creativity, which he has to satisfy, let him do so, but it should be done as discreetly, economically, and warily as possible. I began to think in terms of a ‘low budget’ painting. I worked out a system of motifs whose elements still constitute a basic part of my painting. These drawings had a certain world in common; I could say that there began to loom a huge chance—or danger—of the evolution of a new style. And I did not want to berth my ship definitively in those waters. I found new interest in 17th century Caravaggesque painting.

The Rancate chests

In this series I would have dealt with the question of the relationship between science and art—had I completed these pictures, drawings and other documents. Here I would have had to do a quasi-scientific work, but I decided quickly that I would not finish this series. But these stories and their motifs became the main inspirers of one of my later periods, which I call the ‘robot period’.

Thesis 3.

The Budapest Eye in international comparison—on the embeddedness of the events in Hungarian fine arts in the 1990s into the international context

Some ideas on the activity of Young British Art and the Leipzig School. Representation of “Eastern Europeanness” and the post-communist feeling in the international scene. The question of relatedness to realism. It is obvious that there is an attempt at creating a connection with realism. And at the Hungarian points of connection one can usually hear a “breaking voice”.

Thesis 4.

A few words on the possibilities of contemporary painting

The new media suddenly brought new and interesting pictures into our lives, and this phenomenon had to be processed by painting too. The privileges of painting were eliminated and art became an industry-like formation in which painting was nothing more than a genre among the others. Painting began to use the formal characteristic features that had been brought to visual culture by the new visual languages of the new media, according to its own taste. Painters created the effects that had only been present before in mechanical images with their paintbrushes, thus enriching the toolkit of the language of painting. A dialogue was set up between the new media and ‘ancient’ painting. An attitude of ‘just for spite’ was strongly present in this on behalf of the painters. Painting has never been practised by so many people as today, despite its narrowing possibilities and its unfeasibility. In my opinion, the painting that is important for me does the same thing in art as science does in basic research. This sphere of painting still has a leading role in visibility. The interaction between the different visual genres can have a fertilising effect on our whole culture. I believe that painting still has a main coordinating role in this game due to its conscious attention to tradition and its openness to the impulses coming from the genres that have recently begun to play a role in visibility.

Thesis 5.

The recurrent problem of provinciality in the history of Hungarian painting and the elaboration of this issue in the case of the Budapest Eye

The characteristic features of Hungarian Historicist painting. The effects of historical painting. Comparison with the characteristic features of other periods of painting. The description of my pieces related to this topic (Hackers, etc.). The scientific processing of the history of the Budapest Eye would be important because without such treatment the movement will only add to the treasure trove of untold stories about Hungarian painting, which is provinciality in itself.