

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
Doctoral Programme

ENGAGEMENT AND AUTONOMY

Escape-diary, from the Situationists to Jacques Rancière

DLA Short Theses

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My thesis attempts to deal with the history of engagement and autonomy on the field of art in the last fifty years; to examine the effects of a few related theories and discourses on my own work as well as on the Hungarian contemporary art scene. Through this, it is also a short summary of, and a critical reflection on, the last ten years' artistic and theoretical work, remarkably the project i did within the Big Hope artist collective, and my translations and publications. In it, a special attention has been paid to the Situationist International and Guy Debord's activity, both scarcely introduced in Hungarian culture; Debord's main work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, which was published in 2006 in Hungarian, in my translation, is related to my creative and research activity on multiple levels. Another focus of the thesis is the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (for the time being inaccessible in Hungarian) as currently one of the most important points of reference in the international art scene. In my analysis, as long as we consider the Situationists being the protagonists in bringing the dialectics in the title of my thesis to the extremes and therefore making it implode, it is Rancière who did the most in order to keep this dialectics the main framework of the long term project of modern art.

Rather than conducting an extensive research, in my essay I attempted to synthesize my earlier work and publications.

Introduction

In the introductory notes of the thesis I trace down the oscillation of the dialectics of engagement and autonomy within the current global artistic discourse. My points of departure are the activity of the Situationist International – in which radical, critical art transformed itself into the radical critique of art – and the thought of Jacques Rancière where the theory of “the end of images”, appropriated by early modernism and the avant-gardes, sees itself relativised and becoming part of a new theory of “aesthetic revolution”.

Indirectly, I touch upon my work as a translator which first of all served to create points of reference within the Hungarian art discourse for my artistic work, and upon those characteristics based on which my artistic work can also be considered referential.

Subtraction

This chapter is the actualization of a manifesto I wrote ten years ago (in English: http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors/erhardttext.htm). Within the context of the thesis, it documents the state of affairs from where my work has taken its departure, that is, a more or less instinctive analysis of the Situationist view of culture, and a radical iconoclast attitude to

the relationship of art and society. The central observation of the text refers to the way the system of neoliberal capitalism displaced aesthetic critique; not only by having become immune to it but even dependent on its supply. Thus radical criticism could not find other way out of the situation but its own annihilation or, as the text absurdly proposes, the progressivity of regression. (Such extreme negativity was certainly strengthened by the fact that the Hungarian artistic discourse of the day did not show any sign of having to do with its own social-political environment.)

Spectacle

The chapter is a rather didactic summary of the history of the Situationist International, positing it as one of the focal points of the global contemporary artistic discourse, touching upon its influence on the fields of art and art theory. It analyzes and contextualizes the book *The Society of the Spectacle* that I had translated for an exhibition in 2004 as an attempt to realize a sort of ultimate “subtraction”, or to aesthetize redundancy.

Inside Out

Inside Out is a collaborative project presenting photos and comments made by homeless persons living in Budapest, conceptualized and organized by Scottish artist Dominic Hislop and myself, in 1998. In this chapter, the experiences and the conclusions of the project as well as some of the specificities of the Hungarian artistic discourses of the recent past and the present day are analyzed, through the application of Rancièrian terminology. The project has been used as a chance to illustrate Rancièrè’s main operations: the negation of “unrepresentability”, and the liberation of the image.

In the supplement, the Foreword of Jacques Rancièrè’s book *The Politics of Aesthetics – The Distribution of the Sensible* (Continuum, London-New York: 2004) has been included, in my technical translation. The short text can be considered an authentic explanation of how Rancièrè’s work can support simultaneously engaged activist art and the art market built on artistic autonomy, by promising an emancipation from the antagonism between such engagement and autonomy to be delivered through “forsaking the unsatisfactory mise-en-scène of the ‘end’ and the ‘return’”.

List of related earlier publications (available in English):

„Taking Part”, introductory essay in: *!Revolution?* exhibition catalogue,
Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, 2007.

„Ozunculuk talebi nasıl teröre dönürebilir / How can the Demand of Playfulness Turn into
Terror”, *Art-Ist magazine*, 2004 ősz, „Situationist International” supplement pps. 236-242.

„BB and Shiva”, Notes on Guy Debord and Attila Kotányi, 2004. [exindex/english](http://www.exindex.hu)
(www.exindex.hu)

„Vivisection”, *The HTV 50*, Amsterdam (2003/Sept.) pps. 4-5.