

Hungarian University of Fine Arts

Doctoral School

**The Bed**

**Representations in the 20th Century and the Contemporary Art**

DLA theses

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## **1. The definition of the field of research**

I think the problem of the subject of bed in plastic art is relevant. Before preparing my masterpiece, some of my sculptures and videos had already been related to the subject matter of the bed. The domain of my research includes sculptural representations, installations and performances documented by photos of 20th century and contemporary artists. Paintings and the other branches of fine art are not discussed. I consider important to involve the works of art before the 20th century as preceding models. Although I attach great significance to those works of art where the human figure does not appear on the bed, I also discuss beds with figures in my dissertation.

## **2. Thoughts about the bed following the philosophy of Vilém Flusser**

The book called 'The Bed'<sup>1</sup> by Vilém Flusser is the essential base of my DLA dissertation. It does not always correlate with my ideas; but I discuss it as one of the possible interpretations of the subject. Flusser systematizes the experiences gained in bed: his central topics are birth, reading, sleeping, love, insomnia, illness and death. These issues are arranged in a pyramid-like hierarchy, where love is on the top of it and on its sides there are parallel worlds. Descending from the peak sleeping and insomnia, reading and illness, finally birth and death appear as basic and all-encompassing pairs. Following the example of Flusser I felt necessary to introduce a new hierarchy which arranges the activities in a pyramid based on the amount of time spent in bed. Sleeping is at the peak of it followed by corporal and spiritual pleasures. Corporal pleasures mean love, idling and eating. Spiritual pleasures are reading, writing, dreaming, learning and watching TV or films. At the lowest parts of the pyramid there is the time spent on illness, birth, giving birth, and death.

Only when analysing the works of art I realised that the themes of the representations of bed are completely covered neither by the pyramid of Flusser nor by my suggestion related to time. In the 20th century new meanings appear in the works of art which are independent of all these categories.

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<sup>1</sup> Flusser, Vilém: Az ágy, Kijárat Kiadó, 1996

### **3. Intimacy**

A bed is a private place. The prevailing tone of the representations is always intimacy, which is inseparable from this subject. The private sphere encircles the bed because of the proximity of the body.

### **4. Antecedents in the history of art**

When making a work of art, the type of bed in use in that period is determinant. Consequently I deal with the cultural history of beds from 3500 BC to the beginning of the 19th century in a separate chapter entitled 'History of Furniture'. In the chapter called 'Representations of Beds in Plastic Art from the Prehistoric Age to the 19th Century' I would like to show the meanings that - I suppose - permanently appear in the works of art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary art. From this starting point I can examine the new meanings which turn up later. According to my observations the meaning of all the representations analysed in my dissertation can be compared with the activities related to bed in the pyramid created by Flusser. Most works of art deal with the subject of deathbed and the least of them deal with reading. Besides these everyday activities and concepts, transcendental, religious and mythological embedding is also characteristic.

### **5. Beds in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary art – Different solutions for the same issue**

I have examined especially the works of Rachel Whiteread and Sophie Calle. Their representations of beds are of different style and material and have different purpose. Among the activities related to bed we can observe the notions appearing at the two ends of Flusser's pyramid in them. In my opinion love was the most inspiring experience for Sophie Calle, while for Rachel Whiteread it was death.

Among the 20th century and contemporary representations Marina Abramović could be the third angle of a theoretical triangle. In her works the spiritual and intellectual contents can prevail because of the calm and horizontal appearance of the human body. Rachel Whiteread's bed-sculptures are essential in my research. When analysing her works

I realised that beds without human body turned up in the 20th century and contemporary art, which had never occurred before.

Sophie Calle is also an important part of my research, since there are several representations of bed in her art. Her main subject matter is love, but her beds can be easily related to most of the elements of Flusser's pyramid.

## **6. Various approaches**

I do not want to set up chronological order among these works of art which belong to several styles, and trends. My classification is based on the activities related to bed and on the observation of their meaning. Peter Fischer points out that the bed becomes an independent artistic motive with the arrival of modernism. It loses its picture-like, narrative context.<sup>2</sup> I deal with the beds without human body parallel with the ones with a figure. The meaning of the works cover completely neither the pyramid of Vilém Flusser nor the classification based on usefulness. As I observed, the emphasis on love is the same as in the structure of Flusser, who put it on the top of the pyramid, because this is the most frequent representation in contemporary art as well, including the issues of sexuality and gender. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary representations new meanings can be related to the subjects which have not turned up in the previous classifications. These are the following: the problem of social gender, spirituality which might be related to Flusser's renewal caused by reading, the confrontation of the private and public spheres, the works which show criticism and tension, reflections about political and social problems, cultural differences, the bed as scene of sacral and transcendent experiences. The high level of physical presence is essential. It transforms the bed into a metaphor almost equal to the body, making possible the birth of beds without figure. It is important to emphasize that while the representations without figure appear only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beds with figure have a long past. The most significant result of my research is focused on the possible representations of meanings of the beds without figure.

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer, Peter: Introduction, In: Another World – Twelve Bedroom Stories, catalogue of exhibition, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2002

## 7. Supplement

The reports which can be found in the supplement are important results of my research (Conversations with contemporary Hungarian artists about their works of art representing beds), in which Berhidi Mária, Jovánovics György, Bukta Imre, Németh Ilona, Koronczai Endre and Szigeti Csongor reveal their artistic purposes. When making the reports, each conversation became unique, but the following questions were important in case of each subject: What inspired the creation of the work of art? /How did he/she get to the idea of bed? /Had he/she dealt with the theme of the bed earlier as well? The following topics also often appeared in the conversations: the approach to the bed as a metaphor, the possible relations between the everyday beds and the work of art, the use of personal objects in artworks.