

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
Doctoral School

PARALLELS

Installation art in the nineties
in Hungary and Romania

Theses

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The topic of the thesis and research objectives

The social and political turn of 1989 signified the beginning of a new era in terms of both culture and art for the Eastern European region as a whole. In two former Eastern Bloc countries, Hungary and Romania, however, some changes had already occurred in the ten years preceding the regime change that would determine the cultural dynamics of decades to come. While, in Hungary, more permissive cultural policy resulted in a process of increasing laxity, in Romania, to the contrary, the darkest period of the Ceausescu dictatorship was unfolding, which also led to severe restrictions in the cultural sphere. The difference in the resulting situations, the circumstances of the regime change, the geographical positions of the two countries and the disparities resulting from the structure of their respective art scenes all played a determining role in shaping art in these two countries during the nineties.

My research examines contemporary art in Hungary and Romania during the first decade after the regime change within the framework of one of the defining media of the nineties: installation. I conduct my observations along three parallels, which includes an analysis comparing group activity (Újlak and subREAL), one comparing two contemporary art events of the decade that were considered paradigmatic (Polyphony and 01010101), as well as a comparison in relation to self-referential works of art (Emese Benczúr's installations from the nineties and my own works produced during the same years).

The aim of my research is to use these three parallels, along which the case studies are organized, to draw consequences about these two neighbouring countries which point past the examined phenomena.

Research methodology

My research focuses on one of the defining media of the nineties: installation. I will be employing the method of spatial and temporal delineation, whereby I determine the coordinates of my research in time and space. All these viewpoints have to do with my person: the nineties marked the beginning of my own activities in art/installation, which have been mostly linked with the culture and contemporary art of the two countries.

I regard case study-based comparative analysis as my primary research method, which, in my view, is the most adequate approach for identifying the differences and similarities that characterize the installation and contemporary art of the two countries.

The structure of the paper

In the chapter entitled Installation as medium, I discuss the precursors of installation as a medium and I define the pivotal points in art history which led to the development of installation. Among these points, I mention the forerunners of the collection, "Wunderkammern" and „Kunstkammern“, follies, as well as borderline cases in architecture referred to as vernacular architecture. In terms of the history of art, within the era spanning from cubism to minimalism, I touch on those "moments" which, by expanding and reinterpreting the image plane, as well as emphasizing the physical presence of the perceiver, led to installation as a solution. As a parallel – but not independent – process, I discuss the readymade-object-environment continuum and discuss Moholy-Nagy's Light-Space Modulator.

In the second chapter of my paper, I outline the social and political context of the years of the regime change, after which I present the institution systems of the two countries.

In essence, it is from the next chapter on that I actually discuss my topic. The first parallel focuses on installation activities that are linked to the Újlak group in Hungary and subREAL in Romania. The installation practice of these two groups can be regarded as a model with regards to the entire decade. I undertake my comparative analysis in four subchapters. In Self-management, relating to the institution system I discuss the relationship of the two groups to the institutional framework of the nineties, as well as the peculiarities stemming from this perspective, which also became integrated into art activities. In the subchapter entitled Thematic vs. artistic intention, within the context of an unusual comparison, I contrast subREAL's activity, which is divisible into themes, with Újlak's thematically uncategorizable installation practice (which is better grasped along the notion of artistic intention). The subchapter Language: notional – symbolic vs. sensitive-associative approach explores the differences in visual language as employed

by the two groups, while Use of materials, objects and techniques: cognitively determined vs. experimental focuses on the factors that set apart – or connect – the two groups in terms of their use of materials and objects, as well as their handling of technical tools.

In the second central analysis of my paper, I look at two contemporary art events: Polyphony (“Polifónia”), held in 1993 and 01010101, which took place a year later. In spite of their identical objectives (examining the relationships between contemporary art and social factors), there were significant differences – also interpretable at the art-scenes level – in how the two projects were ultimately realized.

Polyphony, along with its closing symposium, raised important questions, most importantly enquiring as to the extent Hungarian contemporary art was open to social issues. Taking this question and a more detailed enquiry stemming from it, I created a classification which can facilitate the interpretation of the majority of works featured at the event. In the subchapter entitled Art as theme, I discuss works that have – to varying degrees and perhaps unintentionally – retained the characterization of art as idealized and distinct. The subchapter The appropriation of social media contains a discussion of works that, in order to meet their objectives, utilized social tools, such as city information boards, advertisements, the postal network, commercial units, etc. As these were not intended as self-thematizing pieces, by abandoning the idea of the artwork as a thing of exaltation, they managed to achieve a much greater degree of embeddedness. The subchapter with the title Technique and perception contains works whose domains of exploration included audio-visual technical apparatuses, motion and perception, and the aesthetic aspects associated with these areas. Finally, I dedicate a full chapter to discussing works that were, for some reason, never realized (Unrealized works of art) and issues concerning the contemporary art scene, which have been brought forth by the event (Symposium).

For its 01010101 project, the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Bucharest announced an open call for projects, whose primary and most important requirement was to engage collaboration with a specific social group, necessitating a direct and confrontational attitude on the part of the artists. The second requirement of the project was to

present the digitalized documentation of the individual actions in the form of a single, curatorial mega-installation. Based on the social specifics of the “engaged” groups and the nature of relationship between the artist and the communities in question, I grouped the submitted projects into three categories: Collaboration in the spirit of peasant identity, Disadvantaged minorities, and Alternative forms of urban communication. In the first of these subchapters, I cover projects of the 01010101 event, in whose realization and inner motivation peasant identity played a crucial role. In the second group, I listed works that engaged disadvantaged minorities subject to social discrimination. Last, but not least, I discuss alternative forms of urban communication, which were realized by individual artists within the framework of the project.

In connection with the third parallel (Self-referential installations in the nineties in Hungary and Romania), I present examples of self-referential artworks from the nineties, both from Hungary and Romania. During my research, I was most interested in cases where self-referentiality appeared in an explicit form and was consciously employed by the artist as a fundamental constructional element of the work. Following a brief elaboration on – and citing some international examples for – self-referentiality in visual art, in the subchapter entitled Text-oriented and technical self-referentiality in Hungary and Romania, I touch on Hungarian and Romanian artists and works of art relevant for the topic. I then proceed to my actual analysis, whereby I draw a parallel between Emese Benczúr’s installations and my own self-referential works.

Thesis summary and research results

In the final chapter of my dissertation entitled Conclusions, I summarize my findings based on my research. A close examination of the structure and dynamics of the contemporary art scenes of the nineties reveals disparities that clearly result from differences in the closing decade of the previous era. In addition to dissimilarities of a social and political nature (“happiest barracks” vs. darkest dictatorship), variations stemming from geography and the structure of the scenes also constitute an important factor. In consequence, while Hungary is characterized by a relative “seamlessness”, in Romania, we can speak of

steps taken as a result of disorganization caused by a sudden social/political shift, and in the spirit of “catching up” as rapidly as possible. The latter intention, however, did not lead to immediate changes in the institution system and dynamics of Romanian contemporary art: processes unfolded more slowly and with more stalls there than in neighbouring countries to the west.

The first parallel draws a comparison between the two countries’ paradigmatic artist groups from the nineties: Újlak and subREAL. The relationship of the two groups to the traditions of art and to social reality maps the trajectories that have ultimately shaped the contemporary art of the two countries. An examination of subREAL reveals at least two aspects that can be said to be valid for the Romanian contemporary art of the nineties as a whole: a need for local self-definition in an ever changing global world, and the presence of a tradition of “cultural export”, used as a “means” to facilitate this self-definition process. The primary significance of the Újlak group is in their renewal of visual language and use of tools. By dissolving the frameworks of genre and media and by turning artwork into an event, they expanded and rearticulated its boundaries. Their works served as forerunners of a poetic installational language which would become a significant feature of the activities of subsequent artist generations in Hungary.

In my second analysis, I compare the Polyphony and 01010101 exhibitions. While the emergence of the relationship between art and society into the foreground was characteristic of contemporary art in the entire region, as a consequence of the defining nature of local specificities, reflection on this relationship in individual countries, including Hungary and Romania, resulted in differences. In their responses to arising questions, the artists participating in Polyphony revealed the dynamics, versatility and chief orientations of the Hungarian contemporary art scene of the nineties. Perhaps due to an overly cautious analysis of the curatorial concept – or maybe as a result of an absence of art traditions with a more direct approach to social issues, as well as the non-existence of a society that would generate such traditions – rather than asking questions of social relevance, what artists ended up engaging in was aesthetic discourse that was integrated into the social scene (urban context). The curatorial concept behind the 01010101 event was much more reflective and focused, which moved the artworks in a di-

rection of report and action and oriented artists more towards thinking in documentarist projects. The discourse represented by 01010101, along with the resulting dispositions and attitudes, was traceable in the works of numerous Romanian artists in the late nineties. The more restrictive curatorial concept behind the event was articulated in the spirit of playing rapid “catch-up” and reflected the suddenness of the aggressive change which took place in Romania in '89.

In my third and final analysis, I examine works of art from the nineties within these two contemporary scenes, which are of a self-referential nature. I then compare Emese Benczúr's installations with my own work from this same period. In the structure of Benczúr's works, the texts function as “bridges”: they link the visible (installation) and the invisible (the time interval intended for, and work invested in, their realization). They are material- and technique-dependent, resulting in sensual articulation. As a consequence of this, and also as a result of their conceptual aspect, they had clear ties to the intellectual context represented by the neo-conceptualism that was characteristic of Hungary in the nineties. In contrast to Benczúr's installations, in my own works, the texts are more reserved in their materiality; they are cool and objective in their conceptual articulation, resembling formal informational texts. Rather than aiming to tie together two structural elements of the work, their self-referentiality serves as a tool for entrapping and manipulating the perceiver. Through interpreting these installations, viewers become conscious of their role in the system of art, as well as of the process of their own objectification.

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