

Art After Conceptual Art

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Edit Andrés

Transgressing Boundaries

(Even Those Marked Out by the Predecessors)

in New Genre Conceptual Art



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Little Warsaw, *The Body of Nefertiti* (2003),
Hungarian Pavilion, Biennale di Venezia

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Transgressing Boundaries (Even Those Marked Out by the Predecessors) in New Genre Conceptual Art

One should realize that even the aim of re-writing or globalizing Conceptualism, considering it as a broader term than just a specific North American and/or western European art practice, when applied to eastern Europe, still focuses on the art activity of socialism well after the political changes.¹ The paradoxical situation, however, is that the once progressive avant-garde art of the 1970s, which attracted so much Western attention in the time of the cold war, has by now lost much of its credibility in the local art scenes by becoming one of the obstacles of the new, ambitious art of younger generations carrying on the legacy of Conceptualism.² Partly as a consequence of the generation gap in the ex-Eastern European countries, a strong aspiration can be traced among emerging artists and curators to leave behind the past and to be identified as Europeans without any further distinction, claiming the division of Europe to be a purely political construction that became obsolete after the collapse of the Soviet satellite system. Nevertheless, the legacy of the socialist past still saturates the context they operate in, regardless of their opposing desire.

Tracing the difficulties that previous generations of Conceptual art coming from behind the Iron Curtain faced while seeking broader recognition, we can acknowledge that any art with latent or explicit political connotations »was not readily accepted by Conceptual art in general«³ (that is, by the North American canon of hard-core Conceptualism). The conceptually based

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- 1 Desa Philippi, »Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism,« in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 152–68. László Beke, »Conceptualist Tendencies in Eastern European Art,« in *Global Conceptualism: Points of origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat., ed. Philomena Mariani (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 41–52.
- 2 Over-evaluation of the »Great Generation« of the 1960s and 1970s to the detriment of the production of younger generations is quite common in the scene, which is also echoed in the following statement regarding Conceptualism: »...a genuinely new aesthetic language was not created in the 1990s because this had been accomplished decades before.« Beke, »Conceptualist Tendencies,« 42.
- 3 Alexander Alberro, »A Media Art: Conceptualism in Latin America in the 1960s,« in Newman, Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 149.

feminist art of the same period couldn't even get its share of local recognition within the closed, male-dominated circle⁴ of the so-called »secondary publicity.«⁵ The neo-Conceptualism of the 1990s and the turn of the millennium,⁶ which is the focus of my attention, suffers equally from the difficulty of reading the context of the transition from outside, which itself is too controversial and hybrid in nature, and from the authoritarian power and desire for regulation by the recent local art establishment, recruited from the ex-opposition encampment of official socialist culture.

My aim is not to stuff local art practices into the straitjacket of conceptualist terminology as it is defined by Anglo-Saxon theory, based on Anglo-American practice, but rather, to expose the fact that the heritage of conceptual strategies is still very vivid and pertinent in the frame of the post-socialist condition, even if it appears and functions quite differently than in the heyday of the movement's pioneers. In my case-study I would like to analyze two recent, very complex projects by the Budapest-based duo Little Warsaw and the related local reactions. My aim is to explore the current possibilities for critical art practices utilizing the legacy of Conceptualism in an ex-socialist country and the differences between western and eastern European conceptual practices.

In order to understand the context of the neo-Conceptualism developed in the region, one must take into account not just today's socio-political and cultural conditions, but also those special circumstances within which the predecessors operated more than thirty years ago. Since the events and discourses of the region are not included in mainstream art histories beyond the national one, one can refer to it as a starting point for elaborating more nuanced problems. As more and more political secret agents became visible⁷ and a growing number of essays based on the research of the newly opened archives came to light, it became clear that the division between the official and unofficial cultures in the period of socialism wasn't such a black-and-white structure as it appeared to be in the time of the cold war. Instead of total repression by state cultural policy and a heroic resistance on the part of the opposition, a constant negotiation for power, a kind of tug-of-war, was going on, continuously reshaping the terrain for cultural activity.⁸ For the countercultural camp, getting a share of the power was at stake, while keeping its autonomy for defining progressive art.⁹

⁴ For example, Orsolya Drozdik's activity is still underestimated in the reference books of the period. Compare: Gábor András, et al., *Hungarian Art in the 20th Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1999); *Orsolya Drozdik: Adventure & Appropriation 1975–2001*, exh. cat., ed. Dóra Hegyi and Franciska Zólyom (Budapest: Ludwig Museum Budapest—Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002).

⁵ Hans Knoll, ed., *Die Zweite Öffentlichkeit—Kunst in Ungarn im 20. Jahrhundert* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1999).

⁶ See Sándor Hornyik, »Conceptualism in the Hungarian Art of the Nineties,« in *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* (Budapest), LI, 3–4 (2002): 251–64; Erzsébet Tatal, »Neoconceptual Art in Hungary,« in *Conceptual Art at the Turn of Millennium*, ed. Jana Gerzová and Erzsébet Tatal (Budapest/Bratislava: Praesens, 2001); Erzsébet Tatal, *Neokonceptuális művészet Magyarországon a kilencvenes években* (Neo-conceptual Art in Hungary in the 1990s), (Budapest: Praesens, 2005), 114–41.

⁷ Beyond politicians, more and more names pop up even from the pool of internationally recognized artists, such as, Gábor Bódy and István Szabó, movie directors who cooperated with the government as secret agents for the so-called III/3 division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which collected information about private citizens. The Office recruited their agents by blackmailing them with the threat of making their creative work impossible.

⁸ See Serguei Alex. Oushakine, »The terrifying mimicry of samizdat,« in *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 191–241; Edit Sasvári, *A balatonboglári kápolnatárlatok* (Church exhibitions in Balatonboglár), (Budapest, 1999).

All information coming from outside was filtered through the context of the local power dynamics. In the 1960s and 1970s, the main fault line was not drawn between different artistic approaches and strategies following and opposing each other, as in the Western countries. In Hungary, they got along quite well: Those who were not included in the category of »supported« artists, but in that of »tolerated« or »prohibited« ones,¹⁰ formed a loose alliance against the controlling official cultural policy. In no way did they represent a common way of thinking or a homogeneous trend or style, but they were connected in their temporarily shared position in the local scene of being more or less excluded from official venues and commissions, whether they strictly opposed the political regime or whether the regime found their activity disturbing or dangerous and considered their art unsuitable for their conception of progressive art.

This structure discolored the local variations of the art movements and trends of the time. For instance, in the 1950s and early 1960s, all forms of abstraction were considered to be carrying alien and threatening bourgeois ideology, corresponding perfectly with the aim of Western cultural policy of supporting postwar abstraction as the perfect manifestation of the free, self-expressing individualism of Western democracies.¹¹ While American and English Pop art was the product of the economic boom of the postwar period and the launch of consumer capitalism, Hungarian Pop art grew out of the context of the planned economy, where, not only were consumer products in short supply, but also brands and advertisements were an unknown phenomenon. Elements of popular culture—cut-outs from magazines, junk materials—signified youthful rebellion in the tightly controlled, dry, gerontocratic official culture. Hungarian artists were not aware of the contrasting positions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art; therefore, they used the elements and methods of both for conveying messages about the socialist condition.¹²

Concerning Conceptual art of the 1970s, the institutional critique, so inherent in the movement in its Western formations, was flexible enough to be converted into the critique of the socialist regime in its Eastern variant, and to convey a coded political message, so it obviously became the most conscious device of the underground, countercultural force.¹³ »On the other hand, the 'immaterial' nature of conceptualists' works, and the 'poorness' of the media employed ... made communication easier and censorship more difficult.«¹⁴ For Sándor Hornyik, the explanation could be found in the fact that in Hungary, of the different constructions of Conceptualism, the one associated with Kosuth was picked up in the proper operation of the information-filter, which also functioned in the case of social sciences. As he argues, semiotics and Structuralism, for example, could be pressed through the filter, »as they were compatible with the

9 «...early works of Szentjóni and Erdély tested the limits of political protest, and the authorities' willingness to tolerate it, in their own and in all Eastern European countries.» Beke, »Conceptualist Tendencies,« 48.

10 See László Beke, »Dulden, verbieten, unterstützen—Kunst zwischen 1970 und 1975.« in Knoll, *Die Zweite Öffentlichkeit*, 212–34.

11 Eva Cockroft, »Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,« in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), 82–90.

12 Katalin Keserü, *Variations on Pop Art: Chapters in the History of Hungarian Art between 1950 and 1990*, (Budapest: Új Művészet Kiadó, 1993).

13 This was reflected in the broad local usage of the term »Conceptualism«, as a term for covering any kind of progressive art of the time. See Miklós Peternák, *A konceptuális művészet hatása Magyarországon» (The influence of Conceptual art in Hungary)*, <http://www.c3.hu/collection/koncept/index0.html#cs1>.

14 Beke, »Conceptualist Tendencies,« 42.

rationalism of Marxism«;¹⁵ the richness of Hungarian literature on linguistics could be added to the components in favor of adapting the »exclusive or strong« type of Conceptualism, using the term coined by Peter Osborne.¹⁶ Contrasting its Western counterpart, however, the Hungarian conceptual movement had nothing to do with the art market as no such thing existed. Similarly, the contribution to the deconstruction of modernism, by which conceptual tendencies played a crucial role in Western countries, where they were able to expand their critical scope to include questions of identity, representation, and institutional critique in the activities of the second and third generations, was absent in the genealogy of conceptual movements in Hungary. Hungarians lacked this transformation since modernism was an active agent in the opposition to an ideology-driven official culture. Furthermore, modernism worked well for the artists and critics as a field of projection, a kind of dreamland of freedom and equality beyond the physical constraints they experienced in their everyday lives behind the wall. The liberal Western art world also greatly supported this status quo, the fossilization of modernism: the »freedom-fighters« being existentially threatened embodied the lost paradise of art being socially significant. So, while Conceptualism in Western countries played an active role in the critique of modernism, the local eastern variants were deeply embedded in it; therefore, the critique of modernism has remained unfinished business in Hungary well after the political changes.¹⁷

In 1989, with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the physical division between the Eastern and Western blocs, along with the inner cultural division, disappeared. The local art scene was busy canonizing the former oppositional artists and the machinery of restitution began. The tumultuous political changes opened up pathways for recognition of previously ostracized artists and critics, which led to prestigious cultural and academic positions. This long-overdue recognition served as compensation for the neglect these artists and critics had endured during the previous cultural administration. With recognition came glorification: Now these artists and art professionals tended to refer to themselves as the »Great Generation.« They gradually took over the task of establishing and institutionalizing the new canon based on their moral capital accumulated during the time of repression.

Archives for collecting and preserving immaterial conceptual works and documentation of performances were established throughout the ex-Eastern bloc, including Hungary,¹⁸ while objects were commodified by the »art market fever« of the late 1990s. On one hand, the sanctuaries of the neo-avant-garde have the mission of keeping alive the cult of the previous period's cultural heroes, and guarding the myth of greatness connected to the political opposition. Today, this attitude permeating the whole structure of art institutions has become a barrier to any kind

¹⁵ Hornyik, »Conceptualism in the Hungarian Art of the Nineties,« 263.

¹⁶ Peter Osborne, »Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,« in Newman, Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 47–65.

¹⁷ See also: »Western influence and the discursive construction of postmodernity in the cultural debates of post-Socialist Eastern Europe: The case of Hungary and Russia,« lecture given by Anna Szemere at the 27th meeting of »Social Theory, Politics, and Arts,« Golden Gate University, San Francisco, CA, 2001, 18–20 October; Edit András, »Who is Afraid of a New Paradigm? The Old Practice of Art Criticism of the East versus the New Critical Theory of the West,« in *MoneyNations. Constructing the Border—Constructing East-West*, ed. Marion von Osten and Peter Spilmann (Vienna: Edition Seleno, 2003), 96–105. Hans Belting, »Europe: East and West at the Watershed of Art History,« in *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54–61.

¹⁸ <http://www.artpool.hu/>

of critical analysis of the past. At the same time, this mentality preserves the paternal, patronizing, and infantilizing attitude of socialism, and also overshadows contemporary art activity.¹⁹ On the other hand, the boom of the art market was combined with the euphoria over the admission to the European Union, a euphoria that went hand-in-hand with amnesia, eager to bury the recent past, the last half century. As a result of this twofold tendency, the socialist past became taboo, or hardly accessible, a forgettable issue for art making practices. Despite the climate of collective amnesia, the remnants of the socialist structure are everywhere and haunt us, since the psychological process of working through the double trauma (of the repressed existence in socialism and the decline of social significance of art within capitalism) is hardly over.

Profit-oriented predatory capitalism, built on the ruins of socialism, and quite mixed with it, is in full swing by now, and, as a side effect, art collecting has become hip in the nouveau-riche circles. In the United States »[m]any in the multinational corporate world of the 1960s likewise imagined ambitious art not as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture, but as a symbolic ally.«²⁰ On the contrary, the nouveau riche in Hungary, who were educated in socialism, and entered the field of art collecting with no serious competitors, chose to rely on the traditional art of the previous decades as their partners. Only a few looked upon radical contemporary artists as equals, and most regarded them as losers in the economic race of transition, a race in which the only measure of worth was financial success. Thus, the frontline of Hungarian entrepreneurs, innovative and risk-taking, made their alliances with those who worked in traditional genres of painting and sculpture. The transformation of the site that in the 1970s had hosted the most radical, underground art, the infamous Club of Young Artists, into the biggest private art institutions' headquarters,²¹ symbolically embodies a hidden message. A new art patronage, and art for comforting and pleasing untrained but wealthy audiences, took the place of advanced and critical art.

Little Warsaw—a Hungarian artist duo; a collaboration between Bálint Havas and András Gálik²²—started in a local art scene of the late 1990s that was characterized by the features described above, but Little Warsaw definitely never intended to fit in. What they actually did was put aside all the fundamental notions and unwritten agreements on which the scene operated: that is, they turned them upside down. The community, particularly the one that felt addressed by their actual art projects, never failed to reflect on them accordingly.

They were trained as painters by newly appointed teachers, established figures in the scene, first and second generation conceptual artists.²³ For the young apprentices, Conceptualism at that time meant some exhausted, outdated movement, esoteric, aesthetic, and dry, which, as such,

¹⁹ Very recently a young art historian was appointed to the post of the Director of the Kunsthalle.

²⁰ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2003), 2.

²¹ See: <http://www.kogart.hu/main.php>

²² «...the name 'Little Warsaw' first appeared as the title of their exhibition in the Polish Institute in 1996. It soon started functioning as an umbrella term, a logo that marks a mental orientation and a working method.» Livia Páldi, «Little Warsaw 1996–2002.» in *Little Warsaw* (Budapest: Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, 2003), 9. See also Maya and Reuben Fawkes, «Little Warsaw: Strategies of Removal and Deconstruction,» in *Umelec: Contemporary Art and Culture*, no. 3 (2005): 38–40.

²³ András Gálik's professor was Dóra Maurer, a conceptual artist of the 1970s; Bálint Havas's professor was Zsigmond Károlyi, a postconceptual artist of the 1980s. My thanks go to Little Warsaw for their extensive correspondence regarding their activity and ideas, while they never burdened my ideas and interpretation.

was accessible only to a closed, trained circle, isolated even within the art scene. In the 1990s, artists came to wide prominence using idea-based Conceptualism, whether with respect to dematerialization following the footsteps of local hardliners, or in a more sensual meaning, adjusted to the up-to-date reconfiguration of the movement.²⁴ Thus, neo-Conceptualism was frequently their starting point, and not their final goal. They were also definite about not connecting to the newly grounded art market through the gallery system; from the very beginning, they articulated a critique of making and distributing luxury consumer products. They discarded both of these local strategies and looked for new possibilities for art making, responsive to the changed discursive conditions.

In the turbulence of the early period of transition—they started their studies right after the political changes—they faced the insignificance of art and culture as active agents in the social sphere and the ineffectiveness of the rigid institutional structure, incapable of reflecting changes. They felt a strong need to redefine art, to extend it into the public realm, well beyond art's traditional borders. Their main intention was to communicate with a much wider audience than the narrow subculture. By establishing their own institutions,²⁵ they were able to escape from the elitist ghetto.

Following their studies at the art academy, they clearly did not want to join the different generational transformations of local Conceptualism, nor did they want to enlarge the growing pack of painters. They therefore placed sculpting, a traditional genre, center stage, thus crossing borders not just between two opposing fine art disciplines, but also between the art making practices of the professional and the outsider. And this border-crossing was just the very beginning. Contrary to their predecessors, they did not have a phobic relationship to the physical object: instead, it signified to them something they could hold onto in the flood of images of virtual reality, which strongly influenced the local scene and attracted a branch of painters who obsessively imitated virtual images.²⁶ Little Warsaw had no aversion to classical art making practices. For them, the real target of the thought process expanded far beyond the artistic object itself, it was the very nature of the context in which the art object existed with its complex social and psychological embedment within invisible power relations. Hence, they were interested in re-contextualizing and thereby re-evaluating classical art media (instead of imitating the digitized world's new image producing techniques) providing a subtle analysis of the context, through strategies such as mixing, changing, and dislocating it, while constantly testing its flexibility and limitations. The social sphere where art operates in a broader sense was the key site for them to examine.

In terms of orientation, they opposed the dominant direction of artists' migration toward the Western market in the 1990s and the aspirations of previous generations. On par with topical Western movements, in the name of universalism they were eager to discover neighboring coun-

²⁴ Tatai, *Neokonceptuális művészet Magyarországon*.

²⁵ They created an independent studio-cum-gallery in Hajós street. See: Páldi, «Little Warsaw 1996–2002.» In 2001, Little Warsaw ran a public research program «The Artwork of the Week». They investigated through around fifty examples how different Budapest-based art practices related to the idea of the commodified autonomous art object.

²⁶ At the exhibition *Áthallás* (Crosstalk), Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest, 2000 they exhibited a monumental rubber cast of an ornamented gate with a lying figure in a helmet at the block of flats built for army officers in 1929, almost the only work that was not a painting of the new style. See Páldi, «Little Warsaw 1996–2002.» 34.

tries, which had become totally out of fashion after the disintegration of the socialist camp. They navigated further East at a time when solidarity between the ex-fellow camp residents simply evaporated in their competition to curry favor from the West.

Since they interrogated rather than accommodated the given institutionalized art system, considering it a network of communication between interrelated fields (gallery, museum, education, art criticism, audience, etc.) that together frame and sustain art's ideological system, it comes as no surprise that they provoked harsh responses and stirred scandals both locally and globally.

Their first conflict-provoking project on an international scale was *The Body of Nefertiti* in the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2003, which tracked the complex discursive exchanges among different participants in the current art establishment, exposing hidden exclusionary and authoritarian purposes in the very name of »pure« and »authentic« art. Little Warsaw intended to add a cast body to the famous Nefertiti bust,²⁷ which had been taken to Berlin from Egypt in the early twentieth century, and exhibit the new, completed sculpture in the Hungarian Pavilion of Venice. The body and bust were united cautiously in Berlin for a few sacred moments, a process that was filmed, but they were not allowed to bring the bust itself to Venice. At the biennial, one could see the torso sculpted by Little Warsaw but without the famous head, only a video-projection showing the actual animating act, the process of joining head and torso. The cast bronze body was neither a fallible, fragile one following the classical body standard, nor the contemporary healthy, athletic body ideal, as the purpose of the project was not any kind of reconstruction or modernization. The headless body in the pavilion stood for the desire of wholeness, for re-humanizing a sacred and thus tabooed art piece.

The project was closely related to key Conceptual art strategies, despite the fact that it did not dwell on dematerialization and reduction, or on prioritizing the idea: Little Warsaw proceeded in exactly the opposite direction, placing at the heart of their project the point central to all sculpting: animation, giving soul to dead matter. But, also, on the other hand, the headless body and, especially, the void, opened the piece to the age-old issue of admiring ruins and remnants of the past as the physical imprints of our notion of history, as well as iconoclastic tradition and the very current issue of demolishing statues. Mieke Bal's arguments on the nature of visuality as being impure, (im)material, and eventful, since »[e]very act of looking fills the hole,«²⁸ could also be applied to this artwork, which operates on the meaningful presence of a void. I do not wish to get into the debate on visual culture, but, if we take it as a »performing act of seeing, not the materiality of the object seen,«²⁹ then Little Warsaw's activity could surely be interpreted in terms of visual culture.

The project likewise involved a great deal of further conceptual interventions and questioning: crossing borders between times, ancient and current, between Art (with a capital letter) preserved in a museum for eternity and contemporary art, still fighting for legitimacy, between

²⁷ Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin-Charlottenburg; See Geoffrey Thorndike Martin, *A Bibliography of the Amarna Period and its Aftermath* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1991); Joyce Tyldesley, *Nefertiti, Egypt's Sun Queen* (London: Viking, 1998).

²⁸ Mieke Bal, »Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,« in *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol 2 (1) (2003): 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.



The head of Nefertiti combined with cast bronze body, Altes Museum, Berlin

household name (a celebrity-kind of art piece) and unknown young artists from the margins, between the geopolitical places of the makers (Egypt), the owners (Germany), the users (Hungary), and the audiences (Venice). The group raised fundamental questions about art's institutions at the start of the new millennia, with regard to national representation within the structure and power mechanisms of global culture, opposing the established binary logic of the two. They also problematized the interpretation of art—still strongly influenced by the concept of modernity and modernism—as being structured around the concept of beauty, the aesthetic qualities of the object, and its ownership. With all these »illegal« border crossings (such a familiar operation along the margins!), they upset art's governing conventions and its power-related status quo.

Relying on Mieke Bal's argument that »Chronology itself is Eurocentric ... the imposition of European chronologies can be seen as one of the techniques of colonization,«³⁰ what Little Warsaw did was completely subvert the linear reading of traditional art history along the lines of chronology, upsetting the hierarchy of old and new art, and smashing the strict distinction between classified art, as being part of the art historical canon and contemporary art, as being excluded from the scope of academic art history, simultaneously challenging the boundaries between art history and art criticism. The »in between time,« the time of excavation and the provenance of the property of a well-established German museum came into play as well, posing very sensitive questions of ownership and cultural continuity, as echoed not surprisingly in the Egyptian and German press. (Concerning the ruling laws, lawyers could have argued either position on the question of whether the Bust of Nefertiti should remain in Berlin or be returned to Egypt.³¹)

The virtual (Venice) and actual (Berlin) dislocation of the bust attempted to discard the assumption that museums are a special place for acquiring, preserving, and presenting art pieces

³⁰ Ibid., 16.

³¹ See the two symposium papers by Stephen Urice, »The beautiful one has come—to stay- and by Kurt G. Siehr, »The beautiful one has come—to return. The return of the bust of Nefertiti from Berlin to Cairo- at *Imperialism, Art and Restitution: A Conference of the Whitney R. Harris Institute for Global Legal Studies*, School of Law, Washington University in St. Louis, 26 March 2004, <http://law.wustl.edu/igls/Conferences/2003-2004/imperialismagenda.html>.

in isolated sterility, or at least challenge museology with its nineteenth century notions combined with the idea of functionalist expositions. Instead of the geometrical pedestal as a remnant of worshipping abstraction and purity and as a trace of the illusion of the neutrality of art and its presentation, the young artists provided the bust with a more human »pedestal,« in other words, they offered the audience a field for projection to create personal narratives. The temporary act of dislocation was taken literally and stirred latent desires for changing the status quo of the piece's ownership, as the Egyptian authorities jumped on the opportunity to reclaim the bust.³²

The object of appropriation was very carefully chosen by Little Warsaw. They selected a short but very active and rebellious period of Egyptian history, which had been forgotten for centuries as a result of a burst of activity, erasing all traces of the period, which was rife with fundamental changes regarding politics, religion, and even the practice of power.³³ Someone from the eastern European region has a close and intimate relationship to vanishing and newly appearing histories, as people might experience a total rewriting of their own histories even within a lifespan. And the other way around, someone from the region has been through exclusion from even the rewritten (art)history elaborated from a Western perspective,³⁴ despite current opposing claims.³⁵ The two male artists chose to deal with a powerful woman, since they came from a country where gender consciousness had hardly entered the art discourse.³⁶ In the mainstream strategy of appropriation in the 1990s, ownership and authorship were subverted, but the hierarchy of art remained intact. In Little Warsaw's operation, problematizing authorship was merely a side effect, as the object of their appropriation was recharged with radical, critical content indicating questions of power relations; that is, who is allowed to criticize the system and reuse others' objects? who is allowed to enter the global scene with this operation, and who can achieve recognition?

The studio of Thutmos,³⁷ where the bust came from, stands for the profession of sculpting, and presented a tribute to the predecessors. By appropriating a valuable find, the young artists reversed the operation of art institutions intervening from the inside. Following the logic of institutionalization, able to domesticate all kinds of critical practices outside of the institution (like Dada, Russian avant-garde, Conceptualism, institutional critique, etc.), they took an object out of the museum by reappropriating it, and added their own activity to the provenance of the object. As the original function of the bust is unclear, Little Warsaw offered an interpretation by creating a hybrid statue from the torso, which subverted the segregation of different art making practices in different times, thus turning over the linearity of classification and traditional art

³² Barnabás Bencsik, ed., *The Body of Nefertiti. Little Warsaw in Venice 2003*, Supplement to the catalogue *High-Angled Lowlands: Current Art from Hungary*, ed. Barnabás Bencsik (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2006).

³³ See Páldi, »Little Warsaw 1996–2002.«

³⁴ For example, Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

³⁵ Belting, »Europe: East and West.«

³⁶ In their recent project *Only Artists* (2006), they appropriated and exhibited a tapestry of the Hungarian woman artist Noémi Ferenczy, which shows a woman carrying a sign with the text »Esküszünk, esküszünk, hogy rabok tovább nem leszünk / We truly swear, We truly swear the tyrant's yoke / No more to bear!« quoted from Sándor Petőfi's »National Song,« 1848, a poem from the 1848 revolution.

³⁷ Dorothea Arnold, »The workshop of the sculpture Thutmose,« in Dorothea Arnold, *The Royal Woman of Amarna: Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

history. The act of unification of the bust and body served as a solidarity gesture and functioned as a symbolical site for the re-unification of Berlin and also Germany, a process in which the body, made by Eastern Europeans, served as a substitute for all the archeological finds of the tomb of Thutmos, which arrived in East Berlin after World War II—the bust stood for West Berlin's Charlottenburg, where it was guarded in the time of separation.³⁶

The critics in the Egyptian press accused the artists of disrespect for ancient masters and ancient art, and even of humiliating Nefertiti with an inappropriate body. While the Egyptian authorities were against fusing different cultures as a contemporary art strategy, in their own arguments they were not bothered by mixing different periods and cultures.³⁷ Their main accusation, based on the banning of nakedness by Islam, was directed at a piece that was made long before the Arabic invasion into the ancient empire of Egypt. They made their point in the name of universal beauty, universal values of art, which were ruined in their eyes by Little Warsaw's intervention, but relied on the impact of the postcolonial discourse and claim for restitutions in their particular intention for getting the treasure »back« to its »original« place. Although they tried to conceal the power relations behind the attack against an advanced contemporary art project, in their eyes, the crime became more serious given that it was committed by some unknown fellows.³⁸ One would think that the anonymity of the artists, their shared, collaborative authorship hidden behind an enigmatic name (through which they could undercut the fallacy of authorship), might also be behind the lack of broader media coverage of the project in the trend-setting, star-making forums.

The site of the exhibition, a national pavilion in an international venue brings the question of nation-building into play. The exhibitions in the Hungarian National Pavilion still served as a tool for official representation well after the political changes, and its commissars were appointed by the authorities of the Cultural Ministry accordingly. In 1993, Joseph Kosuth, the famous American artist, represented Hungary as a compensatory symptom of the nationalistic ambitions of the local regime (the members of which could hold on to the use of the name of the Hungarian hero, and freedom fighter⁴¹). At the same time, through this choice, the exhibition took the side of Western-type hard-core Conceptualism, the authority of which was debated by younger generations in the Anglo-Saxon art world.⁴² In 1995, György Jovánovics, a leading member of the Great Generation, was selected as the national representative in a gesture of restitution and as a tribute. The curatorial position of the national pavilion could first be obtained through an open competition in 2003. The winner, Little Warsaw, which consciously operated outside of the local institutional system, was drawn into a controversial situation by getting the »once in a lifetime opportunity« to enter the highest sanctuary of the national art narrative.⁴³ So they had to avoid the trap of getting caught in the binarism of national representation and/or local context

³⁶ I wish to express my gratitude to Ernő Marosi for calling my attention to this aspect of the project.

³⁷ See Urice and Siehr, conference papers at *Imperialism, Art and Restitution*.

³⁸ See, for example, Jeevan Vasagar, »Egypt angered at artists' use of Nefertiti bust,« in *Guardian Unlimited* (12 June 2003).

⁴¹ Lajos Kossuth (1802-94) was the leading figure of the 1848-49 revolution in Hungary.

⁴² Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

⁴³ As a side project of their contribution to the Venice Biennale, Little Warsaw published a reader of sixteen interviews conducted with various international artists and professionals on the very idea of national representation. Little Warsaw, *Monitor—Arsenale vs. Giardini* (Budapest: Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, 2003).

unavailable to outsiders as opposed to universalism with some local color and/or faceless globalism, with its constraint of taking on the one side or the other. They were able to avoid exclusionary identifications by conquering a space in between these fixed categories, a site of resistance of both. Through the nomadic strategy of interpenetrations of different discourses, they could overcome the national-universal and local-global split and undermine other assumptions rooted in this binary thought. Despite being fateful agents of one of them, they functioned, instead, as transcultural mediators in the communication of different communities.

The other conceptually oriented project I intend to analyze, along with its subsequent response in Budapest, was shown in Amsterdam at the exhibition *Time and Again* (2004).⁴⁴ This time, Little Warsaw took a Hungarian public monument made in 1965, József Somogyi's⁴⁵ statue of János Szántó Kovács, from Hódmezővásárhely, a southeastern Hungarian town, to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In this case, the target of their operation was the art making practice in their recent past outside of the museum, in the public space of socialism, which is still part of their visual environment on the one hand, and on the other, the investigation of how this particular context could operate in an international framework. This time the dislocation wasn't just virtual, the statue with its pedestal was moved to the prestigious art museum.⁴⁶ As it turned out, this dislocation and artistic intervention touched a very sensitive spot in the Hungarian art community, and it raised a harsh debate.

The Széchenyi Art Academy, an institute established by leading artists in the new era, published a petition and collected signatures against Little Warsaw's action, just like in the old days of rebellion against the official cultural policy. Both the leaders of the cultural right wing and representatives of the liberal left (among them György Jovánovics) signed the petition side by side, something that rarely happens nowadays.⁴⁷ After the fall of the Iron Curtain, it became obvious that the seemingly homogenous countercultural bloc of socialist times was in fact very diverse and split apart accordingly. With the presentation of Little Warsaw's project, however, which reused and recontextualized an art object, these groups were suddenly reunited against what seemed to be a common enemy. The situation is further complicated by the fact, which actually shows the very complex nature of the post-socialist discourse, that in the once-official newspaper of state-socialism, the same critic who accused Little Warsaw of barbarism (for changing the original context of the statue) had been one of the official guards of socialist cultural policy for a good twenty years.⁴⁸ Thus, the ex-opponent of official socialist culture and the ex-beneficiary found a common cause against Little Warsaw's deconstructive project.

⁴⁴ *Time and Again*, Episode 2 of *Who if not we...? 7 episodes on (ex)changing Europe*, Stedelijk Museum CS, Amsterdam, 23 Oct. 2004–30 Jan. 2005. "Time and Again," in *Who if not we...?*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2004), 31–53. The sketch published in the catalogue relates to their project that had been planned but could not be realized. Instead, the project was changed to the analyzed project, which is not documented in the catalogue.

⁴⁵ József Somogyi (1916–93), a very influential Hungarian sculptor; 1963–94 professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest; 1974–87 dean of the institute.

⁴⁶ Originally they intended to exhibit the statue together with its pedestal, but some problems occurred relating to the static capacity of the building's floors.

⁴⁷ See *Much traveled monument: Little Warsaw: Instauratio*, http://www.exindex.hu/index.php?i=en&t=tema&tf=12_en.php; and József Mélyi, "A Szántó Kovács-ügy" (The case of Szántó Kovács), in *Élet és Irodalom*, XLIX. 3. (21 January 2005): 19.

⁴⁸ Gyula Rózsa, "Kis magyar falu" (Little Hungarian Village), in *Népszabadság* (16 December 2004), <http://www.nol.hu/cikk/344806/>.

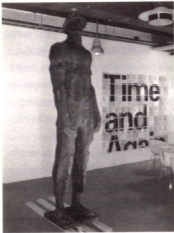


Dismantling of József Somogyi's statue of János Szántó Kovács, Hódmezővásárhely

In 1965, the state of Socialist Realism was at stake because its definition had started to become vague. Likewise, 1965 was the year of the original unveiling of the statue of János Szántó Kovács, the early-twentieth-century agrarian-proletarian leader. This very statue became a site of struggle, where competing positions concerning state control of art versus artists' freedom of expression were being contested. Thus, according to the standards of the more schematic examples of the official style, it was accused of not being heroic and elevated enough and it was celebrated by others, especially by the art community, for pushing the envelope. The case was further complicated by the fact that, in the years of consolidation after the 1956 revolution, the accusation wasn't articulated by the representatives of power, but in the very name of »the people.«⁴⁹ The once-explosive debate was soon forgotten; yet, in some textbooks, the statue represents a diluted form of Socialist Realism, no longer observing the once-so-important subtleties and distinctions of the style. It was also forgotten by those guarding the myths of oppositional art, for whom this statue had the symbolic meaning of resistance, an issue that was rendered irrelevant within the new circumstances. The Western audience, including the professional community, removed not only historically but geographically from the scene, proved to hold its own stereotypes, left-over rhetoric from the cold war.

All of these issues came into play when Little Warsaw re-unveiled the statue. This reanimation, the second unveiling of the statue, once again stirred debate, now in the homeland. The artists were attacked by the local press because of the presentation of the statue, which stood on its feet in the museum rather than high on a pedestal. In terms of conception, the statue was pulled down to earth from the realm of ideology and became a fragile, vulnerable human being contradicting the eternal life of the public monument as it was conceived. The project was also accused of mistakes that had actually been made by the curators of the prestigious western European institution, or to put it psychologically, had been caused by their unconscious slips, very useful ones for analyzing suppressed feelings. The authorities of the museum in Amsterdam

⁴⁹ See *Lelepleztek egy szobrot. A művészet legyen mindenkié* (Let Art Belong to Everybody—A Statue Unveiled), a documentary film made by Boris Palotai in 1965.



Little Warsaw, contribution to *Time and Again* (2004), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

interpreted the statue using old stereotypes and clichés about the ex-region behind the Iron Curtain, namely, the related museum tag identified the peasant leader as a communist worker and the place where it used to be located, a small Hungarian village, thus giving the installation dramatic overtones. Although Little Warsaw was accused of neglecting to explain the original context, they clearly showed—even if unintentionally—the encounter of a work from New Europe with the dominant voice of art discourse dictated by the old division. While the topic that the exhibition was organized around was topical, focusing on issues of memory and history, the rhetoric was not updated, and remained embedded in the old, controlling structure.

According to the change of rhetoric after the long period of socialism, the main problem, as voiced by the press at home and by the art professionals signing the petition, was the offense against human rights. The artists were accused of not asking for permission from the artist's heirs, and also noted was the humiliation endured by the statue and indirectly Somogyi, the sculptor. Actually, the statue was not destroyed and it got back to its original site fully intact, so the gesture was really not against the art object, either. On the contrary, the artists lifted up the veil of ignorance covering the statue, whose story had sunk into oblivion. Little Warsaw had dug it up from the past, and along with it, the wounds and scars of the past, which had never properly healed. The issue at stake was indeed gate-keeping. Who has the right to dig up the past, break apart the preserved ideas of socialism and the related art practice? Who had a share in its construction? And, perhaps most importantly, who has the right to process and recontextualize objects and ideas of the past in the present?

The traditional nationalist ideology of older forms of public art, in the form of conservative figurative monuments, flooded the public spaces of Hungarian towns and villages well after socialist times, even into the mid-1990s, as illustrated by the installation of several statues of Saint Stephan, the first Hungarian king. When Little Warsaw's project pushed the limits of sculpture, people found plenty to criticize, but no one protested against the return of an outdated public art practice. Where was the art community's concern for the issue of sculpting at that time? Little Warsaw entered the current debate on public art, as it is conceived locally and outside of the local context. By this appropriation, the artists' goal was not to question the ownership and

stardom of the object, as the one chosen was not at all a well-known icon, but to investigate the legacy of socialism in art making practices, and expose hidden operations whose intention is to sustain the status quo. Touching a taboo issue, they drew attention to the consequences of the collective amnesia regarding the legacy of the socialist past, which the art community has failed to confront and work through. At the same time, they provided a framework for a discourse on public art, which has kept a low profile in the shadow of the emerging art market. Regarding the burning issue of navigation between the local context and global recognition, they offered a dialogue, rather than pinning down the artistic operation in one position or the other.

In contemporary art behind the mental walls of Europe, the psychological process of working through the trauma of the socialist past indisputably began with the Albanian artist Anri Sala's famous video *Intervista*, which documented the discovery of the buried past of the artist's mother's involvement in socialism. The issue was unfolded via a personal narrative; therefore, it was deeply touching, making the experience digestible even for someone unfamiliar with the local context. In Hungary, the very idea of interpreting the socialist past in art popped up in the work *The Spirit of Freedom* by Tamás St. Auby right after the political changes, but, later, as the region slipped into collective amnesia, the scene became characterized by lack of any critical comments in relation to the past. Direct political comments, whether relating to the past or to the present, were banned by the local unwritten tradition of coded language, partly due to the assumptions of the adapted and fossilized local modernism and partly because of the long history of using coded language as a method of operation within censorship. The »crime« Little Warsaw committed was to touch taboo issues and provide a warning that facing the past and raising questions is essential for recovery and for moving on.

Further analyzing the discourses mobilized in Little Warsaw's local reception, the conception of modernity came to help the hidden intention of censoring new, advanced art. Those who accused the action of being uncivilized took for granted the notion of civilization as a justified cultural hierarchy favoring a Western perspective, as if it was not already deconstructed in critical theories, and as if the exclusive nature of the term was not invested in Western powers with full authority to subjugate different cultures as upholders of cultural standards, which is being critiqued loudly in museum discourse nowadays.

The project clearly shows how the changed sociopolitical position pushed the representatives of the once rebellious avant-garde into a position of guarding the standards. Little Warsaw's effort at dusting off the past, in this case a socialist monument, was not celebrated, but on the contrary, policed. This time, however, the policing was not done by another country's cultural leadership or by the state cultural bureaucracy, but by the art community itself. One would suspect that behind the collective attack lurks fear, namely, of the anti-establishment attitude of the artist-duo, as seen by the bearers of the canon. One cannot help but notice the presence of territorial anxiety behind the vehement attack in defense of the status quo. The message conveyed is not to dwell on the past but to leave it as it is.

⁵⁰ Suzanne Lacy coined the term in 1993. See Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

⁵¹ See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2004).

⁵² Bal, »Visual Essentialism.«

Little Warsaw's activity could be interpreted in the framework of »new genre public art«⁵⁰ as well, in which the site could be as diverse as an artistic genre (in their case, sculpture in the museum or in the public space) or a discursively determined site as a field of knowledge, or a cultural debate, or a way of communicating.⁵¹ Or maybe we can label their activity as »new genre conceptual art,« as it differs greatly from post- and neo-Conceptualism, let alone hard-core Conceptualism, yet is undeniably and deeply conceptual. Quite similarly to Duchamp's ready-made, *Fountain*, Little Warsaw's projects for opening up new discursive fields were treated in the same way, being censored by the art community. The long-term symptoms of the traumatized past could be detected in the short-sighted reaction of the locally and globally isolated art community, which, regardless of the changed conditions in a post-socialist country, did not admire interventionist strategies for their critical capacities and also did not consider them as communicative possibilities for art, being stuck in the past, while denying the analyses of it.

Almost one hundred years after Duchamp's explorations on the nature of the art object, and almost half a century after his followers' explorations, Little Warsaw returned to the complexity of the Duchampian questions, and, by reversing the reductionist process, reclaimed the materialized object without any fear of the fathers, as the notion of art was being replaced by the very context of the object in their investigations. In their projects, this context was stretched well beyond the art object, penetrating into different discursive fields, and into burning sociopolitical issues transgressing even tabooed geopolitical boundaries. Their practice engaged in problematizing received notions of art historical writing, as their context transgressed not just spatial, but temporal dimensions, too. They were aware of the impossibility of working outside of the institutions, lacking the illusions of those who earlier believed it possible to work outside of the system; instead, they highlighted the way it operates. Their works could be seen as theoretical works, referring to Mieke Bal's category,⁵² not just helping us to think, but rather, making visible all the blind spots that could not be seen from either the dominating Western perspective or from the local point of view. What they are making and proposing is to mediate between different cultural communities and different notions of art, thus stimulating new discourses and new ways of thinking about art that are capable of transforming and adapting Conceptualism's most valuable legacies to today's conditions.