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Doctoral School of Art History

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SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

2014

Kinga Bódi
Hungarian Participation at the Venice Art Biennale
1895–1948

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Research Background

As a student of the Doctoral School of Art History at Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities, between 2010 and 2013 I had the possibility to participate with my research subject in a three-year international art history research program titled *Fokus Projekt «Kunstbetrieb» – Biennale Projekt*, sponsored by the Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft in Zurich. The head of the research group was Prof. Dr. Beat Wyss, professor of art history at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe (HfG). The idea to launch a research project in 2010 based on the unique history of the Venice Biennale, the oldest art biennial of the world and its specially constructed system of international pavilions was in part triggered by the existing monographs on international participation and also by an approach based on Niklas Luhmann's (1927-1998) culture theory, which regarded the Biennale as one of the most significant "artistic structures" or "art factories" of the world, as well as by the popular exhibition reconstruction research projects of our time.

The international Biennale research program focuses exclusively on the art biennial of Venice and as such does not examine the later founded music, film, theater and architecture biennials. Therefore my dissertation exclusively studies the realm of fine art.

The first section of the international research program focuses on the monographic analysis of different national participations. The first phase examines the participation of East-Central European countries (Poland, Czech Republic/Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, the former Yugoslavia), as well as the United States and Switzerland. Depending on the participation of the country in question, each monograph embraces a different time period. Hungary's participation ranges from the first Biennale (1895) to the present.

The Subject of the Dissertation

Due to the enormous time span of Hungarian participation at the Biennale, my doctoral dissertation exclusively examines the Hungarian Biennale exhibitions organized between 1895 and 1948, covering precisely twenty-three exhibitions. The starting point of the chosen period is the year of the first Biennale and the 1948 Biennale is the last exhibition elaborately discussed in my dissertation. That year marks the end of an era of Hungarian participation in Venice, since the almost continuous presence of Hungary is put on hold for more than a decade. Within the first phase of the above outlined international Biennale research project, i.e. the monographic analysis of national participations, my dissertation exclusively discusses the Hungarian-related events of the first fifty-three years.

The fundamental starting point for my research was the examination of the political, cultural and artistic background of Hungary's distinguished role at the Venice Biennale: why was the independent Hungarian Pavilion the second pavilion to be built (1909) in the Giardini following the construction of the Belgian Pavilion in 1907? Furthermore, I searched for answers to the following questions: What motivations (professional success, prestige, marketing factors) drove Hungary to participate at the Biennale later on? Why were Hungarian fine artworks and applied art pieces so successful and sought-after in Venice?

I discussed fine art and applied art exhibition displays separately where deemed necessary, due to the fact that – predominantly in the first two decades of the twentieth century – the applied art objects reflected a much more modern approach and achieved greater success than Hungarian paintings or sculptural works of art.

Apart from the successes, I was searching for an answer to why Hungary was (and is still) unable to live up to its distinguished position at the Venice Biennale? This is illustrated by longer source quotes from that period, which were intended to portray an era with all its passions and grievances.

Each exhibition discussed in my dissertation was investigated in reference to the relevance of the material on display at the time. Therefore I focused on portraying the different evaluations of the time: the often positively inclined Italian reviews, the envious Austrian sentiments, the lack of interest on behalf of the Germans, the English and the French as well as the diverse reactions of Hungarian artists: feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, resignation, sharp criticism, yet also content and praise in reference to the Hungarian displays.

Dissertation Structure

My doctoral dissertation consists of two larger units: the main text and the appendix. The main text comprises seven chapters. The first introductory chapter briefly portrays the research conditions and summarizes the aspects and methods applied in the research process; the second chapter discusses the conditions, history and present of the Biennale phenomenon. The third chapter investigates the social and historical background of the late 19th century foundation of the Venice Biennale, with special emphasis on the significant question of nationality versus internationality within the structure of the Biennale as well as the main characteristics of the unique pavilion system. The fourth chapter discusses the most important aspects of Italian-Hungarian cultural relations at the beginning of the Biennale. The fifth chapter, the main body of the dissertation investigates the role and status of the Hungarian

artists participating at the Venice Biennale between 1895 and 1948, placed into the context of the entangled system of political, culture political, artistic, professional and human aspects lying in the background of the exhibitions. The sixth chapter ensues with an outlook on Hungarian participation in Venice following 1948. The seventh chapter comprises a summary of the research subject and the findings of the research.

The main text is followed by an appendix containing the supplementary annexes: source list and bibliography, illustration material and an itemized list of the artworks displayed at the Hungarian Pavilion in Venice between 1895 and 1948. The compilation of this list was one of the most difficult parts of the research process, since twenty-four Biennales were organized during this fifty-three year period, with Hungary participating twenty-three times with a total of some three thousand Hungarian artworks.

Research Method

Scientifically significant source research and critical evaluation of Hungarian participation in Venice has formerly not yet been conducted, neither in its entirety nor within the period discussed in my dissertation. Therefore it was necessary to base my research on the following questions: where (place), when (date), who (person[s]), what (which object[s]) and why (reason[s]). Apart from acquiring this basic information, my aim was to record the chronology of the twenty-three Hungarian exhibitions organized in Venice between 1895 and 1948, or in a broader sense: record the history of Hungarian participation, reconstruct the exhibitions and point out the culture political and art organizational connections lying in the background. My dissertation is at once informative (based on the research of source data) and a modern day reception of the subject. It is simultaneously a historical and aesthetic-based elaboration. Although both my research and thus my dissertation possess a linear timeline, my writings cannot be regarded as a history of evolution or progress. Hungarian participation at the Venice Biennale fluctuated both in its intensity and artistic quality: the discussed twenty-three exhibitions range from elaborately developed, well-constructed collections to superficial and dissonant, mixed quality displays due to disorganization, conflict of interests or political influences. Despite these fluctuations, I aimed to divide the history of Hungarian participation into distinct periods. The demarcations correspond to a shift in diplomatic perspective, a structural turning point within the organization process of the exhibitions, or a change in organizational personnel, since these aspects greatly influenced the composition of the displays.

The historical source material necessary to precisely document the history of Hungarian participation in Venice between 1895 and 1948 can be fundamentally found in the archives of three cities: Budapest, Vienna and Venice. In addition to gathering written source materials from that period, it was necessary to identify the – largest possible number of – artworks displayed at the Giardini in order to be able to record the history of Hungarian participation in Venice. Since a great number of “Venetian Hungarian” artworks have become part of Hungarian public collections over the past decades, it was advisable to review the most significant Hungarian museum collections and examine these acquisitions in reference to the Biennale.

Following the examination of relevant Hungary-related material in Hungarian and foreign public collections, it would be important to conduct independent research on Venetian Hungarian artworks in national and international private collections, which will only be possible in the next phase of analysis.

Summary of Research Results

My dissertation aims to reconstruct the twenty-three Hungarian exhibitions in Venice between 1895 and 1948 and provide an elaborate account of the historical background of the connecting periods, complemented by the drafted outlines of the directions taken by the exhibitions following 1948. The fluctuating nature of the existing and new sources, written documents, images and information on the displayed artworks did not allow for a steady elaboration of the twenty-three exhibitions discussed in the dissertation. There are years where, due to the abundant amount of information available, it was possible to reconstruct the organizational process of the exhibitions, the people involved in the process and the background of their decisions in great detail. Yet there were also a number of years where the most fundamental data is missing and we are left with mere assumptions regarding the background history of the realized exhibitions. The first three, jointly organized Austrian-Hungarian Biennale years are the ones where information is most lacking.

Within the 1895 to 1948 period, the undoubtedly greatest sensation was the construction of the Hungarian Pavilion in 1909, and it may be unequivocally stated that erecting the building was the only occasion in relation to Hungarian participation where the Hungarian political leadership invested a significant amount of money into the Venice Biennale. The early date of construction and the distinguished location of the Hungarian Pavilion within the Giardini reflects the grand scale political relations of the time, it is the manifestation of Italy's

increased political and cultural interest towards Hungary. Austria was the third player in the Italian-Hungarian relationship, with whom Hungary competed at various international exhibitions – the Biennale serving as an appropriate terrain –, and Italy maintained a troubled relationship with Austria as well. The shared “opponent” thus strengthened the friendship between the two countries, which materialized in actual consequences regarding the Hungarian artworks at the Biennale (purchases of Hungarian artworks by Italian public and private collections, extremely positive Italian reviews on Hungarian exhibitions). It is important to point out though, that the Hungarian Pavilion was already in need of renovation a mere year after it was built, and from then on until its alteration in 1958, the Hungarian state almost always started preparations for the Biennale by transforming it into a state suitable for housing exhibitions. Apart from the yearly “nips and tucks” though, none of the cultural ministries succeeded in solving the problem with a large-scale refurbishment project, despite the fact that the layout and general state of the available spaces fundamentally defined the exhibition interiors.

Within the period discussed in my dissertation, the political climate transformed multiple times, Hungary’s geopolitical situation changed, each year brought new exhibiting artists and organizational personnel to the Hungarian Pavilion, and yet the results and mechanisms remained similar not only during this fifty-three year period, but over the course of the entire 118 years of Hungarian participation. The back and forth, the conflicts of interest, the late ad hoc decisions, hurried preparations and professional incompetences barely changed along the decades. The few successful displays were the result of a “random act” of assigning tasks to competent professionals. Although Hungary participated in Venice every other year, there was no elaborated, tested structure to fall back into – sometimes there was an exhibition organizer, an art director, other times not, sometimes the national commissioner was the one responsible for the quality of the material, other times it was the director – making it seem as though the Hungarian leadership was “surprised” by the fact that yet another exhibition was to be organized in Venice. In only a handful of cases was there a strong – either culture political or artistic – concept in reference to the Hungarian participation. Béla Lázár (1901), Jenő Radisics (1905), János Vaszary (1928) were the creators of actual exhibition concepts, and collections based on ideological principles were organized by Tibor Gerevich (1936-1942). Károly Ferenczy was responsible for the transformation of the former salon-like interiors (1914). The dissertation portrays formerly lesser-known Hungarian collections and directorial-organizational activities (Pál Majovszky’s position as national commissioner in

1922 was an extremely interesting and intricate affair) and sheds new light on popular concepts (e.g. Gerevich's dominance was limited to the period between 1936 and 1942 as opposed to the popular belief of 1930 to 1942, and, contrary to former statements, the fact that he alone was responsible for organizing a number of exhibitions did not result in drastic changes, although this type of dominance was unprecedented).

The recurring question in relation to the organization of the Hungarian exhibitions was this: was it more expedient to create a large group exhibition or several smaller, spatially divided monographic displays. The answer changed many times over the course of these decades, showing examples of mass exhibitions, with only one artwork per artist (e.g. 1910, 1926, 1930) and smaller, more intimate introductions as well (1914, 1948).

The exhibitions organized within the discussed time period may be regarded as collections of canonical artworks. Non-figurative, constructive artworks were not shown at the Hungarian Pavilion during this period.

Despite the obstacles and administrative, organizational challenges, there were also a number of high quality artists and artworks on display at the Hungarian Pavilion between 1895 and 1948. The directors' common misconception was not taking into account the fact that choosing great artworks was insufficient to create a strong exhibition, the method of display was of equal importance at the Biennale. During the first half of the twentieth century – and then later on in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – the exhibitions held at the Hungarian Pavilion were museum displays, yet – as Lóránd Hegyi states – “pavilions are not mini museums.” Although a complex, long-term concept and consistency can not be found, and there are only a few significant turning points, yet many deficiencies and shortcomings, I aimed to portray personal successes as well, which were abundant: the appearance of Károly Kernstok in 1901, Károly Ferenczy's award in 1905, Gyula Rudnay's and János Vaszary's success in 1924.

Between 1895 and 1948, it was self-evident for Hungary to organize an exhibition every other year at the Venice Biennale, and during this period, Hungary managed to more or less follow the artistic and conceptual changes taking place at the Biennale. This was important, for this was the only, large scale international forum for the artistic representation of Hungarian artists at the time – and to date. This may be the reason the Hungarian Pavilion has been regularly caught in the crossfire of the Hungarian art scene for the last 118 years.

Future Research Possibilities

Future research may be conducted in two phases, the first phase consisting of the systematic and similarly structured overview of the Hungarian exhibitions from 1948 to the present. In the second phase, this may be followed by a larger scale Biennale research project, entailing an international comparative art history analysis based on the findings of the various national participation research programs and conducted along a unified thematic structure with harmonized aspects and questions. Chronological research is the foundation for case study analyses and comparative studies stepping beyond the frames of a timeline. This latter phase comparative analysis will be conducted along six themes: 1. Center and Peripheries; 2. Politics and Institutional Lobbyism; 3. Art Market; 4. Curatorial Practice and Installation Types; 5. Criticism and Discourse; 6. The Life and Afterlife of Exhibiting Artists.

Conference Participation, Lectures

Ludwig Hevesi (1843–1910) und die Kunstkritik in Wien. International conference, Theatermuseum – Eroica Saal, Vienna, December 11, 2013.

Lecture title: *Padiglione Ungherese – Im Spiegel der italienischen, österreichischen und ungarischen Kunstkritik*

Salon Suisse. The international roundtable discussion series of the 55th Venice Biennale, Istituto Svizzero – Palazzo Trevisan, Venence, September 14, 2013.

Panel II: *A Year in the Life of the Venice Biennale: 1932*

Álljunk meg egy szóra (Let Us Stop for a Moment). Lecture series, Stúdió Galéria, Budapest, March 7, 2013.

Lecture title: *A magyar képzőművészeti részvétel a Velencei Biennálén (Hungarian Participation at the Venice Art Biennale), 1895–2013*

Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response. International symposium, Universität Zürich, Zurich, October 18, 2012.

Lecture title: *The Heritage of Cultural Centres in Hungary. Andreas Fogarasi at the Venice Biennale in 2007*

Area Studies and Globalisation. International summer university, Universität Leipzig, Leipzig, September 17-20, 2012.

Lecture title: *Kunstnationen in einem Weltausstellungsforum? Die Anfangsgeschichte der ungarischen Beteiligung an der Biennale von Venedig 1895–1918*

Guest lectures at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Art Theory Department, Budapest, 2012. Fall semester

Lecture series title: *A Velencei Biennále és a biennále-jelenség (The Venice Biennale and the Biennale Phenomenon)*

Exhibition

Velencei Műcsarnok 101 (Venice Art Gallery 101). Gyula Forster National Centre for Cultural Heritage Management (formerly: National Office for Cultural Heritage) – Pincegaléria, Budapest, September 13 – October 14, 2010. The exhibition material was compiled and the display was directed by: György Sümegi and Kinga Bódi

Publications

Kinga Bódi – Jan Andreas May: *Die Padiglione Bavarese und Ungherese – oder wie die Pavillons in die Giardini kamen?* Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2014 (In the most recent volume of the *Studi. Schriftenreihe des Deutschen Studienzentrums in Venedig* series; in press).

Kinga Bódi: Úszó tárlatok. Beszélgetések az egykor Velencei Biennálén részt vevő magyar képzőművészekkel, kurátorokkal, nemzeti biztosokkal. 6. rész. Kérdések Hegyi Lóránd művészettörténészhez. (Floating exhibitions. Conversations with former participants – artists, curators, national commissioners – of the Venice Biennale. Part 6. Interview with art historian Lóránd Hegyi.) *Balkon* (2013) 11–12, 4–15.

Kinga Bódi: Úszó tárlatok. Beszélgetések az egykor Velencei Biennálén részt vevő magyar képzőművészekkel, kurátorokkal, nemzeti biztosokkal. 5. rész. Kérdések Fehér László képzőművészhez. (Floating exhibitions. Conversations with former participants – artists, curators, national commissioners – of the Venice Biennale. Part 5. Interview with artist László Fehér.) *Balkon* (2013) 7–8, 4–10.

Kinga Bódi: Úszó tárlatok. Beszélgetések az egykor Velencei Biennálén részt vevő magyar képzőművészekkel, kurátorokkal, nemzeti biztosokkal. 4. rész. Kérdések Bukta Imre és Pinczehelyi Sándor képzőművészekhez. (Floating exhibitions. Conversations with former participants – artists, curators, national commissioners – of the Venice Biennale. Part 4. Interview with artists Imre Bukta and Sándor Pinczehelyi.) *Balkon* (2013) 6, 4–13.

Kinga Bódi: Úszó tárlatok. Beszélgetések az egykor Velencei Biennálén részt vevő magyar képzőművészekkel, kurátorokkal, nemzeti biztosokkal. 2. és 3. rész. Kérdések Bak Imre és Birkás Ákos képzőművészekhez. (Floating exhibitions. Conversations with former participants – artists, curators, national commissioners – of the Venice Biennale. Part 2 and 3. Interview with artists Imre Bak and Ákos Birkás.) *Balkon* (2013) 5, 4–11.

Kinga Bódi: Úszó tárlatok. Beszélgetések az egykor Velencei Biennálén részt vevő magyar képzőművészekkel, kurátorokkal, nemzeti biztosokkal. 1. rész Kérdések Csorba Géza művészettörténészhez. (Floating exhibitions. Conversations with former participants – artists, curators, national commissioners – of the Venice Biennale. Part 1. Interview with art historian Géza Csorba.) *Balkon* (2013) 4, 4–9.

Annika Hossain – Kinga Bódi – Daria Ghiu: Layers of Exhibition. The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing. *kunsttexte.de/ostblick* (2011) 2, [1–6.] E-Journal für Kunst- und Bildgeschichte. URL: <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/kunsttexte/2011-2/bodi-kinga5/PDF/bodi.pdf>

Beat Wyss – Annika Hossain – Jörg Scheller – Kinga Bódi – Daria Ghiu – Veronika Wolf: Is this So Contemporary? A look at the Historic Dimension of Celebrification, Personalization, Touristification and Critical Backlashes at the Venice Biennale. In: Mona Schieren – Andrea Sick (eds.): *Look at me. Celebrity Culture at the Venice Art Biennale*. Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 2011, 118–139.

Kinga Bódi: Pre-pozíciók. Az aktualitás és a retrospekció határán az 54. Velencei Biennále. (Pre-Positions. The 54th Venice Biennale on the Border of Relevance and Retrospection.) *Exindex* September 20, 2011, [o. n.] Online kortárs képzőművészeti folyóirat. (Online contemporary art periodical) URL: <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=hu&page=3&id=821>

Kinga Bódi: Velencei Múcsarnok 101. (Venice Art Gallery 101.) *Örökség* 22 (2010) 9–10, 48–49.