

Clandestine art
Non-official art strategies between 1949–1953
and the ways of progressive art (with an outlook to 1957)

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Judit Szeifert

Eötvös Loránd University
Doctoral School of Art History

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This paper seeks to draw a topographical map of the art and life strategies of progressive, avant-garde and abstract – primarily left-wing – artists in the Rákosi era (1949–1953), and to illustrate each strategic type through the analysis of some typical examples. It also seeks to explore the *terrae incognitae* caused by the workings of “non-existent censorship” in Hungarian art, and to examine these workings as reflected by individual works and specific artists. These issues are assessed in the context of the era’s political and politically-infused art activities. It should be noted that the (hi)story of every artist is unique even when it can be classified under this or that broader typological heading.

One of the most important features of the situation is its continuity, which is most saliently evident the history of strategic games between the “official” and “non-official” spheres, involving efforts to broaden or narrow the space assigned to artists.

The difference between individual historical eras is most strikingly revealed by the retrospective attitude to the genesis of the works of a certain period, by the judgement of the administrative and ideological environment that influenced and determined the fate of works, and by the way historical (factual) truth is revealed. Exploring it requires systematic, thorough and scholarly fact-finding work in the cultural political leadership of the age, as well as its official and in particular concealed artistic life. The primary sources of this research task include existing documents (diaries, notes, recollections, letters) which shed light on why specific artists went silent or why certain works were never made public, etc.

The authorities did everything in their power to oust from cultural propaganda – and therefore condemn to death by silencing – certain artists and their works, but not even permanent control official circumstances could prevent the creation of works.

In Eastern Europe (also called Central Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, “the socialist countries”, “the members of the Warsaw Pact”, the “eastern bloc”, etc.) artists have since the middle of the nineteenth century employed as a universal language the styles of Western European origin, such as Impressionism, Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, later Post-Impressionism and all the avant-garde “isms”, which initiated them into the circle of universal discourses. However, four decades of isolation in the Soviet camp changed the situation. Official decrees were banning art and artists from publicity. Two fundamental components of Western artistic life – free, unbiased, public criticism and the art market – were missing. Criticism was censored, and the art trade was a state monopoly.

Following 1989, when the iron curtain came down, research opportunities were reopened, and scores of exhibitions were held seeking to present the art trends of the region as if they were phenomena isolated from one another. The studies published in the catalogues were, for the most part, merely informative, but nevertheless counted as important steps towards further, thorough research. Gradually, a more subtle picture emerged of the avant-garde art of the individual countries of the region, and their post-WWII afterlives, but none of these papers provided an exhaustive examination of the continuity of Eastern European progressive (avant-garde) art and of the artists’ survival strategies in the context of local cultural political environments and art-historical preliminaries in the years of dictatorship. The way on is a more thorough research of the art of the individual ex-Communist countries. This paper seeks to contribute to that research.

The process of Sovietisation in Hungary and in the other satellite states – Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland – occurred in the same manner and at the same time. Yugoslavia was an exception in that ties with the Soviets loosened by 1949. Consequently,

ostracised within the Communist bloc, it enjoyed a measure of freedom which is evident in the country's cultural policy and its art scene.

Hungary underwent the process of Sovietisation in accordance with the place it occupies in the region, roughly at the same time as Poland. Discounting a few specific differences, the ceremony of the turn in the arts – irrespective of the speed in which it was accomplished – lends itself well to morphologisation. In most places, and parallel with the political shift, the Communist party leader or the ideologist responsible for the policy area launched a discourse – first tentatively, later more overtly – about how the avant-garde trends were at odds with the popular “revolutionary reality” of the era. Similarly in all of the countries of the region, political leadership sought out tactical allies among the masters of the older generation who themselves were opposed to the avant-garde trends. In Hungary, the names of Aurél Bernáth, István Szőnyi, Pál Pátzay and Bertalan Pór came up in this respect. In the transition period they concluded a tactical alliance with hard-liner “neo-leftist realists” who were urging to face up with the moral consequences of the World War and who were producing works in keeping with Communist mass art but refused to satisfy its novel optimistic demands.

The four-year period of Sovietisation in Hungary (1945–1948) was characterised by the fiery debates of artists and art historians representing very different creeds. The debates focused on the role of the artist and on realism. The major points in the debate highlight the increasing shift to Socialist Realist art, as well as the process of Sovietisation on the art scene.

Socialist Realist art did not become the official art form until the end of 1949, and it became the only acceptable form during the years of Rákosi's “personality cult” (1949–1953). Since Socialist Realism can be interpreted as the propaganda art of the Communist system, it came into prominence and waned in Hungary parallel, and in conjunction, with the transitions in the political landscape.

The artists this paper examines were representatives of progressive art prior to 1948–1949 when Socialist Realism became the official art form. The period between 1945 and 1948 is especially crucial in this respect. Obviously, the area worth exploring – indeed, possible to explore – in the given period (between 1949 and 1953, with an outlook to 1957) is the influence politics had on the work of those artists whose output was significant after 1945 and had developed their own attitude and style between the two World Wars. These artists were born around 1900 (with a few exceptions, such as Lajos Kassák). Consequently, the scope of this paper will not extend to the generation of artists beginning their career in the late forties and early fifties, even if their oeuvre in the years coinciding with the examined period was radically at odds with the demands of official cultural political leadership.

After 1948, the work of progressive artists underwent fundamental and tangible change. This paper chiefly sets out to study these **alterations and changes**. It will examine how the official demands of the period affected and *altered* and coerced artists dedicated to completely different trends (such as Lajos Kassák and the members of the Abstract Artists group). Their personal histories, the development of their art is of key importance in the context of the era. The demands of Socialist Realism and the demands of (cultural) politics established a curious art-sociological situation, to which the different artists reacted in different ways and took different approaches. Describing these – even if we are looking at forms of rapprochement – contribute to better understanding the period, as does the analysis of the ways in which they sought to stay on the outside or resist, that is, the study of non-official artistic strategies.

The examples presented in the chapters of this paper are mainly representative and highlight the fact that there were no straightforward situations in the period, that every case was different, and a correct assessment requires circumspection and thorough analysis.

Acceptors (Participants)

The main criterion of being accepted in the era was being a member of the Association. However, that did not necessarily mean an artist would also rise to prominence on the official art scene. The second step was participation in official exhibitions, that is, meeting the expectations of the exhibition juries. This, however, was still not enough to make a living, and an artist unable to secure a permanent job in (or through) the Association or state commissions and purchases, would fail to make ends meet just like the non-member artists.

Ministry employees were at the top of the pile, as well the teachers at the Academy of Fine Arts who not only had higher salaries but also higher social recognition. The state prizes and art awards created in the period also came with prestige and a large lump sum. The officially recognised artists formed cliques, such as the civilian circles in the orbit of the prominent members of the former Gresham Circle – Aurél Bernáth, Pál Pátzay and István Szőnyi who had made a pact with Communist authorities – who accepted the new conditions but nevertheless adhered to their own mature (so-called post-Nagybánya) styles. The new left-wing Realists from between the two World Wars, “cleansed” from avant-garde art, gather under the banner of Gábor Ö. Pogány.

Many of the representatives of pre-1945 progressive (avant-garde and even abstract) art went on to become Socialist Realists for periods of varying length, or at least sought to emulate official art in one way or another. The paper provides some of the typical examples of the status of “being an official artist” where some – the officially accepted avant-gardists – were required to make slight adaptations, while others made radical changes of outlook (e.g. Béla Bán, Tamás Lossonczy).

The artists were afraid which meant that keeping things – the creation of works out of keeping with Socialist Realism – secret was not necessary. Fear came from the mechanisms of intimidation known from other areas of life in the period, as well as from the atmosphere laden with a constant mood of intimidation.

Criminal proceedings on trumped-up charges were rife, checks and supervision in every possible area of life all contributed to instilling a sense of fear. The closure of opportunities and the curbing of creative freedom also triggered fear, which was punishment in itself. In the depths of studio, working out of the limelight of publicity, artists regarded their emotional and intellectual world as a sanctuary and an expression of the freedom of the mind, which they protected accordingly.

Tamás Meszerics points out in his study on political resistance between 1945 and 1956 that it is the characteristics of the political system that will decide if an action is considered to be subversive. If Eastern Europe’s Stalinist-Communist regimes can be classified as totalitarian states best characterised by the intention to control every area of their subjects’ lives and subjugate them to actively serve the system, it follows logically that each and every private action over which it does not have control, has to be regarded as subversive. Applied to the area of art, this means that artistic attitudes disregarding official expectations or involving the renunciation of art temporarily or altogether, or making parallel “official” and “illegal” works (so-called “double-entry bookkeeping”), were regarded as (politically) subversive, that is non-official artistic strategies.

The cases of artists belonging to the latter group were naturally different in terms of motivation and the way in which they were accomplished. As the cases of the artists presented in this paper reveal, such parallels are more difficult to ascertain in painters than in sculptors where official commissions provided an excellent livelihood to those lucky enough to have them. Artists opposed to, or standing outside of, Socialist Realism would produce works for official exhibitions, too. However, with many artists this was merely sporadic.

“Double-entry bookkeepers” in this context means painters whose work during this period features parallel trends of realism and abstraction. With their “realistic” works they entered mainstream art, and had the opportunity to be seen at national exhibitions and receive the odd official commission (e.g. Gyula Marosán, Ferenc Martyn).

Rejecters (outsiders)

One of the most convenient forms of remaining absent from the changes of the art scene and the new expectations, was the flight to within the protective environment of the private sphere of art, and rendering in pictorial form the events of the personal microcosm.

The scenes of Hungarian art underwent fundamental changes at the end of the forties. The dictatorship took by force the control of culture, and the remaining public forums of art, the galleries, the clubs and coffee houses disappeared. The only opportunity to meet was in private, far from the publicity, and fear drove many into the private realm both physically, both mentally. In the fifties – and in particular in the Rákosi era – the artistic efforts that differed from the official, i.e. the non-official (more progressive) trends, could appear neither in the official arena nor in the so-called “second publicity” (meaning the legitimate and alternative venues of culture). Consequently, *non-official* art in the era meant the same as *non-public* art. The intellectual venues cannot be regarded as being part of the real art scene. They were companies of friends or colleagues that depended on mutual trust, and could discuss artistic issues informally only. However, everything in those years assumed great importance, and so these communities were existential locales, spaces of survival where thoughts were exchanged, helping artists get by in the intellectual desolation of the era.

A co-tenancy in Rottenbiller utca in Budapest was occupied in April 1948 by a couple, Júlia Vajda and József Jakovits, and Endre Bálint and his wife, mother-in-law and children. The suffocating political mood, the official demands on art, the forced cohabitation, the lack of space and existential insecurity did not favour creative work, as the fewer number of works attest, as well as the fact that the oeuvre of the three artists living here had increasing numbers of started but never finished works.

The influence of Vajda’s legacy was the main cohesive force in this company, but the three artists were nevertheless autonomous personalities. They may have been repositories of Vajda’s spirit and art, but were by no means epigones. They were attached to the art of their master-predecessor now obviously, now less so. In addition to Vajda’s legacy, the European school was another binding force of the community in the co-tenancy. As it transpires from the analysis of the individual artistic paths, in spite of being confined together, the three artists were increasingly seeking autonomous paths, but in spite of their different artistic dispositions and work, they continued to form a community. The main thing they shared in common was their artistic outlook and their shared way of life. By mutual consent the flat was an open house from 1948 to 1967 in every hour of the day (literally) to intellectuals who had fallen from official grace, and later young artist and intellectuals started coming, too.

Isolated from one another, many artists elected to take jobs that were not related to art, and this way their art would remain independent from the constraints of day-to-day work. In their isolated worlds they matured and continued the oeuvre they had begun and disregarded Socialist Realist expectations. Artists in this group included Dezső Korniss, Tihamér Gyarmathy, Géza Bene, Jenő Gadányi and Lajos Kassák.

Life in the countryside, voluntary or forced, also provided not only isolation, but a certain measure of protection in the era. It facilitated the failure to meet official expectations. Their situation (living in the country) and the artistic outlook this came with provided a life of reclusion for the evolvment of their art, such as in the case of Gyula Czimra and Menyhért Tóth.

One of the most radical forms of remaining on the outside was when an artist gave up art or considerably reduced her or his output (at least in the examined period, 1949–1953). Naturally the artists had their own different reasons for making that decision, but the suffocating mood created by official expectations must have contributed, as in the case of Béla Fekete Nagy, Erzsébet Vaszkó, Ilka Gedó, Béla Veszelszky, György Román and Margit Anna.

A separate chapter is dedicated to sculpture. Sculpture assumed a special role in that the required materials (bronze, marble, etc.) were expensive, in particular for large sculptures, and without support they would have been difficult to accomplish. Also, however, due to its representational role, sculpture is in every era the genre most vulnerable to politics. This holds especially true in the Socialist Realist period when politics exploited art for its agit-prop ends. A pseudo-democratic public procurement system, based on invitation, was introduced for public sculptures and other official commissions.

The same artistic strategic groups can be found in sculpture, but the mandatory procurement system greatly influenced the path the individual artists elected to take (or was offered to them by this system). It has to be stressed that political pressure was greater with the sculptors. The artists invited (assigned, that is) to tender had two choices. Either they complied fully with official expectations and sought to approach the Socialist realist canon in their other works, too (Dezső Bokros Birman, Erzsébet Forgách Hann) in the hope of being invited the next time; or they worked on state commissions and carried on, in the solitude of their studios, their works significantly different from Socialist Realism (Tibor Vilt, Lajos Barta). A few artists, nevertheless, elected to stay away from the expectations of Socialist Realism (and were left out, not being invited to tender) and were consequently able to carry on with their own art (e.g. József Jakovits).

The artists of the period can be grouped in three main categories based on their relationship to official expectations:

Acceptors (participants)

There are two further sub-groups:

- Artists accepted by official cultural political leadership
- Artists not, or only partially, accepted by official cultural political leadership, who produced Socialist Realist works, were able to secure a livelihood from art to a certain extent, but never went on to become representative of the period.

The so-called “double-entry bookkeepers” – who created “official” and “illegal” works at the same time.

Rejecters (Outsiders)

There are two further subgroups:

- Artists in domestic exile who *kept up the work they had already begun*, disregarding Socialist Realist expectations.
- Artists who temporarily (in the given period, 1949–1953) decided to *give up art altogether or radically reduce their output*.

Naturally, personal fates were different, creating different sets of motivations with respect to their survival strategies. However, this paper maintains that this classification of groups and subgroups provides a *framework* to describe the phenomena of the period. It should be stressed that these headings are by no means rigid and are flexible enough to accommodate the same artist in more than one category. The artistic careers presented in this paper are representative within their strategic category. The phenomena and individual fates explored in this paper will shed new light on the period of Socialist Realism as it is known to Hungarian

art history. Hopefully, too, this paper will provide new information contributing to a better understanding of Central Eastern European (avant-garde) art.

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