

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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NEO-CONCEPTUAL ART IN HUNGARY IN THE NINETIES  
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**The aims of research. The theme of the thesis**

Emerging in the 1960s, Conceptual Art was a movement that seemed to accomplish Modernism; however, with its institution-critique and political content it contributed to the deconstruction of the modernist paradigm. Back in the late Sixties and early Seventies it was unforeseeable that anti-formalist, issue-based Conceptual Art would herald Postmodernism. It seemed to accomplish Modernist art with the same explicit intellectualism that at the same time invoked the critical voice. The point is not only that contemporary art owes a lot to Conceptual Art, but also that its latest version is still a contemporary, vigorous phenomenon. Conceptual Art fundamentally changed the subsequent development of art, and this effect (influencing not only artistic but also the art-historic practice) became evident by the Nineties. The renewed interest in Conceptual Art internationally coincided with the political turn in Hungary. There is no obvious direct influence of Western art on Hungarian art; however, the reappearance of Conceptual Art in the Nineties in Hungary is related not only with the economic and political changes, but also with the movements of international art.

In view of the fact that the Conceptual Art of the Nineties—in spite of a great many essential similarities—in many respects differs from its Sixties' and Seventies' antecedent, it is expedient to introduce distinguishing terminology. Accordingly, I find it important to establish conceptual-art terminology in accordance with the literary sources and art practices, as well as the periodization of Conceptual Art.

In the course of my research I came to the conclusion that the Conceptual Art of the Nineties—in Hungary at least—forms a distinct period of Conceptual Art. My paper is concerned with mapping that distinct tendency of the Nineties which changed the face of Hungarian art in general in as much as it introduced issues such as identity, political and social questions and institution-critique.

In addition to the exploration of the theoretical background and interrelationships, my aim was to establish—through case studies—a usable system of categories. The analysed Hungarian artworks are not local emulations of international clichés; nevertheless, similarities of strategies and modernness (conceivably) makes them part of the international discourse of contemporary art.

### **Tasks and research methods**

The survey of Hungarian Neo-Conceptual Art requires a short review of Conceptual Art and outline of relevant extrinsic and intrinsic theories. Because Hungarian art is inseparable both from the international trends and the socio-cultural changes in Hungary, I seek to analyse—within the limits of this paper—the “preliminaries,” i.e. the theories of both Conceptual Art and Hungarian art in the Nineties in the context of international art, and to position them in the Hungarian social frame of reference.

Outlining the subject of research—establishing the co-ordinates of space and time—raises the methodological question of isolating it from parallel art phenomena—partly still-prevailing “classical” Conceptual Art and partly other contemporary art practices. The Nineties’ works of Conceptual Art created in the paradigm of classical Conceptual Art are set apart from Neo-Conceptual Art in that they do not contribute to the current contemporary discourse even when using the most up-to-date techniques and spectacular elements.

Neo-Conceptual Art withstands the usual approaches for the reason that it can only be interpreted along lines of content, and not form or genre. Theoretically, a work of any type and genre can be Neo-Conceptual—an installation or painting even—provided it problematises current artistic or social issues. However, for methodological considerations I have kept to a “golden mean” and accordingly avoided borderline works.

In the course of collecting, classifying and interpreting this material, I occasionally applied the method of comparative analyses in order to highlight the relationships between the conceptual works of different periods and areas.

### **Structure of the thesis and the results of the research**

Conceptual art divides the art scene in regards of what is considered as real Conceptual Art, when and where it emerged, how long it lasted, whether it is over at all, and who the most important representatives are. However, irrespective of attitude—i.e. whether one is highly restrictive with regard to Conceptual Art (the artists, the place and time of their activity), or on the contrary, extends its domain—there is wide consensus about the significance of Conceptual Art. One extreme opinions speaks about Conceptual Art as merely exerting an *influence*; while the other extreme considers it as very much alive. The common denominator of the many approaches is that the idea or concept is regarded as being of primary and crucial importance in a work of art, and execution secondary.

However, the appreciation of the object of art and its role has changed significantly over the past decades: the negation of form and “objectness” has been replaced by the acknowledgement of the importance of execution. Works emerged whose perfect execution, too, seeks to serve the “conveyance of content.” In other words, Conceptual Art does not in every instance reject form; rather, it is opposed only to the “form-content” elaborated in the history of modern art.

**In the first part** of my thesis I deal with the issues of terminology and periodisation. In the course of the history of Conceptual Art a number of different terms have emerged—for the purpose of grasping change, among others. It is common sense to apply distinguishing names to the “special” Conceptual Art of one or another period, while the general term “conceptual” is appropriate both as an attribute and as applicable to the whole of Conceptual Art.

It is impossible to define the exact space-time co-ordinates of the beginning of the Conceptual Art. The beginning has traditionally been associated with Joseph Kosuth’s *One and three Chairs* (1965); some claim Conceptual Art began with Sol LeWitt’s essay in 1967; and Lucy R. Lippard, who published a detailed chronology of the movement in 1973, set the date at 1966.

Conceptual Art first appeared in its most systematic and convincing form and most manifestly in the United States and Western Europe where it was able to persist as a tendency. Similar parallel phenomena cropped up in various places around the world (such as Eastern Europe, South America, Japan), and Conceptual Art would soon become ubiquitous.

**Proto-Conceptual Art** comprise those 20<sup>th</sup>-century works which date from before the period of Conceptual Art, but which have much in common with conceptual works in terms of content or function, and assume the role of forerunners. Such works include some of the works of Marcel Duchamp, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha and Ed Kienholz.

The Conceptual Art of the Sixties and Seventies is called “**classical**” **Conceptual Art** as a reference to the canonisation process, albeit Conceptual Art, the new avant-garde, was never homogenous, not even at the outset. It was, in effect, the dominant, “language-based,” pre-1970, “hardcore” (Tony Godfrey) conceptualism that was canonised. Many art historians felt that Conceptual Art had by 1972 lost its initial verve and vitality; it had become a routine just like any other trend before. That was what the 1972 Kassel Documenta 5 would reveal and what Lucy R. Lippard voiced in the epilogue of her book *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...*

In Hungary it was Henry Flynt's term "**Concept Art**" that became widespread in spite of the fact that, give or take a few exceptions, it was the Kosuthian "*conceptual*" art that was regarded as authoritative (László Beke, István Hajdu, Miklós Peternák and Zoltán Sebők; also Éva Körner in 1993 and Edit András in 1999). Since there is nothing to semantically justify the use of "concept art," I shall for reasons of linguistic consistency give preference to the term "conceptual." This is backed up by the fact that there is no close connection between the Flyntian "Concept Art" (1963) and the conceptual art that emerged in the second half of the Sixties. Also, where both terms are used, they are generally treated as synonyms.

I call **Post-Conceptual Art** the period following the "classical period" of Conceptual Art roughly between the mid-Seventies to the latter half of the Eighties. Many features of classical Conceptual Art did not prove lasting, since the mere *conceptual* existence of a work of art has its restrictions in everyday practice and ultimately the consistent dematerialisation leads to the demise of the object of art. By then established practices, certain conceptual patents of Conceptual Art started to repeat themselves and hackneyed ideas lost their validity. Some of the artists kept up their old practice; most of them, however, tried new ways, and soon a new generation emerged whose members, employing a broader means of expression, expanded the scope of Conceptual Art. The first period of Conceptual Art now over, design and execution gained importance once more, but never in an absolute sense and always serving the concept.

The use of the term "Post-Conceptual Art" is just as diffuse as "Conceptual Art." It is applied by some to denote certain creative procedures; others use it to describe a larger period of artistic practice. Peter Osborne, for example, describes as "Post-Conceptual" the spirit of contemporary art beginning with Conceptual Art, the entire *Zeitgeist*. Reflecting on the changed circumstances, László Beke gave the title *Post-Conceptual tendencies* to an exhibition he curated in 1981 which presented Hungarian Conceptual Art. Hungarian Post-Conceptual Art was first surveyed by Gábor Andrási who referred to it as "sensual conceptuality."

**Neo-Conceptual Art** is understood to mean the Conceptual Art that re-emerged in the Nineties, and which would become the most fecund trend on the contemporary art scene. Compared to Post-Conceptual the term is less often used; it is very difficult to understand the reasons for the use of the one or the other. Nevertheless, for reasons of unambiguity I consider its use important. The necessity to distinguish between the two is called for by art in Hungary. While in the West there is continuity between the Conceptual Art of the Eighties and Nineties,

there is a sharp caesura between the two in Hungary. The socio-political changes enabled the emergence of a new Conceptual Art which explicitly reflected on current (art or social) issues which had been suppressed in the Eighties. The most important common feature of the Neo-Conceptual Art of the Nineties and Post-Conceptual, then in its latency period, is that both are rooted in the Post-Modern paradigm. Their preferences and sensitivity to problems and common features were shaped accordingly, and—as opposed to their classical predecessor—the idea or concept, the content “materialises” in a spectacular image or a meticulously executed project.

The divergence between the Conceptual Art of the Eighties and Nineties results from the difference of their situation. Post-Conceptual Art was thrust into the background and was in its latency from the latter half of the Seventies until 1989/1990; while Neo-Conceptual Art came into the limelight in the Nineties and consequently had more scope for development. Also, importantly Neo-Conceptual Art takes a more reflective attitude on the issues of conceptualism. Albeit it is related to Post-Conceptual, it emerged as a new phenomena—hence the “neo” prefix. What partly accounts for this is that from the Seventies onward Conceptual Art appeared in more and more places all round the world to the point that by the end of the millennium it had become globalised. Also, Neo-Conceptual Art extended its interest to include, in the wake of feminist criticism, gender and queer studies, and the influences of the post-colonialist theory. One might venture to suggest that Post-Conceptual Art is implicitly conceptual and Neo-Conceptual Art explicitly, due to their differences of status.

The expression “**Conceptualism**”—referring to an increasingly wide-ranging outlook, mentality and means of expression—came into common use in the Nineties together with “Conceptual Art.” When used retrospectively, however, it has an historic overtone. Its pejorative connotations, too, call for caution. Notwithstanding, the editors in the preface of the exhibition catalogue of *Global Conceptualism* at New York, Queens Museum of Art in 1999, stick to conceptualism, making the case that it embraces a great many artistic practices which take art back to the social, political and economic reality in which it is conceived.

**In the second part of my thesis** I examine the theoretical issues of Conceptual Art. Sound theoretical foundations, a theoretical character is common to all Conceptual Art; naturally, however, the theory underlying or constituting the works has changed. Formerly prevailing linguistics and analytic philosophy were succeeded by anthropology, sociology and feminist criticism. Content and strategy, too, underwent change: direct institution criticism was

gradually replaced by more sophisticated reflection. The shift from an interest in the “domestic” issues of art to the broader social issues occurred around 1970; only back then, in the midst of the canonisation of “hard-core” Conceptualism, it went all but unnoticed.

I trace the changes that occurred in the concept and the artistic practice through the works of the first theoreticians and scholars of Conceptual Art (Joseph Kosuth, Lucy R. Lippard, Sol Lewitt, Tamás Szentjóby, László Beke). I rely chiefly on British and American sources for the reason that Conceptual Art first appeared in these parts of the world in elaborated form, and to this day the most theoretical works are published there. Examining the features it developed in the Sixties, I interpret Conceptual Art both in its original context and in its altered forms. I illustrate each phenomenon with examples taken from international and Hungarian art, and demonstrate the changes by means of earlier and new works of art.

**The third part of thesis is devoted to my specific area of interest.** In the first chapter I examine international manifestations of Neo-Conceptual Art, taking as examples works from two turn-of-the-millennium exhibitions. The second chapter discusses the two principal sources of Hungarian Neo-Conceptual Art: Hungarian Conceptual Art, in connection with this the role art education, and the reception of Marcel Duchamp in Hungary. The third chapter presents the Nineties’ institutional establishment of art, the framework that extensively shaped the face of art. Chapter four presents in four groups the results of my researches (society, identity, art, philosophy).

Classification along the lines of issues and topics proved to be the most workable way to describe and interpret Neo-Conceptual Art. This is justified by the inner logic and problem-centred nature of Neo-Conceptual Art. I take as a basis the questions frequently raised in Neo-Conceptual Art, on which artists and curators launched fertile discourses.

Thematic discussion was common in art history; however, this approach became obsolete with the disappearance of themes from art. Due to an indifference to themes, thematic discussion has been neglected in instances when the subject of research would warrant. Thematic discussion has made a comeback, serving as a model to taking an approach to a problem-centred art.

I arrived at my choice of chapter titles inductively, taking as a starting point the questions raised by the works. The categories thus established are not meant to pigeon-hole the works; that would be impossible anyway, since that all of the works raise several different questions

and would feature under more than one label. Because I focus on the themes raised by the art, the works exemplify the problems they articulate. Accordingly, if only for the sheer quantity, it is impossible to enlist every relevant work of art. In any case my objective was not to create a list, but rather, to demonstrate on typical works the issues Neo-Conceptual Art is concerned with. Rather than discussing individual artists, artist groups, exhibitions or mediums, I opted for this system then, for it affords a well-arranged survey of an important and rich area of the art of the Nineties.

The first of the mentioned categories is **Social and political issues**. Art dealing with social issues concentrates on the private and public aspects of social life (history, politics, war, poverty, and lately institutional systems, drugs, culture, lifestyle, body politics). I take as a basis the broadest possible interpretation of society, and discuss human relationships here on account of their social entrenchment. The message is naturally not “determinism,” but rather the fact that communication and the forms of relationship are socially and culturally bound, and have attracted the interest of artists.

While on the international scene artists have self-evidently been concerned with social issues, critical, socially-sensitive art with its century-old traditions only reappeared in Hungary little by little in the Nineties.

This subchapter chiefly deals with the works of the Subsistence Level Society [Létminimum Társulás], Tamás Szentjóbby, Antal Lakner, Tibor Várnagy, Miklós Erhardt—Dominic Hislop, and Zsolt Veress—Csaba Nemes, as well as, among others, works by Gábor Bakos, Endre Koronczai, Hunor Pető, Emese Benczúr and Ilona Németh.

While the **problem of identity** cannot be isolated from the contexts of society, body politics, art sociology and philosophy, it deserves an independent subchapter on account of its significance in the Nineties. In modern, complex societies—and art—the conflict-laden question of identity assumes increasing significance, due to growing globalisation, migration and multi-culturalism. While the search for identity and the “identity crisis” in the modern sense were concomitant with the political turn in Hungary, only very gradually in the Nineties did the issues of individual, artistic, social, gender and sexual-orientation based identity enter art. And only a decade later, in consequence of a maturation period, would other questions ethnic and religious identity enter the scene.

This subchapter chiefly deals with the works of *Emese Benczúr, Csaba Nemes—Zsolt Veress, Gábor Bakos—Imre Weber, Róza El-Hassan, Orsolya Drozdik* and *Kriszta Nagy*, as well as,



among others, works by *Tamás Komoróczy, Gábor Gerhes, Ágnes Szabó, Eszter Szabó* and *Beáta Széchy*.

The “**fundamental question**” of art raised by Conceptualism was in the focus of interest of the artists of the Nineties as well, albeit it was merely one of the areas Neo-Conceptual Art was concerned with; indeed, the question itself changed in the meantime. The function of art, the place and role of the artist, art’s mode of existence, the *raison-d’être* of art, reflections on its own status were no longer approached strictly along the lines of art philosophy. Hungarian artists who made some highly subtle contributions to these issues include, among others *Balázs Beöthy, Csaba Nemes, Gyula Várnai, Antal Lakner—Georg Winter, Hunor Pető, Emese Benczúr, Pál Gerber, Tibor Várnagy, Endre Koroncz, László L. Révész, Szabolcs KissPál, Little Warsaw [Kis Varsó] (András Gálik—Bálint Havas), Gábor Bakos, Péter Hecker, Tibor Gyenis, Attila Menesi—Christoph Rauch, and Judit Angel*.

The “**philosophical questions,**” being the *per definitionem* issues of Conceptual Art, crop up in Neo-Conceptual Art, too; however, the works of the Nineties’ artists differ greatly in theme, method or simply tone from the (chiefly written) reflections of the “great forerunners” (e.g. Erdély, Kosuth). The Nineties’ artists are generally speaking equally far removed from the “big issues,” as the solemn, philosophical tone and the use of “big words.” They usually take as their starting point everyday, concrete matters, or focus on the various individual aspects of greater issues, and concern themselves with epistemological rather than ontological issues. Their playful, humorous and ironical tone represents a more subtle way of thinking, and also scepticism. Instead of following the paradigms of the old philosophical schools, their works challenge “eternal truths” by means of a personal approach and content, perfect execution and an emphasis on visuality. Some significant works raising “philosophical issues” have been created by Gyula Várnai, Tibor Várnagy, Szabolcs KissPál, Emese Benczúr, Róza El-Hassan, Pál Gerber, Endre Koroncz, Attila Csörgő, Balázs Beöthy, Noémi Fábrián and István Khoncz.

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