Drobe, Christian

Abstraction in Hungary

Art East Central. 2021, vol. 1, iss. 1, pp. 147-151

ISSN 2695-1428 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2021-1-9
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143606
License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International
Access Date: 28. 11. 2024
Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MUNI ARTS Masarykova univerzita Filozofická fakulta

Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
digilib.phil.muni.cz

01 / February 2021 / vol. I / [147—151]

Abstraction in Hungary

A Review of:
Mária Árvai, Zsóka Leposa, Enikő Róka and Ulrich Winkler, eds,
Lajos Barta, Überlebensstrategien, Budapest: Kiscelli Múzeum, 2019.
178 pp. ISBN: 9786155341670

Márta Branczik and Zsóka Leposa, eds, *Sonderwege, Karl-Heinz Adler und die ungarische Abstraktion,* Budapest: Kiscelli and Kassák Museums, 2017. 124 pp. ISBN: 9786155341472

Christian Drobe (drobe@phil.muni.cz)
Department of Art History, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Keywords

Communism; post-war art; Hungary; GDR; Iron Curtain; antipolitics; Mátyás Rákosi; double-speak; Lajos Barta; Karl-Heinz Adler

https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2021-1-9

Abstraction in Hungary

A Review of:

Mária Árvai, Zsóka Leposa, Enikő Róka and Ulrich Winkler, eds, *Lajos Barta, Überlebens-strategien,* Budapest: Kiscelli Múzeum, 2019. 178 pp. ISBN: 9786155341670

Márta Branczik and Zsóka Leposa, eds, *Sonderwege, Karl-Heinz Adler und die ungarische Abstraktion,* Budapest: Kiscelli and Kassák Museums, 2017. 124 pp. ISBN: 9786155341472.

Christian Drobe

Two exhibitions in 2017 and 2019 are exemplary of a larger series of projects at the Kiscelli Museum, which have, in recent years, been devoted to Hungarian art after 1945, its protagonists and issues of abstraction behind the Iron Curtain.[1] Both of these catalogues document this and demonstrate the gaps that the restrictive Communist system had, so that it was still possible to create truly 'progressive,' i.e., non-figurative art. In some cases, such art projects were even supported by official authorities. This was particularly true for art connected to architecture ('Kunst am Bau'), which offered precisely these niches within society and enabled a modern display of forms in public space, away from (or later even in harmony with) Socialist Realism. This development flourished particularly strongly in Hungary, as well as in some countries of Central Europe such as Poland or Czechoslovakia. The regimes of Mátyás Rákosi and János Kádár in the 1950s were regarded as particularly repressive but, nevertheless, some amount of freedom was possible, albeit in a very limited way, in the 'undecided years' before and after the revolution of 1956. Both catalogues attempt to follow these paths of non-figurative art in times of its supposed suppression, avoiding the black-and-white depiction of simple partisanship for or against abstraction that was superficially heard in the later debates. At the same time, they both point to the close ties between Hungary and Germany. One of them does so through the example of Lajos Barta (1899–1986), who spent the last third of his life in Cologne where his work was finally able to have its full effect. The other explores the case of Karl-Heinz Adler (1927–2018), who worked with comparable strategies in East Germany and maintained contact with Hungarian artists. For him, too, art in architecture was an essential reference point for his work. The cultural exchange also highlights opportunities and possibilities in both political blocs of the Cold War.

The first catalogue, *Sonderwege. Karl-Heinz Adler und die ungarische Abstraktion* accompanies the exhibition, which took place in 2017 in the Kassák Museum, the Petőfi Literature Museum and the Kiscelli Museum (the picture gallery of the Budapest History Museum). Four essays accompany the rich catalogue of illustrations. The first two are devoted to Karl-Heinz Adler's relationship to Hungarian abstraction, the last two deal with the question of art and politics in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s. The focus is on art produced specifically

1) *Lajos Barta, Überlebensstrategien*, 6.

for buildings, which was decided on by the Hungarian state in 1954. Officials ordered the allocation of 0.2 percent of each building's budget to art.[2] The same policy became a reality in the GDR and provided lots of opportunities for artists. Most of Karl-Heinz Adler's oeuvre, who was known as an abstract painter and conceptual artist, was devoted to art and decoration on public buildings, where his otherwise contested style could succeed. To cope with this, he not only cultivated contacts with West Germany through old companions such as Gotthard Graubner (1930–2013), but also had connections with Hungarian artists, including János Fajó (1937–2018), István Nádler (1938-), Dóra Maurer (1936-) and Imre Bak (1939-).[3] There was a lively exchange with both halves of Germany. The Museum Folkwang in Essen, for example, under its director Dieter Honisch, awarded several scholarships to Hungarian artists from the 1970s onwards. Adler was well aware of the interrelationships, and there was an awareness of the possibilities offered by art in the various political systems. So it was that both in the GDR and in Hungary the much-vaunted *double speak* came about, i.e. the dual strategies of the artists who officially created state art, but in private followed progressive styles.[4] Klara Kemp-Welch has tried to capture the complicated strategies with which artists undercut state censorship with the term 'antipolitics.'[5] Adler was mostly concerned with colour field painting and serial abstract forms, unusual for East Germany and a practice that could invited possibly recrimination. He created works contrary to the official art doctrine and was unable to exhibit or get appreciation for them for a long time. Only in public spaces was he able to realise his works in the GDR, where Socialist Realism was dominant, even in comparison with other states in the Eastern bloc. A well-known example is Adler's geometric patterns on the side wall of the Pullman Hotel (formerly the Neva) in Dresden.

These and similar works, and the extensive designs for them, are assembled in the attractively designed catalogue and make it possible to follow his development. It also allows a comparison between the artists of this generation in the GDR and Hungary. This includes the design of the Savoy Restaurant in Budapest, which was supplemented in 1962 by the painter László Lakner (1936-) with a large mural showing a view of the city. The painting, which was walled up in 2003 during the construction of a branch of Burgerking, shows a completely abstract solution, an energetic view into a perspectivally arranged but abstract street line. At that time this was something completely new in a public building. Many of these projects by artists such as Imre Bak, Istvan Nádler or even Ferenc Lantos (1929-) were the subject of lively discussion in the cultural committees in Hungary. Older artists like Aurél Bernáth (1895–1982) and Pál Pátzay (1896–1979) were often ambivalent or even hostile towards the new ideas. Aurél Bernáth said to Lakner that the work in the Savoy restaurant did not endanger the viewer, but that it was not real fine art. In 1962 Pátzay, in his essay 'Korunk esztétikai zűrzavara' (Aesthetic Confusion of Our Time), attacked the addiction of artists to abstraction in the wake of architecture.[6] In the same year, Ferenc Lantos countered with a good pinch of Marxist dialectic in his essay

2) *Sonderwege, Karl-Heinz Adler und die ungarische Abstraktion*, 15.

3) Ibid., 9.

4) Edit Sasvári, Hedvig Turai, Sándor Hornyik, eds, *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond,* London: Thames and Hudson, 2018.

5) Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-totalitarian Rule 1956–1989,* London: Bloomsbury. 2014.

6) *Sonderwege, Karl-Heinz Adler und die ungarische Abstraktion*, 17.

'Fogalomtisztázás' (Clarification of Terms) in the magazine *Jelenkor*. Abstraction is reality, he argued, as the dismantling and reconstruction of the elements of the visible world; there is no contradiction at all with state doctrine.[7] Such attempts indicate the growing self-confidence of artists. The essays in the catalogue illustrate very well these rhetorical strategies and the gradual development towards greater acceptance of abstraction among state officials.

In the course of the 1960s the dominance of Socialist Realism was increasingly challenged. More and more projects for abstract designs and art pieces in public places, parks, kindergartens or swimming pools were created. After 1945, abstraction found better opportunities in some parts of Central Europe, especially in Hungary, Poland or Czechoslovakia. It was thus only through his south-eastern neighbours, considered more open to these developments than the GDR, that Karl-Heinz Adler was inspired to create modern forms. Poland was his gateway to modernism, he once stated. What is striking about the catalogue is the many continuities it reveals with the interwar period. These include the well-known Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely (1906–1997) who was educated in the 1930s in Sándor Bortnyik's (1893–1976) art school. References are often made to Lajos Kassák (1887–1967), but also to Gyula Derkovits (1894–1934), both of them key interwar figures. In any case, the progressive European School in Hungary, which was formed shortly after 1945 and continued modernist traditions, was present in Hungary throughout the 1950s. All these influences then had an impact on the generation of Karl-Heinz Adler and Ferenc Lantos, and they allow this neo-avant-garde to flourish in Central Europe. These ideas continue to have an effect right up to contemporary artists such as Olaf Holzapfel, who has taken up many ideas from Adler. The catalogue's merit is to have drawn attention to this discourse particularly by means of examples from the field of architectural art.

The second catalogue is dedicated to the work of the Hungarian sculptor Lajos Barta and is appropriately titled *Überlebensstrategien* (Strategies of survival). The exhibition was shown at the Kiscelli Museum in 2019, in cooperation with the Martin-Lantzsch-Nötzel Foundation in Cologne. Extensive essays are dedicated to the various tactics with which Barta tried to work as an artist in Hungary's repressive environment. Barta's eventful life as an artist began before the Second World War in Paris. Like many Hungarian artists, he travelled to the metropolis early on. There were connections to the Parisian artists' group *Abstraction-Creation*, but Barta also cultivated contacts with the Surrealists and experimented with *écriture automatique*. Both influences remained decisive for his development as a sculptor, visible in the geometrization of his figurative works on the one hand, and a tendency towards Surrealism on the other, which he preserved especially in the medium of drawing. After his artistic awakening, there was a final shift to abstraction in 1943; due to the War he experienced a long odyssey before he eventually returned to Hungary. There he became a co-founder of the 'European School,' which soon disintegrated, but remained his main influence. In 1949, with the turn to Stalinism, he submitted to the artistic doctrine imposed from above. For reasons of subsistence as a sculptor, he modelled works such as *The Happy Family* (1950) and similar realistic scenes, including a design for the Stalin monument in Budapest and also a bust of Mátyás Rákosi, the Communist Hungarian leader, which corresponded to the aims of the new state and Socialist Realism. The state consequently provided him with his studio and enough working materials

7) Ibid., 19.

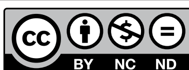
– as a sculptor, one was much more dependent on the favour of public authorities. His life was strongly influenced by the Hungarian National Uprising in 1956. He saw glimmers of hope for more freedom. Between 1953 and 1956 there was a process of quiet de-stalinisation, but after 1956 modern art couldn't prevail. Thus, Barta's double existence as a sculptor for the state and as a progressive artist in the private sphere – the double-speak – became established in an exemplary manner. Only in private life did he remain the progressive modernist he wanted to be after his time in Paris, above all as a draughtsman.

His aim was to participate in as many public competitions as possible, flooding everything with his progressive, abstract designs. It was a long process of eroding conservative ideas. When his sculpture *Three Children* (1959) was finished, the jury complained that he should make his work 30% more representational, i.e. more figurative. In the wake of that, the sculpture *Wave* (1959) was created, the first public abstract sculpture in Hungary.[8] All these commissions remained highly contested. Another sculpture was to be created on Gellért Hill in Budapest for the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Hungary. The abstract sculpture, planned as a surface for climbing, did not meet with the approval of the official clients.[9] Barta threatened to commit suicide, but then promised to make the *Three Little Horses* (1964) instead, for which he is still famous today. The, sometimes, grim business of negotiation determined the work of artists in Hungary, always driven between three official categories: (1) official art; (2) art accepted by the state; (3) art that was merely tolerated or forbidden. Until the mid-1960s, Barta followed the strategy of double-speak. Then he explored Western Europe and finally moved to Cologne in 1965. Today Barta is known for his organic, biomorphic figures, which are reminiscent of Henry Moore and are linked to ideas of modern abstract sculpture. They found many supporters and are widespread in the urban areas of West Germany. The catalogue makes all these aspects clear in a vivid way and with a lot of illustrative material.

Both publications must be seen in the larger context of art after 1945. In recent years, the relationship between supposedly Western abstraction and Socialist Realism in the East has been reappraised, especially regarding the individual strategies of the artists. Both catalogues succeed in presenting in a nuanced way the coping strategies that artists pursued behind the Iron Curtain. It was precisely the art on buildings and in public spaces that created niches and free spaces that made possible a progressive modern and abstract art of its own. The constant struggle for this limited freedom led to subversive and innovative solutions.

8) *Lajos Barta, Überlebensstrategien, Kiscelli Múzeum*, 35.

9) Ibid., 75.



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.