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### **History Meets Memory: Lili Ország's Art**

The topic of my dissertation is the oeuvre of Lili Ország (1926–1978), a Hungarian artist of Jewish descent, a determining figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century Central European art. Numerous studies and exhibitions were devoted to her work, including a comprehensive retrospective exhibition held last year at the Hungarian National Gallery. Her paintings are included in permanent exhibitions, today she forms part of the art historical canon. Nevertheless, research dedicated to her oeuvre so far is not without gaps and problems. Authors covering her art were almost exclusively her contemporaries and personal acquaintances. Lacking a historical perspective and a broader context, Ország's art was labelled self-contained and unparalleled. Moreover, the sources were not explored yet and consequently the thorough analysis of her written legacy did not take place.

Following the transformation of Europe after 1989, issues of identity entered the public discourse, consequently memory studies emerged as an important, new field of research. The fall of communism and the end of the Cold War left an interpretational vacuum, opening up space for re-contextualization of the past and reformation of identities. In this context, the art of Lili Ország is thought-provoking as it focuses on history, collective and cultural memory, and our relations to the past. Nonetheless, remembrance had a different connotation in the 1960s and 1970s, when in communist Hungary remembering was a form of resistance. An attempt to forge and preserve an alternative identity meant to diverge from official memory and identity politics.

Accordingly, the theoretical framework of the dissertation is memory studies, through which I examine the possibility of a comprehensive interpretation that could replace the romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative of the solitary artist and instead introduce Ország's art into an international discourse.

The theme of memory is omnipresent in Lili Ország's oeuvre from the early cemetery paintings to her last series, the *Labyrinth*, yet it becomes truly accentuated in the 1960s, in her series of townscapes and in the period of the so called "inscribed" paintings, featuring unreadable gesture-like signs or traces, that evoke Hebrew characters. The titles of her works,

referring to biblical locations, as well as Jewish motifs appearing in her paintings indicate the painter's determined quest to form and communicate her Jewish identity. Accordingly, the intended programme of her works in the 1960s includes the evocation of sacred places and texts, those devices of memory that helped to preserve Jewish identity in the diaspora. In a broader context, cultural memory also plays an important role in Ország's art. Even the painterly tools and solutions applied in her townscapes and inscribed paintings, such as scratching, fragmentation, imprinting and seriality gain new meaning in the context of memory studies, namely as references to different layers and functions of memory.

Methodologically, the dissertation takes a distanced, critical perspective, and attributes vital importance to the analysis of written sources and interviews. The research I have carried out in the last few years dealt with several emphatic elements of the artist's written legacy such as her correspondence, sketchbooks, pocket calendars, and her notes on esotericism. The results of this work include the accurate and extensive mapping of the artist's social network, identification of her chosen masters, and her sources of inspiration. This knowledge will help to answer questions such as to what extent was she trying to be state of the art, as well as the identification of career building strategies. Her network might provide an explanation on how could she travel so widely despite the restrictive travel policies of the period and how did she consciously utilize these travels and connections towards building an international career – a rather ambitious goal in the contemporary East Central European context.

Examined as a case study, the *Requiem series* (I-VII, 1963) can demonstrate the fruitful application of the two methodological approaches outlined above: the exploration and close analysis of sources and the use of memory studies as a theoretical framework. As a result, not only the title, but the original context and the interpretation of a long known masterpiece prove to be subject to change.