

Zsuzsanna Zsuró

Eötvös Loránd University, Doctoral School of Philosophy, Department of Aesthetics

“Infrastructure of Dissent.” Socially Engaged and Critical Art Practices in The Hungarian Diaspora After 2010

In the Hungarian contemporary cultural field dominated by nationalistic ideology and close control of the governing Hungarian Civic Alliance party, repression of artistic freedom has been present since the party's election in 2010. Tackling a hostile and exclusionary ideology, a persistent dissent towards the state among art workers has formulated in the last twelve years. Parallel to the “official”, socially engaged and critical art practices arose in order to give voice to ostracised communities and reintegrate critical thinking into the discipline. As labour migration in European countries have increased significantly since 2004, this research has a special focus on Hungarian art professionals living in the European diaspora. Being a not yet debated subject, the doctoral research scrutinises the “infrastructure of dissent”: the loose network of socially engaged and critical art practices initiated by Hungarians after 2010.

The dissertation has two main methodological aspects. Whilst it aims to raise awareness on socially engaged and critical art practices through case studies, it is equally vital to create a solid theoretical background to its topic. A precursor of this research, the presentation will focus on results of the latter.

On one hand, it engages with the ideas of political theorist Chantal Mouffe in a wider context of neoliberalism. Mouffe, by defining art as “critical art” in its inherently political dimension, states that it is a means by which positive social change can be achieved in the most hegemonic societies precisely through the anti-hegemonic nature of critical art.

On the other hand, leaving behind the East-West dichotomy, the research applies theories taken from the academic disciplines of decolonialism and horizontal art history, relying on works by Judith Butler and Piotr Piotrowski.

Judith Butler discusses whether confrontation with repressive powers fuelled by violence alone could be sustained in the long run. Instead, she urges for the practice of “nonviolence” as it also presupposes a sustainable resistance. A 'sustained commitment, a redirection of aggression towards the will to affirm equality and freedom'.

Polish art historian, Piotr Piotrowski tackles the hegemony of the Western art historical narrative by offering a more democratic approach, “horizontal art history”,

rooted in decolonial theory. According to Piotrowski, there is a multitude of histories, therefore, it is crucial to deconstruct the old canon and rewrite the individual art histories of each state according to their historical and socio-political specificities.

Based on the theoretical presuppositions the following questions arise. Can the examined art practices mobilise emotions to create a more democratic and socially conscious society in Hungary? Is it possible that the theory of nonviolence can be effectively applied in the analysis of Hungarian socially engaged art practices? Can Hungarian socially engaged and critical art practices be seen as equally valuable chapters as their Western counterparts in the global art historical narrative of the 21st century?

A difficulty in this research is to find relatively continuous and sustained socially engaged and critical art practices when cultural and academic freedom is undermined. Nevertheless, to discover and to research the work of young art workers can provide in-depth knowledge on the notion of contemporary civil art practices and therefore add to a global understanding of a more democratic cultural future.