

Zsóka Leposa

Eötvös Loránd University Budapest

'They do no harm ... but this is not fine art' Abstraction In and Outside. Abstraction as Official Language of Modernism during the Socialism in Hungary

My PhD thesis examines the period between 1956 and 1989 with a special focus on the sixties and seventies. The main goal is to unravel the difficult processes how abstract art, especially geometric abstraction, which had been banned from the art field during the Stalinist regime of the first half of the fifties, became not only accepted but well-funded and commissioned by the state in two decades. The formal language of abstraction was approved as early as the mid-60s within the field of applied arts (building decoration, graphic design etc.) as opposed to that of public sculpture, with the latter falling under the strictest ideological control. My conference paper will focus on the very beginning of this process, the period between 1957 and 1965, and summarize the political, ideological and institutional circumstances, furthermore the personal factors that played a role in the headway of abstract art as public decorations commissioned by the state.

A general confusion hallmarked the conciliatory attempts of cultural policy after 1956. 'After the reprisals following the 1956 revolution, the Party leadership in Hungary aimed at political consolidation through a »deal« with society from the early 1960s onwards. What this meant for artists was a degree of creative freedom for those who did not criticize the regime openly, unless their view contradicted the tenets of the Party.' A pivotal question was the official stance towards realism and abstraction. A public debate on the question of abstraction began in this atmosphere. Critics and artists were trying to find a place for the abstract artists silenced in the Stalinist era. In a polemical article published in 1961, art historian Lajos Németh considered cooperation with modern architects as one of the great opportunities for modern art. In her response to the article, art historian Nóra Aradi – a party hardliner – stated that 'today a nonfigurative artist can receive commissions for the decoration of buildings. [...] It cannot be the duty of the state to subsidize abstract artists beyond that.' Hence, Aradi essentially implied that the "still supportable" trend of nonfigurative art had been consciously channeled towards cooperation with architects and the decoration of buildings after 1957. After all, abstract geometry "did no harm", and could serve one purpose well, namely the creation of "flat ornamental decoration." Although in terms of numbers abstract artworks as public decorations were not in an extreme majority, they were often considered as problematic. It was mainly influential figurative artists who took every opportunity to sound the alarm that abstract artists could receive commissions from the two-permille budget. The Art Committee realized by late autumn 1962 that this tendency had got out of hand to such an extent that it jeopardized

the existence of figurative art. Therefore, they decided to use political pressure to force architects to demand figurative works for their buildings. Similar tendencies between modern architecture and modern art were observable in the former GDR where the "Beton Formstein Sortiment" of the artists Karl-Heinz Adler und Friedrich Kracht went in to industrial realization in 1972, although Adler could hold his first solo show as a visual artist not sooner than 1982, in Dresden.

The institutional framework for selecting and commissioning artists in Hungary was initially provided by the Fine Art Fund, then from 1964 by the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts. I have been researching the Archives of the Lectorate, where the files of every state commissioned artwork of the period are held. In my findings the jury protocols of the early abstract decorations reveal the circumstances of their realization. To complete the analytical and descriptive research, I juxtapose the case studies and the official ideological statements concerning fine arts of the time and try to read between the lines. The hidden narratives of the assignments paint a picture of the unpredictability of the cultural politics of the early sixties where the fate of artworks that bore the marks of abstraction depended on personal relations and individual decisions. In my paper I will address the problems of use of terms "official" and "unofficial" art, I will shed light on the transition between the overused categories of "approved", "tolerated" and "banned" art.