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Sculptura Una

Explorations
on the Division of Cultures
and on the Unity of Sculpture Art

Theses of DLA dissertation

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The focal perspective and working hypothesis of the doctoral project

In order to stand its ground, contemporary sculpture art is simultaneously to face the diversity of cultures polarized in the East-West division of today's globalized cultural space, and the requisite unity of aesthetic value in sculptural space. A sculptor is expected to respond to the challenge as a sculptor. Such a response, however, is not feasible without a conceptual clarification of the content and context of the issues involved. The actual 'thesis' of the doctoral project in the professional sense of the term is given by the sculpture work made in the course of my doctoral studies, primarily by my 'master work'. Nevertheless, the theoretical exploration summarized in my doctoral dissertation is essentially related to the 'sculpture thesis'. Therefore, the present statement, too, is formulated in two interacting contexts: in the interplay of reflections on a comprehensive professional challenge, and on the sculptural response to the challenge. The initial working assumption of the exploration posited that the precondition and key to the validity of an aesthetic response to the challenge implied by cultural divisions is the personal integrity of the artist's identity in the pre-given unity of the human person.

The approach applied

A. Theory

In my dissertation, in order to examine the questions set and the answer that can be given to them, I aimed at exploring the nature of cultural division, with special regard to its East-West polarity, and at checking the initial assumption as a working hypothesis in multiple ways. For the given purpose, the dissertation in its successive chapters proceeded:

- (1) by giving an introductory overview on the nature of a sculptural dissertation and on the tasks it may entail, on the central issues to be addressed, on the ways of approaching those issues, and on the thematic composition to be followed;
- (2) by outlining, as a precedent and starting point for doctoral studies, some traits of the sculptural orientation I had when entering the DLA course, referring to its culturally diverse components (partly due to personal Japanese experience) and to my quest for unity, at that time largely intuitively conceived;
- (3) by surveying the aesthetic values of Japanese artistic tradition, as those values were mapped and applied in their categorial systems by 20th century Japanese and international academic research as widely referenced 'aesthetic canons', including observations not

only about the content traditionally attributed to those values, but also on the historicity of its modern-day axiology; the scrutiny of the latter corroborating the view that without properly considering long-term cross-cultural interactions neither the supposedly traditional content, nor the latter's categorization and eventual 'canonization', nor its actual influence can be adequately assessed;

- (4) by pursuing the historical trajectory of cultural and artistic interactions between East and West, primarily through Japanese-Western relations, including *japonisme* and its Hungarian version, and involving major conclusions from the interpretational history of East-West cultural contacts, referring also to Asia research conducted by Hungarian scholars in the first half of the 20th century;
- (5) by taking into account that an exploration of the historical background to aesthetic and cultural exchanges, though necessary, cannot be sufficient for living up to the unity criterion of artistic, sculptural work, the chapter inspected some representative cases of intellectual interferences and synthetic efforts, highlighting the mutual inspiration of Western phenomenology and Japanese zen tradition, some major achievements in Western and Eastern theories of synthesis, with special regard to convergences in searching the criteria for synthesis;
- (6) by recognizing that, no matter how valuable the contributions gained thus far may be for the project's purposes, a sculptor's experience of how intercultural issues in sculptural practice arise and are to be resolved on a daily basis can be more directly relevant for his/her professional agenda, the chapter reviewed Isamu Noguchi's work, in particular his sculpture of public spaces, and the aspirations of the Japanese Mono-ha school as well as Lee Ufan's globally acknowledged *oeuvre* deeply rooted in Eastern heritage while fully aware of Western traditions, and exemplary also in terms of the unity of theory and practice in sculptural work;
- (7) by discerning that up to that point of exposition the articulation of pertinent problems largely followed 20th century methodological patterns, the chapter incorporated 21st century findings of cultural psychology and cultural neuroscience on the East-West structure of aesthetic space into the dissertation, under the guidance of an external consultant¹;
- (8) by referring to my doctoral 'master work' in chapter 8, presenting it as the actual 'thesis' of the doctoral project as a whole, compared to which the dissertation with its conceptual

¹ In this regard Attila Gergely as sociologist and East-Asia expert was consulted.

explication hasn't but an auxiliary function; since a more detailed view of the master work is given in a paragraph below, the present reference cites only the entries of thematic subsections: the first one on compositional and technical issues; the second one on the main substantive elements of the applied symbolism; the third one on the master work as a 'thesis' in its own right in terms of its cultural dimensions, its status identifiable in the structure of cultural space as well as the synthetic potential of its respective 'cultural vectors'; the last subsection indicating the cognitive framework and the criterion regarded as definitive for the notion of unity pursued in producing the master work.

- (9) finally, by taking stock of the evidence and reconsidering the working hypothesis in the closing chapter, and by articulating the conclusions derived from the argumentation of the dissertation in regard of the central *Problemstellung* of the research program.

Since the dissertation is focusing on the interrelation of two issues, the drawing of theoretical conclusions also followed this structure. While in terms of intercultural divisions, the study proceeded from issues of the Japanese 'aesthetic canon' and its cultural assumptions towards the contrastive characteristics of 'cultural default patterns' of human perception, emotion, cognition etc. as these are revealed in cross-cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts, also the formulation of the initial working hypothesis became more articulate. The East-West distinction gradually shifted from its traditional geographical projection and it became more recognizable how the East-West polarity is interrelated with such artistically and sculpturally significant oppositions of human practice as those of subject and object, individual and community, object and background, or part and whole. The 'default modes' and their relationships highlighted new ways of interpreting cultural patterns that are often taken as mutually exclusive, yet potentially complementary. Thereby such concepts may provide a ground for comprehensively evaluating a practice or work of art on two dimensions: on a horizontal one of cultural divisions, as epitomized by the East-West divide, and on a vertical one indicating the extent of transcending divisions. The latter directly concerns the unity issue of the research agenda. In this respect, the cardinal importance of the person and his/her existential unity posited by the working hypothesis was confirmed by the research conclusions as the central tenet of the doctoral study.

B. Sculpture

The formulation of the actual sculptural thesis of the doctoral project – in line with the conceptual and theoretical conclusions of the dissertation – was the task for my master work made and presented in 2017. Its operations, taking into account the facts of cultural divisiveness, were aimed at validating the theoretically elaborated unity criterion assumed to be fundamental for the aesthetic quality of a work of art. As detailed in Chapter 8 of the dissertation, the compositional, structural and technical implementation, the symbolism, and the built-in cultural components of the master work were all subordinated to that aim. Here I would underline just one reading of the composition inspired by the classical philosophical notion of unity: unity must include the cause holding it together. Even while heterogeneous or contrastive, interrelated elements of a whole are assumed to complement each other. I have strived for a work that is a sign of unity also in its composition, with none of its components displaceable or replaceable without violating unity, having as many elements as necessary, not less, not more. Ignoring further details of the composition, here I address only some features of the symbolism and cultural components applied. Also in terms of symbolism, I sought elements inherent to the common human experience in diverse cultures. From among the choice of motives, I selected a sequence of the generally experienced major stages of human life and its basic symbolism: the motifs of birth, death and that of the life course spanning it. Accordingly, in its symbolic context the morphology of the work can be simultaneously conceived as a cradle, a sacrificial altar, and a sarcophagus, embedded into natural and cosmic cycles. The expanse of abstraction shaping the symbols is also a factor in the cross-cultural generalization of the aesthetic message. The work takes aim at borderline equilibria among cultural and transcultural implications on multiple levels: between openness and closure, abstraction and figuration, artificial and natural, physical and spiritual, permanent and transient, physical and metaphysical, sacred and profane, traditional and contemporary, partial and integral, and, last but not least, at a balance of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ qualities. In addition to the phase characteristics of the chosen materials (e.g. charcoal), the succession of culturally generalized stages of the human life path displays liminal situations on yet another plane: when we move from one life situation to another in the life course, we tend to face threshold situations where we are no longer in one but not yet in the other, or even in one, while already in the other, similarly to experiencing cultural shifts or intercultural transitions. It is not about a closed, final state, but rather about the moments of a larger whole with a

plurality of potential transformations and meanings. Liminal situations expand our perspective when in a point of imminent transition past, present and future, external and internal, activity and passivity, as well as their specifically culture-related projections seem to coincide, thereby liberating us from blind routines and orienting to wider horizons. Similarly, I intended the motifs of fire and altar to be symbolic elements linking cultures. The altar, also evoking the act of sacrifice and the image of a sanctuary, appears not only as a shape, but primarily as a symbol implying the unity and re-unification of existence. This is an essential point: it refers to the unity of being as a whole, including both beginning and end, as well as the existential ground for all unity and synthesis. Other transcultural features of the master work and their integrative traits are discussed in more detail in the referenced chapter of the dissertation. All these converge in positing personal unity and its enactment as the definitive condition and source of aesthetic value.

Conclusions

A thesis-like summary of some of the main conclusions as confirmed on the common denominator of the theoretical and sculptural work of the doctoral program.

- ❖ Both classical tradition and recent scientific research assume unity as a fundamental criterion of aesthetic value and quality.
- ❖ The achievement of unity as a privileged aesthetic criterion under the current conditions of global cultural diversity and divisions poses a distinct challenge to the artist and sculptor of our time. Even if the tasks are not new in all its aspects, its contemporary conditions require and enable deeper insights than before in exploring the nature of cultural division and unity, including the case of East-West polarity.
- ❖ In the light of the studies concluded, the tracing and linking of the aesthetic criterion of unity to unity as a universal criterion of being may be conducive to prevailing in face of the challenge.
- ❖ The ground for fulfilling the condition of universal unity may be provided by recognizing its personal quality and by the human person's overall integrity rooted in the same unity.
- ❖ It can be concluded that the requirement of unity as an essential criterion of aesthetic value has been maintained in all great artistic and spiritual traditions, both East and West, but its absolute personal standard can be met by an art practice that attests to the full reality of the human person, proverbially exemplified by Augustine: *'cor ad cor loquitur'*.

Output and novelty

By sculptural standards and in line with the above, I consider my master work (and other sculptures made in the course of doctoral studies) as an output and novelty in terms of its personal singularity.

I see the value of the research carried out primarily in its contribution to my own sculptural work: as it has been helpful in rendering my previously largely intuitive orientation more reflective, more self-aware and personal.

Although the problems examined are not necessarily new in all their aspects, the approach applied, its disciplinary constellation (as it involves e.g. philosophical, cultural anthropological, theological, psychological, and neuroscience contributions in addition to those of art, art history and aesthetics) hopefully entail some novel features.

However rudimentarily, to my knowledge the latest results in cultural psychology and cultural neuroscience were factored into the cultural screening of sculptural space in this country for the first time.

The given research project has resulted in developing a notion of the ‘cultural status’ of a work of art, and revealed ways for further contributions to its operationalization.

Inherently related to aesthetic value and quality, the conclusions drawn from recent cultural psychology and cultural neuroscience research put the phenomena of cultural divides, its nature and origin, in a novel perspective also by guiding the recognition of how divisions arise from ‘default’ practices adding up to systemic inertia.

Defining a horizontal dimension of *cultures* and a vertical dimension of *culture* can provide coordinates for a comprehensive assessment of artistic practice and creation, and thus for a reinterpretation of the potential contribution of art, in general, and sculpture, in particular, under contemporary conditions.

Photo supplement



Réka Erzsébet Gergely: Mokutan (doctoral masterwork) 2017.

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(A selection of major items involved in the doctoral project)

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