

University of Pécs, Doctoral School of the Faculty of Music and Visual Arts

Zsolt Nyári
Time and Sculpture

DLA thesis (summary)

Supervisor:
István Bencsik
sculptor, professor Emeritus

Theoretical consultant:
György Várkonyi
art historian

2012

Thesis Statement I.

The wide variety of art produced in the last hundred years can be categorized and divided into two, relatively distinct groups, based on art's relationship to time; one group would transcend history to achieve a timeless mode of existence, or at least this is what art of this kind – what I call object making art – aspires to, while the other aims at successfully interfering with the historical time of the here and now.

The great divide

In this chapter I set out to demonstrate how individual works of art and ideas therein exist with time passing, and to model how they are immersed in, and eroded by, the flow of time. With the suggestive metaphor of the flow of time, I wanted to draw attention to the differences between object making art and conceptual art, as well as other contemporary trends (project art, fluxus, happening, performance, video art, etc.), without implicitly evaluating and judging them. In my view, the major difference between them can be grasped in their different relationships to time.

Time for the objects of object making art is an extended present, independent of location, historical age and audience in a special way, while all the other trends are specific to a location and have an effect on the here and now of their present time. This here and now of their present is, of course, not to be taken literally, but as enabled and maintained by discourses on art. Thus, most inventions in 20th century art have not aspired to transcend historical time and achieve a timeless mode of existence, but, on the contrary, to exist and participate intensively in the present of historical time, to affect its actuality. That explains why interpretation of these works of art runs into difficulties in the lack of their historical contexts, as when the work's nature as an object, its form, i. e. the body of the work loses its significance, this „dematerialization” makes the work of art vulnerable to the erosive forces of time. To make my claim more explicit: every work of art will necessarily be left alone in the due course of time, by losing institutional support as well as its immediate context in terms of ideas, and it is only this „sensual-concrete” nature of its being an

object, its very own message, that will prevail.

Thesis Statement II.

Sculpture is, first and foremost, an interpretation of reality, and – similarly to philosophy – it examines the form, structure and quality of the world. What is more, its analytical and intuitive artistic approaches correspond to inductive and deductive ways of thinking, the two basic methods in philosophy. Thus, self-expression and aesthetic quality are not aims themselves, but, at times, rather intrinsic features of the sculptor's practice, whose real sense lies in recognition, gaining insight into, understanding, and then registering in authentic forms some aspects of being – and to achieve all these by creating a plastic language capable of conveying the truths recognized, or whose meticulous application will eventually yield a new plastic reality.

Analytical and intuitive ways of thinking in sculpture

Reading György Tatár on Nietzsche I arrived at the conclusion that, similarly to deductive and inductive ways of thinking in philosophy, we can distinguish two essentially distinct artistic methods in the field of sculpture. These two basically different artistic attitudes or habitus are, on the one hand, the observing-interpretative, which, analysing its objects, digs deep into a problem to create; and, on the other, a „prophetic”, visionary type, the *intuitive*, which always works from within. The former corresponds to the deductive, the latter to the inductive way of thinking in philosophy. Certainly, the two artistic habitus cannot be clearly separated from one another, as the *analytical* sculptor would also have intuitions, and the *intuitive* artist cannot do without observing and analysing phenomena, but the question remains how a given artist will realize his or her artistic truth, and, based on that, what artistic method s/he will pursue. S/he will either discursively examine and analyze step by step the world that s/he inhabits, or try and find means of expressing his/her visions. „Art either reveals the dominant mode of dwelling [Wohnen] (...), or makes a new, authentic form of dwelling available.”¹

Thesis Statement III.

The concept of time in a given culture naturally influencing one's perception of personal time, i. e. how people in a given age conceive of the past, the present and the future, will also influence sculptures produced in a given age. The basic difference between the concepts of time in Western civilization in the 20th century and in other contemporary cultures as well as in premodern Western times explains major changes that have taken place in the field of visual art in the past century.

The archaic (defensive) and the offensive present

In my view, nomadic and settled communities as well as great cultures and ages of the past have, despite their great varieties, more similarities than differences with respect to their conception of time. The real, substantial difference exists between concepts of time in Western culture and all other cultures in the present and the past. This difference is described by anthropology as the opposition between linear and cyclic notions of time.

The modern Western world interprets „time as an impersonal dimension based on objective

1 Walter Biemel: Heidegger művészet-értelmezése. [Heidegger's interpretation of art.] In Fehér M. István (szerk): *Utak és tévutak. A budapesti Heidegger-konferencia előadásai*. Budapest, 1991, Atlantisz, 143. p. (My translation from Hungarian.)

and unchangable cosmic movements”², while tribal societies, and, most probably, cultures in the past, perceived it as less objective, at times accelerating or decelerating, and not necessarily as a unidirectional movement. „The insulation of the first present was broken up by the promise, opening up a yet non-existent dimension of the future.”³ Which is to suggest that Western culture parted with the archaic concept of time present in ancient cultures, because Judeo-Christian promises of a messiah and the day of Judgement invested history with a teleology, defining the coordinates of time in terms of a beginning and an end.

Thus, our sense of time presupposes a progress towards something, the teleology of world history, and, accordingly, the future „turns into some sort of a superpast”⁴ in a secularized offensive present. „Progress and historical consciousness reciprocally temporalize all histories into the singularity of the world historical process. Without resort to the Hereafter, world history becomes the tribunal of the world.”⁵ This pragmatic nature of our present-day notion of time prevents the individual's actual present from thriving; we may argue that these days, instead of their works of art in the process of making, artists concentrate on their *oeuvres* and its survival after their deaths.

Thesis Statement IV.

As a result of this peculiar notion of time as formed by the offensive present, the sculptor, for the most part, experiences time in its own lack, as something confined when measured against his or her intentions. The approach to time as an empty space to be filled in necessarily deliberates intention in spatial terms, confining ideas and choices along spatial coordinates associated with time. An analysis of the notion of time in the offensive present will provide an insight into the nature of changes in art in the previous centuries, and will explain what in art historian parlance is referred to as the inventive urge.

Time as the essential component of sculpture

„The heedless urge to rationalize leads to deceleration, saving time to the lack of time. (In Elias Canetti's words: 'Everything has been accelerated for us to have more time. And in the meantime, we have less and less time.').”⁶ Which is to say that the time Gadamer calls empty, waiting to be filled in seems spacious due to life having been accelerated, and that is why people today want to condense more into its space than physically possible, only to narrow down the vast space of modern time. Conveniences of the 20th century like drinking water, central heating, electric power, transportation, etc. making the particularities of modern life comfortable and free of struggle theoretically save time in the realm of the personal, increasing its space to be filled in. This increased space of time, in turn, creates the illusion that everything has to fit into it, at the same time suggesting that if it cannot be filled in perfectly, we miss something. That is why the increase in the space of personal time generally proves to be too confined.

It is due to this sense of the confinement on the personal space of time that in the field of sculpture works are usually not finished, but rather abandoned by their maker. At times the sculptor chooses a material, a method, a theme which save him or her the hassle, and s/he often avoids enterprises that would consume his or her time and energy disproportionately. As a result, some sculptures only meet the *necessary* and *sufficient* criteria: they only „look like” a sculpture, they

2 André Iteanu: Szinkronizáció az orokaiváknál. In Fejős Zoltán (szerk.): *Idő és antropológia*. Budapest, 2000, Osiris, 267. p. (My translation from Hungarian.)

3 Tatár György: *Pompeji és a Titanic*. Budapest, 1993, Atlantisz, 94. p. (My translation from Hungarian.)

4 Tatár György: *Pompeji és a Titanic*. Budapest, 1993, Atlantisz, 92. p. (My translation from Hungarian.)

5 Kosseleck, Richard: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. by Keith Tribe. New York, 2004, Columbia UP, 243. p.

6 Ilma Rakusa: *Lassabban!* Pécs, 2010, Jelenkor, 73. p. (My translation from Hungarian.)

are „as if” one, but in reality they only suffice as an object resembling a sculpture. Having been devoted the time and energy barely enough for them to fulfill the function of art objects, these sculptures do not come into *being*.

In my opinion, it is due to the nature of our concept of time that in recent decades we have witnessed the rise of an inbred system in artistic circles, preferring speed to being slow. This is not to suggest that one cannot create excellent works of art outside this system, and that no value whatsoever exists within it. But outside the mainstream, the real professional and financial recognition of artistic work is few and far between, the result of which, on the one hand, is the lack of works of a grander scale, and, on the other, that young apprentices are socialized into this inbred system, into the mainstream whose compromises they internalize.

In my mind, the above described processes in the offensive present led to art masquerading as global folklore, whose produce are harvested by the market and by theoretically oriented professionals alike and at will. In line with their special expectation, they bring some artists to the fore from an oftentimes confusing diversity, while others they doom to oblivion. There are artists who try to decipher and meet these expectations, while others are preoccupied with building their own worlds, secretly entertaining or vehemently denying the hope that they, too, will make it into the mainstream.

Thesis Statement V.

Despite the discontinuity of an integral Western artistic tradition, reading Hans Belting's argument in „Image and Death”, we can recognize a nine thousand year-old, still alive, unbroken analytical tradition in the skulls of Jericho. The concept of Western time has been changing: the past became the present, the future has been fulfilled, time's only measure is itself, it has content, but no direction, it has lost its linear character and became defensive. These days, we can argue, a new concept of time, a new present is being born.

The new present

Hans Belting in his essay „Image and Death” calls attention to artefacts found in Jericho, which he refers to as images. These objects dating back to 7000 B. C. are human skulls, whose faces had been restored by using lime and mud, the eyes replaced with shells or pebbles, and finally painted over to look more life-like. This method produced stunning portraits: „The flesh that had been cleansed from the bones was replaced with an image with which the bones were newly fitted. [...] The sense we have of a presence is the result of an exchange of facial signs, our face addressing that of the image, whose life is most powerfully felt in its gazing eyes.”⁷

Based on Belting's study, I draw two general conclusions in my argument. First, that Belting in this piece found the origins of art, and the skulls of Jericho can be read as one of the ancient symbols of art history. The very experience of death embodied in them founded a place to be filled in in time, an absence, which urged humankind to fill in its void by their own creations. I locate the ultimate cause that had set humankind on the path of art in this experience of absence, which inspires to create artworks even today. By realizing his or her own death and the absence it will leave in the future, an artist finds his/her own cult of death by his/her lifework or *oeuvre*. He or she will also fill in the void left by others' deaths, and both of these gestures indicate the intention of trying to stop time. These two tendencies will culminate in self-portraits.

In conclusion, I argue that in the ancient tradition founded by the images of Jericho we can locate a continuous and ever-present *analytical* tradition traceable from Egyptian and ancient sculpture through the *Arnolfini Marriage*, Dürer's portraits and Rembrandt's series of self-portraits,

⁷ Hans Belting: *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Trans. by Thomas Dunlap. 2011, Princeton UP, 91-91. pp.

Erzsébet Schaár, Segal, the hyperrealists to Borremans and Lucien Freud. In this tradition, the artist follows the procedure employed in Jericho: forming the missing face on the skull, as if to reconstruct a reality long gone, and by this magical act to transpose the face from the plane of time to synchronicity, where „[t]he being of beings (*das Sein des Seienden*) comes into the steadiness of its shining (*scheinen*)”.⁸

8 Martin Heidegger: *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Trans. by Roger Berkowitz and Philippe Nonet. [http://www.academia.edu/2083177/The Origin of the Work of Art by Martin Heidegger](http://www.academia.edu/2083177/The-Origin-of-the-Work-of-Art-by-Martin-Heidegger) [WEB, last accessed 14th April, 2013.]