

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

# **Remembrance discourse and a search for identity**

**Thoughts on Hungarian critical art after the change of the regime**

Theses of Doctoral (DLA) Dissertation

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## Summary of the dissertation

The importance of remembrance, processing memories, reclaiming a past appropriated has become increasingly common today in several dimensions: museums, in collections, on exhibitions, or in public squares. Remembrance-discourse creates a connection between the respect for our past and a sense of belonging, collective and individual consciousness, and a bridge between memory and identity.<sup>1</sup>

The topic of my thesis is the problem of remembrance and identity in sculpture, through contemporary art connected to sculpting. In my essay I extend the concept of sculpture, and I use the framework for the notion in very vague terms, in terms of art in public squares, or in cases when the artist does not create a sculpture, but “only” uses it for their artistic expression. The works selected for my topic share a feature: each of them stem from sculpture and use one element of it.

I divided my topic into twelve chapters. In the introduction I point out the importance of remembrance, identity, collective and individual past and its processing, while in the following part I focus on everyday events in Hungarian public square sculpture, and the heritage of special historical relations relevant in sculpture.

All these pieces of knowledge create the process of constructing elements of Hungarian remembrance and the history of sculpture. I focus more on the period after 1989, as in the era before this date Hungarian public square sculpture was burdened with ideologies, due to the political regime in that stage. The examination of the last 30 years and the precursors to it, I believe, cannot make sense and be contextualized unless we understand the history of the closely 150 years of Hungarian sculpture.

The period after the change of the regime has become interesting to me for several reasons. This is the era when Hungarian critical art appeared. Chapter four, for this reason discusses the notion of critical art and its Hungarian corollaries, and uniqueness. Since the end of the 1970-ies the fresh impulses arriving from humanities towards the history of art, along with new theories of social sciences and theories of science have questioned the invulnerability of the great theses of the history of art. By rethinking the history of science, tendencies like Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, and their reinterpretations have transformed the role of art and art institutions, transcribing the concept of both classical and modern art. New

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Nora 1984.  
cf. András 2009. p. 143.

directions, like New Genre Public Art, a Socially Engaged Art, a Participatory Art have become active participants of political, scientific and social responsibility. The goal of new critical art from this point on is not only reproduction and representation. Reflexivity has become one major feature of critical theories and practice. The task of critical art theory is to reveal connections, unveil hidden underpinnings and background information, and to give context to the narrative at hand. This type of complex knowledge can be called critical theory. As critical theories target the deeper understanding of the world, the same way, critical art and history of art in Hungary tries to find an answer focusing on local situations and constellations in questions and problems of history, politics, sociology or even psychology.

Besides important sources of professional literature, it is important to me that I can rely on my own first-hand experience in my thesis. Therefore, looking back on the last thirty years of sculpture has become a central part of my topic. As a sculptress I found it important to look at events and analyze those phenomena, pieces of art and circumstances in the history of art that reflect on sculptures and monuments, or integrate sculptures penetrated by ideologies into a contemporary context of art, and/or generate their message by using tools and elements of sculptures. One important and key factor in selecting the artworks was a contemporary rethinking and critical understanding of the processing of the past in the framework of fine-art, which portrays the local strategies that have diverse reflections on the state of remembrance-discourse in Hungarian visual art at a global scale. For this reason, in the 5<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> part under the general theoretical contents I analyze artworks and working methods of four co-artists from a methodological perspective, and I use these as examples in my chapters.

In the following part of the dissertation I investigate the situation of the statues of the communist dictatorship propaganda, with the transformations and reinterpretations. Among these I focus on Tamás St. Auby – Júlia Lőrinczy: The Statue of the Soul of Freedom and introduce their project. Then I turn to the co-artists Kis Varsó, and by analyzing their methods and artworks, I describe the work's identity and the act of appropriation.

In chapter 7 I look at the watercolors of Lőrinc Boros, some works that are, however, not typical Boros pieces. They are important due to the topics they embrace and because of the concept of their birth and creation. The series entitled "Pretty little watercolors" uses tools of popularity, commonplace style, public taste and kitsch to deal with representational aspirations used by public square sculpture, and with transpositions deriving from these, with placements, transformations, annihilations and ideologies.

In chapter eight I eventually describe the creation of an autonomous memorial, that serves as an example in my argumentation, that was formed by applying contemporary

strategies of memorial construction, in a way that the memorial place eventually could stay free of ideologies. This artwork is unfortunately not in Hungary, but in Paris, and was created with the contribution of a Hungarian artist with the support of Société Réaliste.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> chapter I introduce and compare contemporary strategies of identity- and memorial construction through international examples, in works of Jochen Gerz, Dani Karavan, William Kentridge and Thomas Hirschhorn. I selected some memorials of the artists that I see as important, and through these artworks I represent the various concepts of remembrance and identity with the help of a table.

## The most important aspects of my thesis as for content

I start my dissertation with some thoughts from the work edited by Pierre Nora, entitled *Le lieux de mémoire (Places of remembrance)* which has become an extremely important and frequent reference in terms of remembrance, memory and historical aspects, generating hectic debates and international reflections.<sup>2</sup>

Nora's basic idea is that after the dissolution of peasants' and framers' communities, of traditional archaic communities, the continuity of remembrance is broken. This sense of continuity has moved over to various places, as the original context of remembrance has been dissolved.<sup>3</sup>

Societies of remembrance – that were capable of preserving events, memories of the past – have been dissolved. Today remembrance is not only passed down from generations by families or nuclear communities, who feed and transmit these, but by places that preserve the memories and past experiences, like museums, collections, archives, documents, places of remembrance or sculptures.

This phenomenon is described by Edit András in her book entitled “Kulturális átöltözés” [“Cultural change of outfit”]: “Artificially made places of remembrance from the remains of the past have a function: that the desired remembrance strengthens itself permanently”.<sup>4</sup> Then, in the next parts, she projects the importance of connecting to remembrance on the participants of artistic discourse and confirms that “remembrance and memory have come to the foreground both in contemporary international art theory and art as well”.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore, important that we reinterpret the tools and places of remembrance, and the identification of strategies and places that are worthy and capable of becoming a new context of remembrance.

As János Pótó puts it: “when a continuous and living remembrance ceases to exist, and its role in society was taken over by a reconstructed picture of the past, that is, history, from that point on, sporadic, broken pieces of remembrance are connecting to certain places”.<sup>6</sup>

Besides archives and places of remembrance, memorials can also become perfect objects and places of remembrance, as memorials convey messages and symbols which reflect

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Pótó 2003. p. 24.; András 2009. p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Nora 1999. p. 142–157. „The sense of continuity moves over to places. Memory and remembrance have places. [lieux de mémoire] as today we do not have an authentic real context of remembrance anymore [milieux de mémoire]”.

<sup>4</sup> András 2009. p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pótó 2003. p. 24.

a dense meaning that facilitates remembering (like erecting memorials and public square remembrance).

Contrary to classic versions of memorials, political memorials always have the goal of transmitting propaganda, instead of remembrance. All powers would like to be commemorated, not only for the future but also for the present. As János Póto puts it, “political monuments must be excluded from the places of remembrance, or at least should be distinguished from them, as political monuments were not created at the intersection of memory and history, but at the intersection of reconstructed past and political interests.”<sup>7</sup>

Póto also claims here: between the places of remembrance and the places of reminding, “the tools of propaganda serving the needs of political legitimation are not the *places of remembrance*, but the *places of reminding*. At the places where we are reminded, there we do not want to remember, for sure. Places of reminder are burdened with ideologies, and this eventually is placed on the community, place, monument carrying the message”.<sup>8</sup> Pierre Nora classified and typologized places of remembrance and differentiated places of remembrance of the winners and of the defeated. The monuments of winners are triumphant, spectacular, solemn, stem from a formal body or national authority, and there are official rituals that connect to them. Contrary to this, memorials of the defeated represent a place of pilgrimage, and shelter. “This is the living heart of remembrance”.<sup>9</sup>

The history of Hungary in the XXth century has seen several changes of regimes. Due to these events, our public squares have been reorganized and they have transformed, rebuilt. Hungarian political monuments and memorials were all doomed to be demolished and reinterpreted after the change of the regime. The last of these historical events is something I have witnessed too: the fall of the communist regime in Hungary. Therefore, I have my own experience concerning this period, the one preceding it, and the one coming after the change. Therefore, I find it easier to make sense of the events and have a personal level of understanding. I am a contemporary artist, with professional experience in this field, and this is through which I connect to these events, to the critical approaches, reflections that emerged after the change of the regime in fine art. This is why I eventually chose this topic to be the central theme of my thesis.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Nora 1999. p. 156.

In my dissertation I focus on the topics of creating memorials, positioning identity relating to Hungarian sculpture – with some thoughts on international tendencies – and I examine aspects of relics and elements of the past of sculpture connecting to factors of identity, by using contemporary critical theories. After describing antecedents of historical and place-specific nature, I aim to relate to claims in the critical discourse in Hungarian fine art, considering its special features as well.

After the change of the regime in 1989, Critical thinking and its practical applications in executing the critical views in methodology have gained new directions, and thus it became possible to get closer to areas in contemporary art that build on critical reflection, like the notion of participation or autonomy (empowerment) in artistic thinking. As for contents, it has become important to reveal and uncover the events of the concealed historical past, socialist dictatorship and the happenings of all of the XXth century, to make it possible to digest and process these past events. Hungary too – as the other post-socialist countries – after the change of the regime tried to place the elements of global remembrance to museums with the help of films, movies, or remembrance days (e.g. holocaust remembrance day). At the same time, this was rather a tool in order to connect to the West – also supported for various other reasons – more than a real undertaking of human values. These values, therefore, did not really and truly get stabilized in public thinking. Along with this, mostly local remembrance in public places (or rather non-remembrance) has been permanently present in Hungary after the regime, in the form of overturning responsibility or competitive victimization, amongst others.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for the topic of creating memorials is almost lacking from contemporary fine art discourse is due to an appropriation and manipulation of remembrance by official party-political forces. The criticism of remembrance also takes place along political views and stances, and this generates social mistrust.<sup>11</sup> It is not a coincidence that reflective works of art that I use as examples could only be born through crossing geographical boundaries, and through crossing boundaries of generations.

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<sup>10</sup> cf. <https://www.szombat.org/tortenelem/emlekmuvek-arnyekaban>

<sup>11</sup> András 2009. p. 143.

**The most important tenet of my thesis states that the societies preserving memories, societies of remembrance have been dissolved. It has become necessary therefore, to reinterpret the places and tools of remembrance. Remembrance is not ensured by micro-communities, but the act of remembering has been displaced to places of remembrance preserving memories. The tools of propaganda serving the needs of political legitimation are not the *places of remembrance*, but the *places of reminding*. Contrary to the memorials of the winners, those of the defeated represent a place of pilgrimage.**

**There is no remembrance without just examination and processing of the past. Traumas bridging generations, the clarification of personal and collective past is indispensable concerning the understanding of our future, not only at the level of our society but also in scientific disciplines, in questions of art and culture in general. Without really understanding and feeling these, remembrance will be broken, remembering starts stagnating, and this generates disturbances in both personal-individual and collective identity.**

**In the last few decades going back to our past, special attention devoted to remembrance has gone hand in hand with the strengthening of collective and individual consciousness, with the importance of the clarification of identity positions and with the rethinking of these notions. Discourse in fine arts and in culture became finally open to exploration with the help of critical fine art using the logic and tools of critical thinking, remembrance and creating memorials, after the epistemological turn.**

Remembrance is versatile. In this sense it is not a photograph of past events, but rather a coping mechanism, one that helps us process past experiences, a way of taking a stand, that involves an emotional response and a critical verdict as well. For this reason it is important that it happens in a different time dimension and with a different set of values from the original one. “... Remembrance therefore, is looking back, or, rather, a form of retrospective reflection. This way it can influence our past from the present”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://artportal.hu/magazin/emlekezetrol-es-felejtesselrol-beszalgetes-aleida-assmannal/>



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