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Time Patrol, the Populist Listener

“This is an anthology of existences. Lives of a few lines or of a few pages, countless misfortunes and adventures, gathered together in a handful of words. ... Singular lives, those which have become, through I know not what accidents, strange poems.”
Michel Foucault: *The Life of Infamous Men*

[ZOOMING]

Intro I. Sugár's context displacements

'Context exercises': experiments into linking private and public situations, different genres or chance-operated occurrences that are not originally linked have characterised the work of János Sugár for a number of years now. In his 1987 “video opera”¹ he re-used the text of the voice-recording of a conversation between a video technician and himself about the operation of the video recorder for a contemporary opera whereby he displaced the text and modified, or even annulled, its original meaning. At another time, he arranged that the visitors of a vernissage at the ICA-Dunaújváros could freely use a public pay phone installed at the exhibition place - only they were told that their conversations would be recorded. Then, at a later occasion, Sugár had actors read out, without staging or directing, these by then neutralized or contextless dialogues (*Public Phone*, 2002). From the 1980s on, he has photographed broken shop windows throughout Budapest and these images can now be seen as so many records of the view and the atmosphere of the city at the time. His graffiti-saving project (see details at <http://www.icols.org/pages/JSugar/JSugar.html>) is to preserve the ephemeral or constantly changing time-traces of today's society.

Intro II. The prominence of public art in Hungary

The largely undefined notion of public art turns up with increasing frequency in the contemporary Hungarian art scene. A solid definition is difficult to reach both because the expansion of the meaning of the term from ‘publicly staged art’ to ‘community arts’ also affected the English usage, and because the Hungarian term used so far to designate primarily state-commissioned representative monuments located in public spaces is not applicable to this new art form. The growing number of recent engagements with this kind of art practice have by no means terminated the semantic unfixity of the term. The two-part compound itself sounds „an oxymoron: the distinctive relative autonomy of art seems incompatible with the distinctly non-autonomous demands of the public”.² The two entities could be linked through the idea of mutual communication by breaking down the traditional boundaries of art and bringing it closer to the everyday, with a sense of social responsibility incorporated. The tension of the above oxymoron, however, is doubly felt in the aspirations to naturalise public

¹ *Immortal Culprits (Chamber Opera on Videotechnology)*; performed in 1988, 1991, 1996.

² Mark Hutchinson: *Four Stages of Public Art. Third Text*, 2002/4, p.430.

art in Hungary where most contemporary artists do not endorse the concept of the artist undertaking social „tasks” but tend to fall back on the myth of autonomous art, artistic freedom and individual(ist) strategies. Even artists who recognise art's capacity to address various social issues more often than not fail to conceive of an actual goal-oriented interdisciplinary co-operation through which to (contribute to) *solve problems*. What many of them admittedly seek is to alleviate art's isolation within today's society by trying to direct the public's attention to their work. But does not it sound more like PR for contemporary art rather than attempts to establish a reciprocal communication of citizens through art as a mediator?

Intro III. *Moscow Square – Gravitation*

The beginning of last Summer saw one of the most extensive Hungarian endeavours to present art in a public space, the six-week long *Moscow Square – Gravitation* project (<http://www.ludvigmuseum.hu/moszkvater>). Few reviewers of the event considered the location of the enterprise quite as thoroughly as did Gergely Nagy.³ He did not only note the disreputable features of the giant and amorphous traffic junction but also several other layers of its versatile context, starting with its very name referring to past engagements and present ambiguities. “Moscow Square is perhaps the most contradictory one of all of Budapest's public spaces. ... Partly framed by the three richest Buda-side districts, it is the buried bad conscience of the city ‘hosting’ its many destitutes: glue-sniffers and job expectant day-wage men. At the same time, it is where the shoppers of the nearby posh mall meet, local teenagers date and party goers gather to set off for the night. ... Missionaries, ultra-rightist book traders, lunatics as well as retired environmentalists also frequent the square ... the nobles, the citizenry, and the outcasts of the Moscow Square micro-society.” An ideal field then to make public art – or, again, to make art public?...

[FOCUSING]

The *Time Patrol Stand* was one of the projects enacted during the *Moscow Square – Gravitation* event. In given hours on given days, a van parked on the square functioned as a peculiar '(self)analytical sofa'. Whoever could dictate by heart to a typist for at least ten minutes was rewarded, beside the opportunity to speak up, with a honorarium of HUF 4000.⁴ The texts then appeared, unedited and unanimous, in the *publication Time Patrol* that was being sold right at the newsagents of the square. The booklet, foregoing any selection criteria and with it the act of value-assignment, thus archived a segment of the present in a time capsule predisposed to an unforeseen – because not bearing any clear relevance as yet - future activation.

The context displacement between the present and future, but more importantly, the private and the public domain is a major element in *Time Patrol Stand* as well – although what we have here is a quazi-private and a quazi-public environment. The temporary confinement in the van of the typist, the artist and his ‘client’⁵ creates -

³ Gergely Nagy: Térélmény – Kortárs művészet a Moszkva téren. *Műértő* 2003/6. p.1, 5.

⁴ Approx. EUR 16; one-tenth of the Hungarian minimal wage, the equivalent of a carton of low quality cigarettes, or a little less than a full price monthly public transportation pass.

⁵ Or, after the typist was replaced by a faster recording tape recorder, the artist and the ‘client’ only.

even if these people are complete strangers – an atmosphere of confidence which time and again prompts the speakers to talk about very personal issues, opened frequently in a biographical sort of frame. “I was born in Transsylvania in the 1960s, I went to school, did OK in the first four grade.” “This is going to be a sorta life story. I was born in January 1968, on a 19th.” In a vast number of narratives, however, these very personal issues are densely intersected with factors of social location. In cases like this, the speakers seem to view this opportunity to share their private misfortunes almost as an occasion to get a public hearing, as it is reflected by the very many ‘social wishes’ they spell out. Indeed, a succinct exemplification of the feminist-introduced slogan, ‘the personal is political’.

Unlike several participants of the *Gravitation* project who (ab)used the public space situation to impose their work on a non-gallery-goer audience, the *Time Patrol Stand* has proved to be an undoubtedly site-specific intervention that made out of the ‘locals’ of the given public space occasional orators whose speech is worth documenting. The artist has also managed to eliminate the hierarchic set-up often encountered in participatory or ‘interactive’ projects when the artist holds the reigns and observes, at times even amused, as passers-by are being deployed or confused.⁶ Instead, Sugár’s ‘subjects’ immediately made sense of the purpose of the stand and were ready to participate which was expressed by their willingness to queue hours long to get in, or come back next time if they could not and, in the meanwhile, ponder over what they would speak about.

Out of the attributes of public art as it is traditionally known, *Time Patrol* does deploy the function of representation. However, acknowledging that urban public spaces may provide representational ground to those whose representation is left out from democratic institutions, *Time Patrol* does not serve the ones in dominant positions but gives the voice to those who remain unassimilated, invisible and mute in the narratives of power. One way to perform this replacement is to turn filtering mechanisms upside down: while in other allegedly public spaces an entrance fee of HUF 4000 would be there to filter out unwanted elements, here people who normally would not “sell” themselves for such amount of money get preselected. As a result, two major groups surface: students and people on the margins or periphery. Another filter further contributed to render the work indeed site-specific: the several-hour waiting time to *get in* gathered again the typical dwellers of the square: the homeless, the elderly, day-wage men and students – but not the busy ‘VIPs’ of (the micro)society. By this, *Time Patrol* created a mental map of this urban scene which architectural concepts or the grid of streets could never produce.

[EXPOSURES]

Problem solving I. Subsistence

⁶ C.f. Franciska Zólyom’s point about the interactive works shown at *Moscow Square*. Zólyom F.: Questions to Ask, Mistakes to Make: On Art in Public Spaces. *Praesens Central European Contemporary Art Review*, 2003/3, p.72.

Bearing in mind how the domestic discourse on public art insists on art's autonomy versus actual social utility, it is a bold praise to state that *Time Patrol* has doubly contributed to alleviate social problems: on a small-scale but very real level, and on a larger-scale although more symbolic/theoretical level.

For the first glance, paying money for participation is a controversial issue. Why should not the offering of a communicational opportunity or a situation that relieves one's experience of not being listened to, be sufficient to 'go public' and be socially committed? Why corrupt this nice model of interaction by allowing for applicants who would come 'only for the money'? 'The money', HUF 4000, as we have seen, did not only serve as a payment but as a filter as well. As a one-time amount it can only count for those without a steady income but if converted into the one-sixth of an hourly wage of HUF 24.000, it turns out to be a fairly respectable rate. Although the artist did not originally mean to solve anybody's actual problems, in numerous cases the fee has turned out to temporarily ease very real financial difficulties – the dimensions of which those lamenting over the corruption of an art piece with money matters can not even have nightmares about. That the fact of being materially rewarded for a verbal or intellectual performance, or being indeed paid as previously agreed also had a symbolic force to compensate for efforts left literally unpaid at other times, is evidenced by numerous narrated events. "These were exceptional banknotes not like the ordinary ones, these more yellow and beautiful or, perhaps, it's also that I haven't seen banknotes at all for a long time now." "Some of us worked there all day and could hardly escape at night, without being paid because these big rough guys came and only blows were given instead of a payment."

Problem solving II. Subaltern

The uninterrupted flows of the occasional orators' unexpectedly confidential, often unbelievable and devastating private stories, when published, were not ordered into standard written prose. The strangeness of this deviant textuality often hinders understanding but, at the same time, its surprises and immediacy render meaning production an extraordinarily active process for the effect produced violates both the reader's linguistic *and* social conventions. This is also how the British 'radical culturalist', E. P. Thompson, striving to grant the dignity of a full hearing even to the most insignificant and 'mistaken' historical subjects, presented the unprocessed "voices" of previously disregarded people.⁷ The strategies of the New Historicist Thompson and the artist Sugár strikingly coincide which relates *Time Patrol* to this counterhistorical trend, a history 'from below' that sets out to explore the 'records of the submerged, of what had not quite been said'. Michel Foucault's *The Life of Infamous Men* was also part of this counterhistorical enterprise focusing on the study of daily life.⁸ Just as the narratives referred to in my motto, the words of the *Time Patrol Stand*'s visitors grow into 'strange poems', poorly-versed prose verses too, with bluntly recurring painful leitmotifs. "But how can someone talk to one/me like that?... But how could he say that?"; "We were battered ... Every Saturday we were battered ... I was so beaten up, I couldn't move"; "I find it really injurious... It hurts me so much... I think it's really very wrong..." –

⁷ Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt: Counterhistory and the Anecdote. In *Practicing New Historicism*. The University of Chicago Press, 2000. p.54-60, passim.

⁸ Michel Foucault: *The Life of Infamous Men*. In Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, eds.: *Michel Foucault: Power Truth Strategy*. Feral Publications, 1979. Eredetiben: La vie des hommes infâmes. In *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, 29 (1977)

and what follows is not a sad ending romance or something of the sort but an indictment of our democratic society.

The visibility of what is defined as the *subaltern* - minorities or otherwise socially disadvantaged groups cut off from the lines of social mobility – is a recurrent dilemma in contemporary humanities. Some rather sceptically assert that the subaltern has no history and cannot talk⁹ for their stories are always already re-told in the language and within the conceptual framework of intellectuals set out to represent them. Although socially engaged artists often refer to their activity as ‘social research’, they might perhaps be unaware of existent discontents with the methodologies of social research itself. Recent strategies such as participatory or action research, in-depth interviews, content and discourse analysis, quantitative research methods (turning to less channelled forms of inquiry and unframed narratives - versus traditional qualitative research falling back on numbers and statistics), all have to reconsider such ethical and epistemological issues as the researcher’s role and his inherent domination of the research process. The recipe e.g. that in-depth interviewers formulated (go where your interviewee lives, welcome all stories and don’t mind if they’re not elaborate, never stop the person talking, don’t try to fill in the gaps in the story with questions, hide the person in order to prevent subsequent identification, etc.) strikingly resembles again to Sugár’s self-effacing presence as a mere project initiator.

[BLOW-UP]

The self-minimizing role that the artist assumed may have not been so much a carefully worked out methodology or strategy but a manifestation of his attitude toward presenting art in public spaces whose outcomes were unforeseen even for him. Nevertheless, what makes the art project *Time Patrol Stand* truly remarkable is that it seems to have realised an instance of the unmediated and undeformed self-representation of the subaltern that theorists, social researchers, and political activists are craving so much to attain. When the *Moscow Square – Gravitation* event was over, Sugár went back to the scene and sprayed a modest sign onto the asphalt to mark the spot of the now removed van. Thus, the conceptual visual artist that he is, also created a far from state-commissioned *representative* public-space art piece: an ephemeral public memorial to infamous people.

[An expanded version of the text written for the *Moscow Square – Gravitation* catalogue co-authored with Judit Bodor.]

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Can the Subaltern Speak? In Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, eds.: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Macmillan, 1998. p.287.