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## **Budapest (Re)imagined:**

Creatively examining urban street-poster aesthetics in Hungary's capital.

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### **Artist Statement/Abstract**

As an artist I work with city walls. Specifically the printed posters, flyers, and urban ephemera that accumulate on their surfaces. The exterior walls of Budapest are covered with colorful posters, street artwork, advertisements, and other printed matter—in some places centimeters thick. This printed “skin” accumulates particularly on the street-level surfaces of abandoned or derelict buildings which dot the downtown districts. Graffiti artists, advertisers, political sloganists, and other pedestrian voices engage in a discourse: crossing out or altering previously written messages, tearing away and pasting new posters, and otherwise raising a wide variety of personal, public, or existential concerns.

My art practice involves exploring the city's walls and urban spaces, photographing and collecting scraps of torn posters. I then use this documentation as a starting point for exploration: I recontextualize the collected information, often by using traditional poster-printing techniques such as lithography, or silkscreen-printing. Then I reintroduce this transformed information back into the urban environment by pasting my own posters or photographs back into the environment, or by installing larger works or performances in urban settings. I intend my work to function both on a very local level—specifically dealing with Budapest's unique aesthetic and cultural parameters --but *also* i intend it to serve as a development in a universal discussion about urban street-level aesthetics, particularly the role that these aesthetics can play in the re-imagining of a city's identity within its own cultural, national, and global context. I believe that examining this urban discourse through an artistic lens helps us gain profound insights into the continuing development of a city's identity.

Keywords: Art, Posters, Urban aesthetics, Political advertisements, Budapest

# Observations on Urban Posters

For the purpose of this paper I will lay out a series of my own basic observations about urban posters which inform my work. I will then use these observations as a starting point for discussing some of the questions and problems which arise within or adjacent to my artistic practice. I will unpack three of my recent artworks from the basis of these observations and questions. First will be a project called *Novi Sad*, which I created based on a trip to Novi Sad, Serbia. Second and Third will both be works I have created in Budapest, called *Jon Hopkins*, and *Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City)*, respectively.

1. In cities and other densely-populated areas I always look for evidences of street posters that have been glued, taped, or otherwise adhered to vertical surfaces, for example walls, posterboards, signboards, lampposts, or bus-stop shelters.
2. These posters, more often than not, are commercially printed using an offset-lithographic process, and usually made in large editions to better spread throughout a city.
3. These posters were designed and deployed for a specific function. This function could be, among other things, politically, economically, socially, or aesthetically driven.
4. From the moment a poster is deployed on a wall, it begins a process of physical deterioration. Rain soaks and degrades the material integrity of the paper, the sun fades its colors, passers-by rip and tear, and other posters cover its surface. With time all that remains is an organic abstraction of colored paper scraps—an urban aesthetic texture.
5. I consider this physical deterioration of the poster object to be also a symbolic degradation of its function. When words disappear and faces become unrecognizable, the printed ink and the paper substrate become free from their responsibility to purvey a specific function, and are able to simply exist as part of a city's exterior appearance.

On an explanatory note, I do not intend this paper to fully answer or satisfy the questions raised by my working practice or methodologies. In fact I would prefer to raise more questions than can possibly be hashed out within the confines of an academic paper. However, my goal is to introduce my particular creative focus to an international discussion about urban aesthetics, and through questioning, attempt to learn something about the nature of cities themselves.





black and white, and printed them on transparency paper as film positives. Then I exposed each transparency onto its own photolithographic plate. I rolled each plate individually with black ink and printed them each only one time onto Sand-colored Zerkall Niddeggen paper. I then mounted each single print onto an individual panel and tiled them in grid format onto a gallery wall.

This methodical process adds another layer of distance between the viewer and the source material of the original posters, but offers instead an alluringly rich surface. The flatness of the surface of these prints, when contrasted with the texture and rips of the original posters creates a dissonance for the viewer. I believe this dissonance echoes the tension that exists between the image content/political function of street posters, and their physical and vulnerable nature as paper objects.

Also worth mentioning, is the tension surrounding my artistic practice as an American citizen living and working in Eastern/Central Europe. Of course as a visitor to a foreign place, as I was during my trip to Novi Sad, I must acknowledge my role as an outsider or guest, who may be uninitiated to local cultural or political situations. However, as a visitor or a non-native, I bring an objective vantage point to this urban poster aesthetic that allows me to more clearly see its structure. I believe this is a useful attitude to maintain, particularly within the context of continuously developing urban identities in this part of the world.

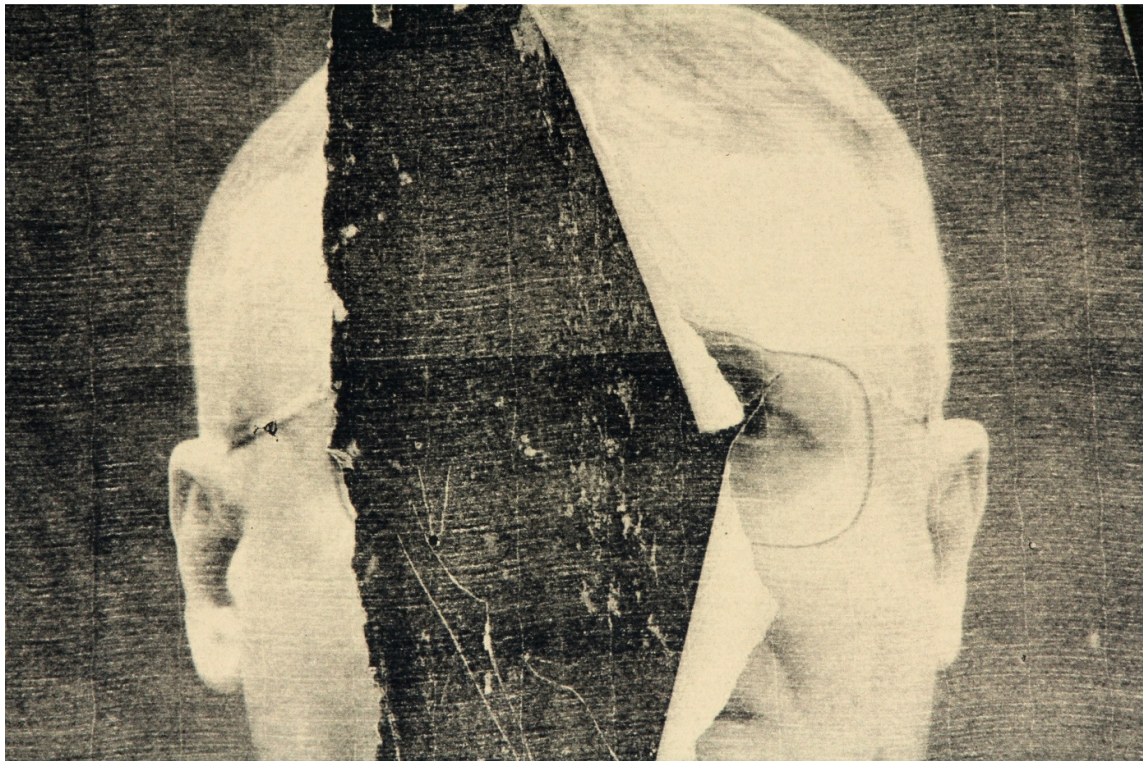


Figure 2. Novi Sad Detail.





Figure 3. Novi Sad Detail.



Figure 4. Novi Sad Detail.



## Jon Hopkins

In Budapest, during a two-week period from January 17-31, 2014, I systematically recollected an edition of posters from the city's walls. The posters belong to an edition advertising a release party for an album called *Immunity*, by an English DJ named Jon Hopkins. I found 56 copies of this poster in Budapest. With one motion, I removed as much of each poster as I could. Each in its original state measured 60 x 45 cm. My finished piece exists as a gridded wall installation measuring 2.4 meters by 6.3 meters.

With this piece I was interested in actually physically re-collecting a previously disseminated edition of prints and analyzing them as a set of individually altered but once-identical shapes. This typological format presents an aesthetic reading of this work which focuses on the interplay between positive and negative shapes. Each poster fragment in the installation is placed within the 60 x 45 cm rectangle of its original proportion, in the exact position it previously occupied. The negative space is a clear reference to the parts of each poster which conceivably still remain on a wall. Therefore in divorcing each poster into fractions by collecting them, I have in fact created two installations—one concisely and archivably organized on a gallery wall, and the other spread throughout the city, still subject to ongoing deterioration.

This piece also raises a number of issues concerning my actions with respect to the function of the poster. This poster was created and deployed in order to advertise a semi-public event—a music concert with paid admission in a high-profile venue. As a culturally-participating resident of Budapest I belong to the poster's targeted audience. In addition, these posters were deployed on avenues and streets that I use daily as a pedestrian. However, my choice to systematically remove and collect these posters before the date of the concert, (January 31) sharply opposes the interests of both the advertisers and the featured musician. Did I have the right to alter the effectiveness of these advertisements, and thus limit the prospective audience of the concert? Who owns a poster after it has been adhered to a wall, and who is allowed to remove or alter it? I should mention that the concert managed to sell out regardless of my project, but the idea of a poster's deterioration/removal impacting actual events or experiences is an important one, and raises valuable questions about posters used as social or economical advertisements.



Figure 5. Jon Hopkins. Found Offset-Printed Posters

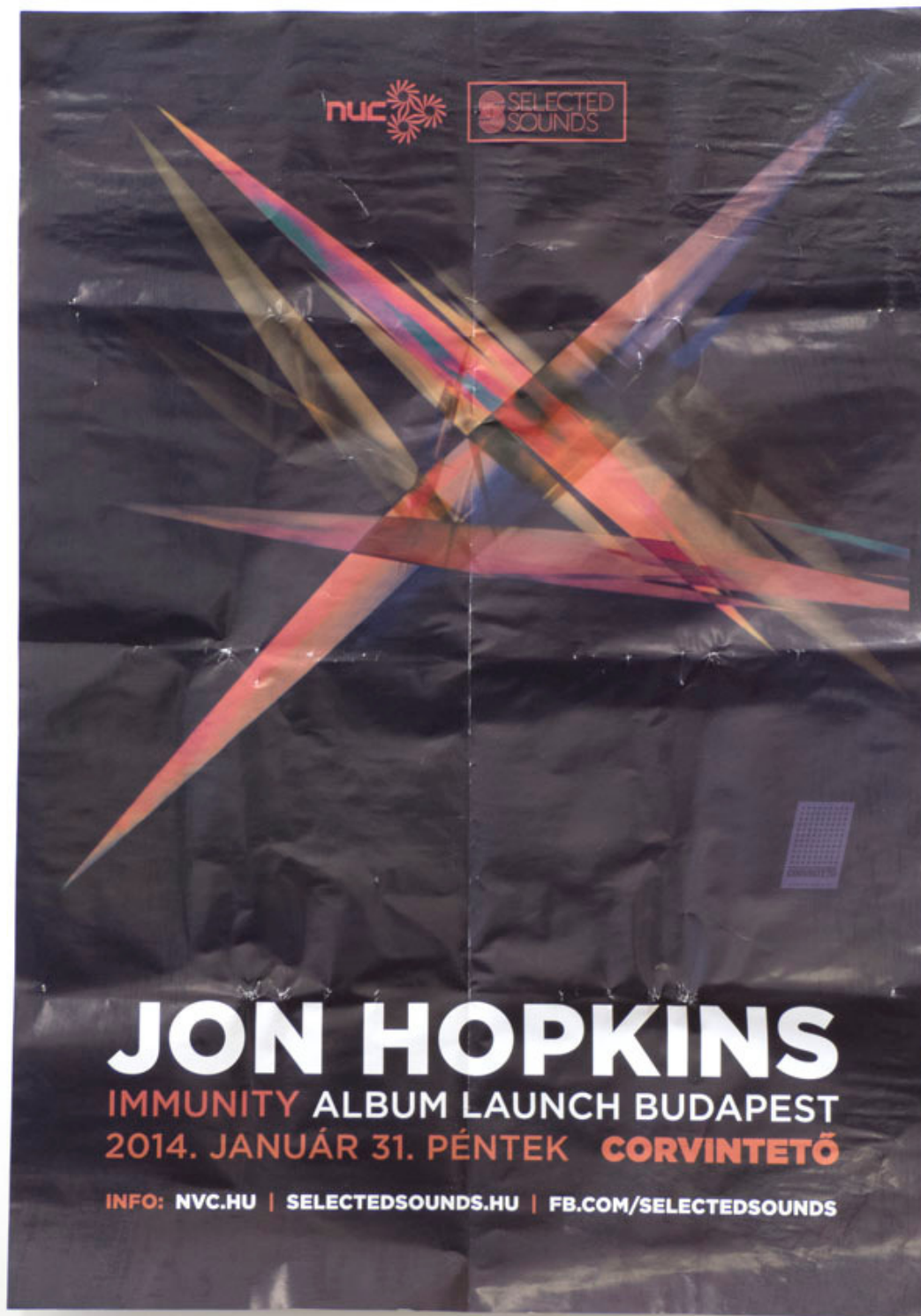


Figure 6. Jon Hopkins Detail





Figure 7. Jon Hopkins Detail.



Figure 8. Jon Hopkins Detail.



## Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City)

This piece exists as a series of photographs documenting a performance I created on January 25, 2014. I made a costume out of posters collected from the streets of Budapest. Covered from head to toe like a living poster column, I walked a path along several major avenues of the city, stopping periodically to pose standing in front of poster billboards and column kiosks. The photographs record me in a variety of situations. At times I seem to be rather unsuccessfully attempting to camouflage myself in familiar poster settings. Other photographs document instances of brief interaction with various passers-by. Some spectators appear startled, others amused, some bewildered, and still others seemingly unaffected.

My motivation with this performance was to invert my normal process of art-making. Instead of remaining at a distance from my subject posters and walls, photographing and collecting documentation mostly in silence and with a purposefully limited footprint, I chose a gesture that transformed my body into a spectacle. I allowed myself to be seen, photographed, observed, laughed at, and otherwise interacted with. Not only did I become one of the subjects of the work, but so also did my personal interactions with others.

I also altered the role that posters play in this piece. Instead of using posters only as an index of human social, political, and economic interaction, I was interested to see if posters could serve as a conduit for interaction. In other words, could the act of wearing posters, and attempting to *become* a poster column myself elicit new and different responses from viewers and passers-by?



Figure 9. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still





Figure 10. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still



Figure 11. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still





Figure 12. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still



Figure 13. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still





Figure 14. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still





Figure 15. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still



Figure 16. Láthatatlan Város (Invisible City) Still

## **A Note on the Author**

Galen Gibson-Cornell is an American artist and scholar. He currently lives and works in Budapest, Hungary. He was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to Hungary for the academic year 2013-2014 for his work based on urban posters and their appearance on the walls of the Hungarian capitol. He is currently affiliated with the Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem (Hungarian University of Fine Arts), and Printa (a screen-printing workshop, gallery, and design boutique), both in Budapest.

Galen was born in Maryville, Missouri, USA in 1987. He received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2013, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Summa Cum Laude, Valedictorian) from Truman State University, in Kirksville, Missouri in 2009, and a Certificat de Langue from l'Université Catholique de l'Ouest in Angers, France in 2007.