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Giving birth to identity

by Délia Vékony

Introduction

After the euphoria that characterized the general atmosphere when joining the Europian Union, first Hungary, then Romania, including Transylvania, faced new challenges. The two countries did not only have to deal with the tension that shaped the relationship of Romanians and ethnic Hungarians living in Hungary, both countries were facing the need to create a new identity. Hungary and Romania had to reconsider what it means to be European, and within the European melting pot, what it means to be Eastern-European.

Today, there are diverse artistic dialogues that cross national borders. For the definition of what it means to be European, or Central- Eastern-European to be precise, artists are exploring concepts such as the individual and collective identity, past and present, nationalism and internationalism.

Within the different artistic practices there are two distinct voices present which could be seen as quests for identity. On the one hand, there are artists who reach back to the past through reflecting on the sorrows inflicted on the region by Communism and the post-communist present. This is mostly a painterly direction initiated by Transylvanian artists.

On the other hand, Hungary-based multi-media artists and photographers look upon the idea of a recently emerging, often radical nationalist present with political criticism and irony. The idea of the EU and the making of the EU identity that is supposed to be a new hybrid, is clashed with the symbols and issues of nationalism. Although these artists acknowledge that the language of art is global and international, they keep local references.

In the following paper artistic practices that refer to the ideas mentioned above are explored. It is also pointed out that there might be an underlying tendency behind some artistic practices that claim that instead of a radical, exclusivist voice, there is an initiative towards a new discourse that - within the quest for identity - is sensitive to hybridity, complexity and difference.

Out of the grip of Communism

Whenever we explore questions of identity in relation to artistic practices in the present Eastern-European region, we need to reach further back than the dates of joining the EU. Debates on identity emerged right after 1989 when Socialism/Communism ended, and the legacy of the regime still makes an impact on everyday life and attitudes.

In this newly initiated search for a new identity the artistic scenery also faced new challenges, namely artists no longer had a stable regime to work against or be afraid of, a regime that either supported, tolerated or banned their art depending on the politically correct nature of the art in question. Instead, artists found themselves in a new international terrain. After the end of the communist regime, the western, international art world became highly interested in the artistic practices of the eastern region.[1]

However, the introduction of eastern artistic practices to the international world did not go as smoothly as it was desired. Central-Eastern-Europe was expected to come up with an artistic message that was supposed to be thought-provoking enough for the west. Unfortunately, in the 90s, with the strong impact of globalisation and the new-found liberty, artists, generally speaking, – at least in Hungary and Romania - did not, or could not articulate an artistic vision that seemed exciting and exotic enough for the international taste. It was a deception for the west, but the Hungarian and Transylvanian artists – the later still living in deep poverty – did not want to appear eastern and exotic, on the contrary, they were rather working towards melting into the new internationalism dictated by the west. Instead of finding a local voice, artists followed international trends as for them these symbolized a new identity and a new-found freedom.[2,3]

As the eastern region could not live up to the expectations during the 1990s, the west turned towards Asia and – as a reaction - Hungary turned back into itself. Although there was a local art world with institutions and collectors, and it followed the main trends also present in international forums, it was insensitive towards the international critical discourses such as post-colonialism, post-structuralism or the revival of Marxist criticism. Hungary has created a local universe for itself without making a significant effort in opening up its art world.

It should be noted that the western[4] attitude was also quite patronizing and the theory of 'the gaze' – in this case not from a feminist, but from a 'self-other', post-colonical view-point - could also be applied to the situation. This means that when international experts came (and come) to judge Romanian or Hungarian contemporary art, they judged the art they saw from an international view-point instead of trying to experience the work from a local context. This is a classical mistake - outlined by Gadamerian hermeneutics - made when different cultures meet. In many cases an artwork is often considered good and valid in local spheres but boring or useless in international circles.[5] There were also examples for the other way around in which case the local art world argued that the artwork in question was propagandastic and vulgar, however it appeared to be popular in the west. András argues that the reason for this still existing misunderstanding is the difference in history and culture and the only way to overcome this discrepancy would be through the use of an extensive, ongoing dialogue.[6]

Today, the recognition of the artists of the region is slowly changing. Ironically, the artists who are also recognized internationally are those who reach back to Communism. Although it is expected that twenty years would suffice to overcome the social practices and traumas inflicted upon the region by Communism, Eastern-Europe is still struggling to get out of the grip of the past. As Socialism/Communism still haunts our everyday life and moral values, it is certainly present in those artistic practices that reflect on society.[7]

The artistic direction that deals with such matters is dictated by the artists of the Cluj-school, it is a trend that originates from the Transylvanian town of Cluj. In the past seven years these artists have become very successful; Adrian Ghenie, Serban Savu, Ciprien Muresan, Victor Man, or artists associated with them such as Peter Sudar and Zsolt Bodoni are names most art experts who are familiar with the international contemporary art world should have heard of. These artists follow a mostly figurative, painterly style through which they deal with the memories and consequences of the oppressive communist Ceausescu-regime or – stated in more general terms - with a past shaped by aggressive political forces. In their art people and urban spaces bound by history and memory are explored.

Painting memory

As we shall see, the artists associated with the Cluj-school present a very strong painterly message. However, the reason why they could become successful is not simply the fact that they are talented artists, but the message their works carry also had a place in the international theoretical and artistic forums.

András argues that in the past two decades many countries have experienced a different relationship towards their past, the meta-narratives that characterized the national discourse, mostly due to the effective influence of post-structuralism, have been, and are still being reconsidered. In this re-writing of the official 'text', more and more space was given to the oppressed and to the minorities and to those voices that have not been heard so far. These new practices wish to re-establish a bond with the 'real' and 'illusory' past, in order to initiate a new dialogue between ideas such as the collective and the individual or memory and identity. [8,9]

The artists who use this voice of remembering are mostly young male painters. Some of them featured in the exhibition *Show me a hero* in London (26 June – 2 August 2009) curated by the British art critic, Jane Neal.[10]
The title of the show comes from a quote by the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald in the early 1930s who said: "show me a hero … and I will write you a tragedy", a quote that might symbolizes very well the attitude of the Cluj-artists towards the past.[11]

The idea of the hero as being tightly connected to the idea of myth, therefore to heritage, national dreams and desires is a concept that should be examined when there is a quest for identity through the act of remembering. A hero means stability, a hero is a father, an order, also a supernatural savior.

However, as Jane Neal writes:

> The idea of the 'hero' was a notion familiar to all young people growing up under communism in Russia and Eastern Europe. As Pioneers, the young were in training to be heroes and the authorities instilled in them how important it was to venerate the leader and to emulate the worker. For the generation who grew up during the last years of communism however, witnessing its disintegration and the destabilising effect of the sudden onslaught of capitalism, the heroes were changing or lost to them altogether.[12]

If a nation loses its heroes, it loses the core values it was taught to live accordingly. Therefore there is a need for mourning, remembering and also re-interpreting the role that heros played in our lives. **Adrian Ghenie** does this with masterly painterly skills.

For the paintings entitled *Elena* (2010) (fig 1) and *The trial* (2010) (fig 2) Ghenie took his inspiration from the documentary that was made about the execution of the infamous sadistic dictators, the Ceausescu-couple. *Elena's* face shifts into the past through loose brushwork, it seems like she is only remembered from an old, ragged photograph. In *The trial* we can see "… a shabby interior that, with its shoddy floorboards, rust-red wooden paneling, and curtain seemingly the worse for wear, looks like a run-down social club. The accused sit huddled in the shadows of the makeshift courtroom, wedged into a dark corner by two cheap tretle tables. … the couple, … seem more like squaters than dignitaries. Elena wears a tiger-skin coat, symbolizing the once extrawagant lifestyle she once enjoyed."[13]

Fig 1. Adrian Ghenie, *Elena,* (2010)

Fig 2. Adrian Ghenie, *The trial,* (2010)

Ghenie has painted a series of different leaders and dictators, including Lenin, in order to confront the myths with the reality of misery that is generated by dictatorial political situations. Ghenie's colleague shows the urban reality that was constructed by the political and social changes implied by the regime. **Serban Savu** was also part of the *Show me a hero* exhibition. Savu deals with urban landscapes through which he explores the visual heritage of sites left for the present to deal with (fig 3), (fig 4).

As Jane Neal writes:

> Serban Savu's meticulously rendered paintings of workers and 'ordinary' folk read as tender documents of the characters who reflect everyday life in the artist's native Romania. This arcadia is not what it seems; the 'dreams' Savu creates have a latent darkness informed by his personal experience of the after-effects (several generations on) of a social and political experiment devised by the communists in the 1960s to create a 'New Man' by forcing most of Romania's mostly rural population to move from their native villages to cities. The rural population did not assimilate the urban values and so emerged a hybrid category of people who

colonised the peripheries in endless grey-blocked neighbourhoods while continuing to try and live as they had for centuries. Savu's work is far from a straightforward documentation of reality; instead it provides the viewer with a fascinating insight into a society struggling to contend with both its past and its future.[14]

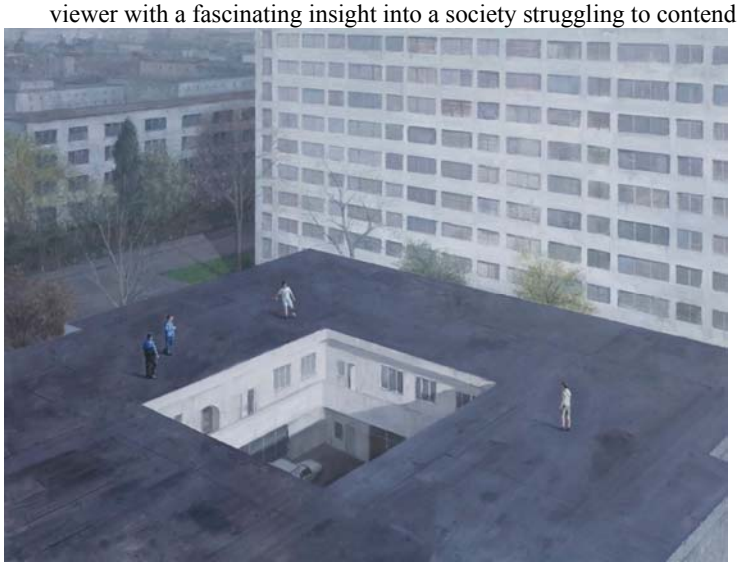

Fig 3. Serban Savu, *The Old Roof* (2009)

Fig 4. Serban Savu, *Under the View* (2010)

Zsolt Bodoni uses recurring motifs and symbols that carry a complex system of references to power, history, and the sacred. Spaces such as industrial storage rooms, objects such as the black car used during Communism to arrest people in their homes, battle ships, statues that are torn by history and war recur in his paintings. Many of Bodoni's works are burdened with political historical meaning, his use of technique and compositional arrangements demonstrate true masterly skills.

Fig 5. Zsolt Bodoni, *Ararat* (2011)

Fig 6. Zsolt Bodoni, *Propeller* (2010)

In his paintings *Ararat* (2011) (fig 5) and *Propeller* (2010) (fig 6), Bodoni has found a universal theme that somehow always hides within most of his paintings: "This feeling of being bound, trapped, and dehumanization have been part of Bodoni's work for many years. He has often referred to how the communist system attempted to destroy individuality, turning people into pieces of meat or soulless machines."[15]

Both universal and individual experiences are present in these two works mentioned above. The enigmatic expression of oppressive power, fear, torture and mystery characterize the two paintings, but the experience that Bodoni uses is "… drawn specifically from his life growing up as a hated ethnic minority in a communist country. They address the dehumanizing result and intent of the communist system."[16]

In both paintings the system of references is quite complex. *Ararat* represents a battleship with a horse wearing a gas-mask, both hovering in air. We see an aggressive, claustrophobic image with its historical references which reminds the viewer of the world wars, the battleship and "gas masked horse walking the plank" creates anxiety.[17] Mount Ararat is often associated with the Armenian genocide.

Propeller, is reminiscent of crucified machinery in a cold, abandoned industrial setting that, according to Taylor[18] also references the decaying sites found all over Romania. Brown argues that "although this is a piece of machinery, it more clearly represents a person bound and strapped to a chair in a way we associate with interrogation and torture". By knowing the artist quite well, Brown refers to this work as a self-portrait.[19]

As viewers we might have other associations when looking at the work. The central figure might be a victim or the symbol of power, possibly an animal, or a disfigured monster that has a life of its own. And indeed, are most perpetrators not also victims of a regime, or of some inflated idea that eventually transforms them into monsters?

Levente Herman's *New Paradise Project* (2007-2010) (fig 7, 8) also fits into this idea of remembering. Herman takes the sites of his childhood as the subject-matter for his art in order to express the destruction and loss of Transylvanian identity inflicted by the Romanians and by the Communist regime. Herman's sites are sites of desertion, disfiguration and they might remind us of the works of Anselm Kiefer who paints similar, tortured and violated, deserted landscapes.

Herman's works are disfigured in the sense that the figure is withdrawn, absent. When only picturing space, as Herman does, we tend to look for meaningful objects in it. But we only find concrete, rust and waste. Where can we hide in the landscapes of Herman, where can we feel safe? If we can hide at all, it is in the pipes, which we can immediatelly associate with homelessness, not even human, but homeless animals who come to search for food in the rubbish.

Fig 7. Levente Herman, *New Paradise project* (2007)

Fig 8. Levente Herman, *New Paradise project* (2007)

Criticizing nationalism

When looking for ways to establish a European identity some artists look onto the current political reality. In Hungary there is a general fear – that is probably present in many European countries – namely that becoming European will force us to lose our national identity. This would certainly be a too big of a price to pay. The loss of national culture that tormented the Hungarians and Transylvanians throughout the centuries resulted in a series of traumas; if the region was not occupied by the Turks or the Hapsburgs, then it was the Russians who invaded the country and imposed their culture upon the nation. Hungary cannot bare the idea of a loss of national identity again.

As globalization that occured parallel with the collapse of the Sovjet regime, the question of 'local versus global' became an issue to deal with. In the dualism of this debate during the 1990s, Hungary in many aspects decided to choose the 'local' side. These ideologies were supported by right-wing politics, whereas the left-wing was accused of forcing the nation into a new hybridity that would be a melting pot for the now newly emerging Hungarian identity. Left-wing ideologies were also accused of wanting to sell out the country to international investors without supporting local businesses.

Redefining the status of Hungary within the Central-Eastern-European region also opened up new debates. A new way of positioning called for a new system of relations, namely that the country should not see itself as poor and disadvantaged in relation to western countries, it should rather place itself as a superior country in relation to the Balkan region.

This new-found nationalism, that still characterizes Hungary today, is highly criticized by artists. These artists often take iconic, folkloric or mythological subject-matter as their object of criticism, not because they are disrespectful towards traditions, but they interrogate those nationalist discourses that use these iconic images as legimimate symbols for their separatist, right-wing intentions. It must also be noted that, just like all over in Europe, right-wing tendencies are not only dictated by the government, but there are also right-wing groups that are becoming more and more radical. Usually, these groups often entertain fascist, racist and nationalist ideas and unfortunately this attitude often results in the violation of human rights and murder. As a result of the tendencies that aim to re-create the traditional Hungarian self, there is a revival of a variety of traditional practices, such as the old Hungarian way of living, the rebirth of traditional cuisine, agriculture and dishes as well as religious and medical practices through which new healers and shamans work on the well-being of the pure Hungarians.

One of the artists who creates politically powerful at the same time critical works is **Gábor Gerhes**.

Fig 9. Gábor Gerhes*, Grieving sheperd* (2001)

Fig 10. Gábor Gerhes, *Nimród altarpiece – the displacement of the cross* (2009)

The two illustrations demonstrate how Gerhes criticizes the new-born nationalist tendencies that presently characterize the country. The *Grieving sheperd* (2001) (fig 9) is a typical folkloric icon that was idealized by Hungarian Romanticism within the wave of international Romanticism at the second half of the 19th century, especially by the well-known Hungarian sculptor, Miklós Izsó. Izsó lifted peasants and countrymen to the level of everyday heros, whereas Gerhes desacralizes and mocks this iconic image by replacing the statuesque figure with a young man, sitting detached from reality positioned as an object of ethnographic research.

We can observe a similar critical attitude in the *Nimrod altarpiece* (2009) (fig 10) in which the artist takes a trophy of a deer – again a particular pride of Hungarian men who, especially in the past, enjoyed hunting -, to replace the Cross. Nimrod, who - according to Hungarian mythology - is the ancestor of all Hungarians is being worshiped instead of Jesus Christ. This replacement can symbolize the rebirth of traditional relgious practices in the region. The skull of the dead animal is decorated with dices, a direct reference to chance and gambling, connected to fate and fortune, symbolizing insecurity and dirty politics. The fake flowers around the altar, a sight seen almost in every traditional rural Hungarian houses, refer to cheap Eastern-European aesthetics.

Miklós Surányi's photographs, at least these two series (fig 11, 12, 13), look at the aesthetics of housing estates and week-end houses, both phenomena are products and by-products of Communism. People who did not have proper accomodation were made to move into the identical looking flats of the estates in which even the furniture was identical, manufactured according to the communist aesthetics that characterized most countries of the Sovjet Union. The uniformality and solitude that was generated by the lifestyle of these estates and the emptiness of this uniformal existence is presented to the viewer.

Since it was not allowed to leave the country, holidays could only take place in Hungary, therefore people were encouraged to buy cheap week-end houses. Given that the population was generally poor, all kinds of solutions were invented to make things, that were broken, function, or to create recreative environments out of scratch. Wine and palinka making was – and still is – a traditional Hungarian practice, there are even a few families today who actually learnt through years of practice how to make good spirits.

Fig 11. Miklós Surányi, *Ghost Science / Pull & Bear* (2009)

Fig 12. Miklós Surányi, *Weekend House series 7.* (2007)

Fig 13. Miklós Surányi, *Weekend House series 8.* (2007)

Art with a message of new hybridity

Having explored art that on the one hand could be reflective on memory and experiences generated by the politically tormented past and difficult present, on the other hand it could be critical of newly emerging nationalist tendencies, let us take a look into the question of a new hybrid identity.

Art is supposed to be a universal language that can refer to social or individual issues. However, if it does not somehow raise ultimate questions and concerns that are issues for most people or at least for those living in similar cultures, then that artwork might not be called successful. In order to show that probably a new idea of hybiridy can be found in the universal language of art, because this language of art is both local and international, I have chosen two pieces by two women-artists.

Mariann Imre's *St Cecilia* (1997) (fig 14) is not only a universal Christian figure who is worshiped for her martyrdom and is present in several artistic representations, - probably the most famous is in the Trastevere church in Rome - she is also an iconic figure of female martyrdom who died by the hands of men, first fumigated then decapitated.

Fig. 14. Mariann Imre, *Saint Cecilia* (1997)

Imre's St Cecilia is a flat representation of a figure made of concrete and enbroidered with green strings that signify veins and the new coming to life of the saint. The strings that connect the figure to the ceiling give a three dimensional aspect to the work, suggesting upliftment, reincarnation. Although St. Cecilia is a general Christian icon, and an international symbol of female sacrifice, Hungarians also have local, traditional references with similar stories. In our region, in the castle of Déva a mason was working on the construction of a fort. The wall did not have proper mortar, whatever they built in the morning, collapsed by night. So the masons decided to fix the mortar with the ashes of the first wife who would visit them. It was Kelemen's wife who came first, so they threw her into the fire and built the wall by using the ashes of her body.[20]
In this case, Saint Cecilia as presented by the artist is also the wife of Kelemen, who makes a living wall, a wall that grows life.

Fig 15. Erika Baglyas, *Hundred sheets* (2004)

Fig 16. Erika Baglyas, *Hundred sheets* (2004)

Another example is **Erika Baglyas** who deals with a quest for identity through a feminine voice in her performance-video project entitled *Hundred sheets* (2004) (fig 15, 16) in the hall of the Csepel Steel Factory. The artist projected a video of her disabled and retired mother who looks after her old, ill, dying relatives, she nurses them and cleans after them. The video shows the mother washing already white and clean sheets. The sheets that were projected onto were also washed by her. The site recalls the working class of her age, it was a central factory that provided work for those living in the area.

Again, this piece can have international as well as local references. Besides reflecting on social issues such as the lack of proper health-care system in the country, the work can be seen as a ritual. The ongoing washing of sheets recalls the spiritual practice of purification associated with women, but the desperate ongoing cleansing is never-ending, it is a work of Sysiphus. The endless act of washing can also turn into an obsessive-compulsive disorder or into the mental condition of binging and purging. However, the work also has poetic references. In the Hungarian poem about Lady Ágnes by the famous poet János Arany, Lady Ágnes tried to wash away her blood and sins in the river, but the sheet would never get clean. There is also a reference to the life-story of the other Hungarian poet, Attila József, whose mother was a washer-woman who cleaned for the rich and did not have enough time to be with her son.[21]

So the question arises; what can we learn from art? Hopefully, the examples above illustrate that art is able to point to some kind of heterogenous identity. It can help us give birth to our European identity because it can speak an international language and at the same time it can be also sensitive to social questions and individual issues. Art can refer to mythology and it can also offer a healing to the wounds of the past as well as the wounds of the self. It is not an easy labour, but art can show us ways to create a new hybridity when wanting to define who we are. It would be high time to start listening to art.

Endnotes

1 Edit András, *Kulturális átöltözés. Művészet a szocializmus romjain* (Budapest: Argumentum 2009), 13-20.
2 András, *Kulturális átöltözés,* 13-20.
3 By the time they had their heyday in western countries, the trends of Photo-realism or Abstract Expressionism, for example, became very popular in the region.
4 I use the terminologies 'western' and 'international' when I refer to the Euro-American art world.
5 The artist Agnes Verebics is an interesting example in this regard. Although she is a very powerful woman artist in Hungary, and she is associated with feminism and feminist performance art, she has not received outstanding attention in western/international forums, whereas in Hungary she is popular and recognized.
6 András, *Kulturális átöltözés,* 30.
7 It should be indicated that not all the art that is currently being practiced in the region is socially referential. There are artists who distance themselves and claim to make 'universal' art. This might be the result of the popularity of the Greenbergian model of making art that partially shaped the art world of the second half of the 20th century in the region. Art that aims to be self-referential and/or persuade higher realms and causes has been inspiring Hungarian artists to remain socially detached in their artistic practices even today. (Edit András, *Kulturális átöltözés, 13-20.*)
8 András, *Kulturális átöltözés* 143.
9 For the re-thinking of history we could mention examples such as the Berlin *Memorial to the mudered Jews of Europe* (2004) by Peter Eisenman. The memorial was created in the spirit of deconstruction and it does not only position the Holocaust and Nazi Germany in a different light generating active remembering, it also comments on traditional monuments that stand erect and claim a unitary narrative over either the heroism or the sorrows generated by a particular political event. In international artistic practices this act of remembering is interrogated by many artists such as Christian Boltansky who is dealing with the Holocaust, Louis Bourgeois who targets child-hood trauma, or Marina Abramovich who also deals with Communism in some of her performances.
10 Jane Neal, Show me a hero. Press release, 2009. (Available at: http://www.calvert22.org/pdf/pr_show_me_a_hero_at_calvert_22-26_june-2_august_2009.pdf, accessed on 9/11/2011).
11 Neal 2009
12 Neal 2009
13 Matt Price, "Out of the zoo. Adrian Ghenie's paintings revisit the haunted past of his native Romania," *Modern Painters* (April 2010): 59.
14 Neal 2009
15 Dianne C. Brown sent me personal emails with her insights on the artist (2011)
16 Brown 2011
17 Brown 2011
18 Jeff Taylor sent me personal emails with his insights on the artist (2011)
19 Brown 2011
20 The poem on the mason is available at: http://www.atti.info/komuveskelemenlegendaja.htm, accessed on 9/11/2011.
21 Erzsébet Pilinger, Száz lepedő - Művész mint magánember, művészet mint magánügy (2004). Available at: http://artportal.hu/aktualis/hirek/szaz_lepedo_muvesz_mint_maganember_muveszet_mint_maganugy, accessed on 06/11/2011.

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The poem on the mason is available at: http://www.atti.info/komuveskelemenlegendaja.htm, accessed on 9/11/2011

Illustrations

Fig 1. Adrian Ghenie, *Elena (*2010) oil on canvas, 20 X 11 in © Courtesy of the Artist and Mihai Nicodim Gallery

Fig 2. Adrian Ghenie, *The Trial (*2010) oil on canvas, 143 X 79 in © Courtesy of the Artist and Mihai Nicodim Gallery

Fig 3. Serban Savu, *The Old Roof* (2009) oil on canvas, 64 X 87 in

Fig 4. Serban Savu, *Under the View* (2010) oil on canvas, 76.7 X 60.6 in

Fig 5. Zsolt Bodoni, *Ararat* (2011) oil on canvas, 185 X 160 cm© Courtesy of the Artist and Mihai Nicodim Gallery

Fig 6. Zsolt Bodoni, *Propeller*, (2010) oil and acrylic on canvas, 180 X 240 cm© Courtesy of the Artist and Mihai Nicodim Gallery

Fig.7 Levente Herman, *New Paradise project* (2007) Oil on canvas 180 x 230 cm

Fig 8 Levente Herman, *New Paradise project* (2007) Oil on canvas 180 x 180 cm

Fig 9. Gábor Gerhes, *Grieving sheperd*, (2001) photograph, 180x100 cm

Fig 10. Gábor Gerhes, *Nimród altarpiece – the displacement of the cross* (2009), photograph, 112x90 cm

Fig 11. Miklós Surányi, *Ghost Science / Pull & Bear* (2009) 92 x 75 cm, lambda print, 1/3, Ed.

Fig 12. Miklós Surányi, *Weekend House series 7.* (2007) lambda print; 62 x 62 cm

Fig 13. Miklós Surányi, *Weekend House series 8*. (2007) lambda print; 62 x 62 cm

Fig 14. Mariann Imre, *Saint Cecilia,* (1997) installation, embroidered concrete, strongs 250 x 200 x 50 cm

Fig15, 16. Erika Baglyas, *Száz lepedő/Hundred sheets* (2004) documented performance

Keywords:

Memory, Communism, criticism, local, international

Research method: books and articles were consulted for the completion of the paper besides the personal observations of the artistic practices explored.

ABSTRACT

Having joined the European Union, both Hungary and Romania found themselves facing new challenges. The borders, that seemed impossible to cross between the two neighboring countries, suddenly opened up. This new freedom inspired a discourse through which, mostly because of the touchy issue of Transylvania that created tension between Hungary and Romania in the past century, ideas of identity and belonging are being raised not as a national, rather as a regional question.

Today, there are diverse artistic dialogues that cross national borders. For the definition of what it means to be European, or Central- and Eastern-European to be precise, artists are exploring concepts such as the individual and collective identity, past and present, nationalism and internationalism.

Within the different artistic practices there are two distinct voices present which could be seen as quests for identity. On the one hand, there are artists who reach back to the past through reflecting on the sorrows inflicted on the region by Communism and the post-communist present. This is mostly a painterly direction initiated by Transylvanian-Hungarian artists, similar to the artistic message of the now renowned Cluj-school coming from the same region.

On the other hand, Hungary-based multi-media artists and photographers look upon the idea of a recently emerging, often radical nationalist present with political criticism and irony. The idea of the EU and the making of the EU identity that is supposed to be a new hybrid, is clashed with the symbols and issues of nationalism. Although these artists acknowledge that the language of art is global and international, they keep local references.

In her talk, the author argues that in spite of the nationalist tendencies that characterise Europe in these turbulent times, artists seem to state that instead of a radical, exclusivist voice, there is a need to initiate a new discourse that is sensitive to hybridity, complexity and difference.

Delia Vekony is a Hungarian art historian who completed her MA in art history at the University of South Africa. She teaches at the Department of Arts Management of the International Business School, Budapest and lectures at the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts and Design, Budapest. Her general interest lies in the relationship of philosophy, art and religion. Within this framework, through different publications she explores issues such as the idea of quality in contemporary art or the presence of the transcendental in contemporary artistic practices.