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Modernist of the Provinces On István Csákány's works

Torn socks, solar cell sculpture, red carpet, indoor mountain hike built from stretchers. What is their common denominator? This list might as well be an extremely simplified description of ISTVÁN CSÁKÁNY's works dated 2008. However, this series of constituents is all but a chain of whimsical associations: it is in fact one of the most consequently articulated artistic programs of recent years.

One of the fundamental works of the artist, who was born in 1978 in Sepsiszentgyörgy, is the one entitled *Reconstruction of the Lomnický Peak*, constructed of rafters. It was first exhibited in 2003 on Millenáris, later in Barcsay Hall and at the 3rd Prague Biennial.¹ As a painter, Csákány was pushing the limits of college education based on academic principles with this work; yet it was significant not only from a technical aspect. The gigantic installation, "recycled" in several contexts, was practically the reconstruction of a national symbol, blending the artist's uniquely constructivist affinities with his criticism of painting, since the installation was practically constructed of dismantled and recompiled stretchers. Therefore, the work might be considered a reinterpretation of a particular landscape painting. By rebuilding (objectifying) the symbolic landscape as a skeleton-structure, Csákány has given rise to a form on the frontier of the abstract and the concrete, which was one of his first and most influential steps towards his later work and themes, which probe the limits of the genre of installation and explore the issue of provinciality. Csákány's 2006 diploma work, *Province Model* can be interpreted as a much more resolute gesture of institutional criticism: he erected a house in the middle of the foyer of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, "framed" from straw bales, with a sign adorning its façade saying "province" in large red letters. It is by all means a radical gesture to build a stack of straw emitting stable smell in the marble-tiled central space (the "shrine") of the University of Fine Arts. This building made of straw and wood was the (installed) means of presenting Csákány's oil-on-canvas paintings, which he used for tiling the roof of his object. Thus he found an entirely new function for his paintings – while depriving them of all nobility and majesty.

We need to lay down that when Csákány refers to provinciality in his work, he is not promoting or mystifying a lifestyle; rather, the gestures of his works are reflections on the present state of the Hungarian art scene. It can be almost precisely prognosticated that due to the lack of a serious art market, the majority of the works of art made by Hungarian graduate artists will not even be able to function so much as roof tiling: the Hungarian scene is incapable of integrating so many graduate artists. The majority of the immense proportion of artists that switch careers are accommodated by the construction industry. This strange sociological phenomenon was reflected on with some role-playing (self-)irony by Csákány's 2005 individual exhibition in Studio Gallery, entitled *Work Title*.² The photo prints showed a "brigade" of real life construction workers, where everyone including the artist was a graduate artist. Csákány's next province-installation – inspired by stage sets – was manifested in the *Province-Transmitter* at the 2007 *Dear painter, paint for me... with heart and*

¹ Cf. Edina Nagy: *Magyarok Bohémiában, vagy a lassúság újrafelfedezése. PRAGUEBIENNALE 3*, Balkon, 2007/7,8., pp. 20-23.

² *István Csákány – Work Title*. Studio Gallery, Budapest, 6 – 23 Sept. 2005.

mind exhibition in Trafo Gallery.³ At this point – since the consequentiality of genre is already well observable – it is worthwhile to consider CLAIRE BISHOP's remarks about installation art, since the concept of "installation" has become so commonly used that as a direct result, its domain of meaning has begun to shift. In her book *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Bishop makes a clear-cut distinction: installation as a genre of art is not to be confused with the forms of presenting a work of art.⁴ That is to say, a form of presentation as a "vehicle or medium" can only take a subordinated position, while installation art has its own history. Installation art has drawn inspiration from architecture, theatre and film sets, sculpture and curatorial practice. The basic terrain of this genre is the spatial construction of a context. It might not be too much of an overstatement to say that installation art is among the most authentic transmitters of the 60s concept-art ideals, also supported by curatorial theories. Moreover, installation as a genre builds not only on the presence of the spectator in the artwork, but especially on his/her participation. Installation art considers its recipient more than two bodiless eyes: namely, a physically existent entity which experiences art as a spatial phenomenon via movement and changing position. According to Bishop, The installation thus presupposes an active spectator who psychically and symbolically participates in the work, which is composed for the spectator. Installation art is practically a kind of aesthetic of participation, even if the notion of participation is typically favoured by the socially more sensitive activist project art. At the same time, installation art raises the issue of authorship, which often becomes secondary in relation to collective practice.⁵ This kind of collectivist attitude is characteristic of Csákány, too, inasmuch as collaborates with others in constructing a work of art. He has worked several times with TAMÁS KASZÁS and BEATRIX SZÖRÉNYI: they have arranged several exhibitions in Bercsényi Gallery, and the exhibition in Trafó was also their joint work. Csákány's installation practice, which lies in manipulating and rearranging the entire exhibition space for the sake of one work, was first manifested in *Province-Transmitter*. The central element of the installation is a landscape painting, around which he constructed a stage-like scene set. That is, the structure which is the "medium" for his artwork becomes an integral part of it. Its stage-like nature is even more strongly emphasized by the lighting, which highlights certain elements of the installation, while leaving others in darkness. *Province Models* (2008), Csákány's individual exhibition in Žilina, Slovakia⁶, was practically a continuation of *Province Model* and *Province-Transmitter*. The treatment of our provinciality was a central thematic constituent here, too, while the house's scene set-like shape returned. Building in the entire space of Stanica, Csákány ushered the spectators in new directions and routes – in other words, he redesigned and even exploited the faculties of the environment, establishing a physical relation between artwork and spectator. For his work entitled *A city dweller's weekend house*, he built a house from radio receivers and covered it with a straw roof, thus attempting to treat provinciality and the provinces as a communicational problem. For the dweller of the provinces feels "forgotten" by history, and so he/she "forgets" history in return, trying to retreat into his/her closed tribal realm. This communicational regression is, of course, destined to fail, as argued already in the

³ *Dear painter, paint for me... with heart and mind*. Trafo – House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, 9-31 Oct. 2007.

⁴ Claire Bishop: *Installation Art: A Critical History* (Tate, 2005). pp. 6-11.

⁵ Claire Bishop: "Viewers as Producers". In: *Participation*. p. 13.

⁶ Istvan Csákány (HU): *Modely Provincie / Province Models*. Stanica Žilina Záriečie, Žilina, 28 May – 17 July 2008. (www.stanica.sk)

1960s by the Serbian Radovan Konstantinovič in his book *Philosophy of the Province*⁷. The essence of the province is always to be sought in the fundamentals of a system of relations: something can only be provincial in relation to something else. The answer, namely that provincial consciousness in our region is generated by an exclusion from the communicational channels of Western art, as expounded by Tamás Kaszás in Link, the appendix of Index, might seem evident.⁸ The way out of provinciality could either be participation in non-provincial channels, or the establishment of a kind of alternative centre in which provincial terrains would become connectable and could function as alternative communicational channels as opposed to the centralized and hierarchically organized models. Of course, this utopia is also based on finding common practices and participation in them. Perhaps Csákány's house built from radios and his province-transmitter was broadcasting the promise of this alternative in Stanica. (His collaborative work method was also present at the exhibition, since *Home-made mutant* was practically a spatial model of MIKLÓS SURÁNYI's photograph.)

Csákány's context-dependently recycled works are consequently and organically integrated: he is apparently not afraid to build his new works on earlier ones, hopping over the shadows of their predecessors in a way. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the gigantic installation *The Choreography of the Mountain*, built for the show *Mechanics of the Canvas* in Ernst Museum.⁹ This work makes use of the lessons of the *Reconstruction of the Lomnický Peak*, but also surpasses the realm of installations for-the-eyes-only, perhaps even going as far as to retrospectively reclassify his earlier works into sculptures. For *The Choreography of the Mountain* is participatory (it can be climbed): it is not a medium for presenting a work of art; the installation itself is the work of art, it is the corporeal experience of the recipient raised on a pedestal. The real mountain built from rafters is a crystal clear exposition of the formation of space. At the same time, as revealed by the title, the installation draws from stage effects, since the possibility of a mountain hike as an experience in the exhibition space emerges with sensory immediacy. We might even say, with some modern romanticism, that the artist extends the aesthetic category of "majestic" to the auditorium, where safely leaning back in the box as Kant could when contemplating plays, is not an option any more. A natural motif, used to illustrate a category, was reconstructed in the artificial environment, or black box, of the exhibition space, on the massive construct of which visitors could roam around several metres above floor level.

Csákány's installations undoubtedly made a long way until the "hikeable" piece at the *Mechanics of the Canvas* exhibition, though his network of motifs and themes has focused on similar issues from the beginning. Installation has appeared in several forms so far in Csákány's work: from sculpture through the form of presentation that is an integral part of his works, to crystal-clear installation as a super-medium. In 2008, Csákány experimented with an extraordinary hybrid genre, since he had the opportunity to realize one of his statue plans in Žilina, Slovakia. *Monument for a Monument* practically has everything a contemporary public statue needs to have: it is utopian, site-specific, and self-supporting. Instead of modifying his immediate urban environment, the artist makes creative use of it. In addition, he uses environmental technology, for the floodlight on the monument requires no extra energy source. The location of the statue is also extraordinary: it stands in a suburb

⁷ Radovan Konstantinovič: *A vidék filozófiája*. Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2001

⁸ Tamás T Kaszás: *Progresszív provincializmust!* Index. Link. No. 18-19. May – June 2008.

⁹ *Mechanics of the Canvas*. Ernst Museum, Budapest, 10 July – 31 August 2008.

of Žilina, a city of almost 100 thousand inhabitants, in the immediate vicinity of the train station (Stanica, also an art centre) and the highway bypass, on the top of a rusty lamp post. The bypass, built in the 60s, was surrounded with 20-meter high street lamps, but for some reason these monumental floodlights were never put into operation. As if these oversized poles, symbolizing the “modernizing” processes and the “development” of socialism, had just been forgotten there. Their history and presence today makes the passer-by recall the failures and at once the modernizing achievements of socialism. Csákány’s work was inspired precisely by this experience, which also serves as its context. The figure in workwear (self-portrait of the artist) stands holding a solar panel above his head. The light source fitted on the bottom of the panel lights the monument by night with the energy collected during the day. The work thus becomes an actual prosthesis of the streetlamp, since with its help the lamp can once again emit light, practically short-circuiting the utopia of modernism. Owing to the individual activity moulded into a statue, the city dwellers can regain a fragment of the forgotten history of their past. In my conception this is everything a public statue needs to achieve.

Csákány’s latest works unfold from the themes that emerge in relation to erecting a statue. He has carved the erection of a statue into a wood engraving that resembles the style of “social realism”. As a result of some kind of techno-elitist consensus, certain graphic genres, including wood engraving, have been considered completely provincial and unrenowable by the majority of the Hungarian art scene. Perhaps the 2008 show *The Leipzig Phenomenon* in Budapest Kunsthalle¹⁰ changed this stance somewhat, and since the show there have been interesting experiments employing this technique.

Csákány’s concrete statue *Tomorrow’s Worker* at Trafo Gallery’s latest exhibition¹¹ has perhaps been the test run of a new work method. An important change is that the artist now functioned as the deviser of the concept and not as executor: he had a shed firefighting gear cast into almost 300 kilograms of concrete. The work thus becomes an imprint of its wearer, its user, while, precisely because of the function of the clothing, it can be quickly reloaded and reused. This flexibility is counterbalanced by the extremely robust material and mass of the statue. For that matter, the visitors at the *Vacuum Noise* exhibition opening encountered a totally different, unfinished stage of the statue, which, however, did not render it truncated: it stood ground as photo documentation and work diary revealing its unfinished nature –invoking the future, the tomorrow even with its title. It is doubtless, though, that the substantial impact of the finished, 1 ½ times life-size object owes a lot to the nature of its material. It still remains a question whether Csákány is serious about experimenting with forms of sculpture in the future, bringing some colour into the not too inventive Hungarian plastic art life that only serves to satisfy commissions.

All in all, so much is certain that Csákány has serious and inventively solved exhibition situations behind him, which he exclusively owes to his progressive works that are organically founded on one another. Perhaps there is still no red carpet under his feet, but his works undoubtedly prove that there exists in Hungary a site-specific and progressive young art that makes clever use of context.

¹⁰ *The Leipzig Phenomenon*. Budapest Kunsthalle, Budapest, 27 March – 18 May 2008.

¹¹ *Vacuum Noise*. Trafo – House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, 5 Feb. – 29 March 2009.