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# Temporal Entanglements in Art and Exhibition Histories

A Review of: Dóra Hegyi and Eszter Szakács, eds, *1971 – Parallel Nonsynchronism*, Budapest and Bucharest: PUNCH / tranzit.hu, 2022. pp. 332. ISBN 978-615-5341-74-8.

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# Temporal Entanglements in Art and Exhibition Histories

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## Gabriela Świtek

What is the significance of the year 1971 in the context of Hungarian art history? What is the significance of 1971 for the art of East-Central Europe, for global art history, and political history? What does ‘parallel’ imply in (art-)historical investigations? What analogies, juxtapositions, and comparisons are expected in contemporary art narratives, permanent museum displays, and temporary exhibitions? Is it possible to find similarities between art events occurring in the parallel, unrelated times of national and local art histories? Are they unrelated? Is it possible to find parallels when the art histories are considered nonsynchronous, not simultaneous?

These and other questions current in academic debate on time in art history are provoked by the title of the exhibition *1971 – Parallel Nonsynchronism*, which was curated by Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, Zsóka Leposa, Enikő Róka, and László Százados at the Kiscell Museum Municipal Gallery, part of the Budapest History Museum, between 13 October 2018 and 24 March 2019. What remains after the temporary visual event are the Hungarian and English editions of its catalogue. The exhibition and catalogue are the outcome of the joint research conducted by representatives of the contemporary art organization tranzit.hu, which in 2009 initiated the online archive *Parallel Chronologies: Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950–1989*, and the Kiscell Museum Municipal Gallery in Budapest, which holds a collection of twentieth-century Hungarian art. The catalogue documents the exhibition and gathers essays examining the art, cultural institutions, and art networks in socialist Hungary during the so-called Kádár era (1957–89). However, this political time frame, mentioned by the authors in the introduction, should not be identified with the concept of art-historical time delineated in this project.

For the creators of the exhibition and the impressive catalogue of 332 pages, the initial point of reference is 1971. In that year the Budapest History Museum, for example, hosted exhibitions of work by Gyula Hincz (1904–1986), József Somogyi (1916–1993), and Endre Domanovszky (1907–1974), all of whom were well established in the official art system. In 1970 Hincz and Somogyi presented their works in the Hungarian Pavilion at the 35<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, and Domanovszky in 1972 at the 36<sup>th</sup> edition. Also, in 1971, László Beke (1944–2022), the then-twenty-seven-year-old art historian, initiated his ‘unofficial’ curatorial project, a call to artists to submit artworks on A4 sheets. He received works from thirty-one artists and exhibited them in his apartment. This project, titled *Imagination [Elképzelés]*, gathering a young generation of artists, is today considered the first collection of Hungarian conceptual art.

Art historians and curators often appropriate time frames from political history, considering them essential for the periodization of art. Typical examples are 1968 – the year of global ‘revolutions’, or 1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>1</sup> *1971 – Parallel Nonsynchronism* places as its starting point a date relevant to local art history, or to be more precise, to two parallel ‘micro-histories’ – of the Kiscell Museum and Beke’s exhibition project of conceptual art.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes have recently problematized Piotr Piotrowski’s ‘horizontal art history’ in terms of Euclidian geometry, pointing to the fact that ‘horizontality’ implies ‘the act of constituting a boundary line’.<sup>2</sup> As inscribed in *1971 – Parallel Nonsynchronism*, the concept of time would rather correspond to a ‘rhizome-like’ structure, as is explained in the catalogue’s concluding essay by László Százados (‘Space Grid’), and visualized by Tamás Kaszás’s labyrinthine installation *Dezső Korniss Space Grid*, commissioned for the exhibition of 2018 and placed in the courtyard of the Kiscell Museum. Kaszás’s installation introduces another shoot of time; it is a contemporary interpretation of Dezső Korniss’s pencil drawing *Space Grid*, the artist’s answer to Beke’s call of 1971. The installation and the drawing resemble a geometrical meander rather than an organic rhizome. Nevertheless, if one accepts a rhizome as a visualization of historical time, 1971 would be a node from which sprout many shoots of various lengths, such as 1968–73, a time frame marked at the beginning of the catalogue’s *Context* section, and 1957–89, the Kádár era.

In the introduction to the catalogue Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, and Enikő Róka explain the concepts of time informing the project, such as ‘nonsynchronism’, inspired by Ernst Bloch’s idea of ‘Ungleichzeitigkeit’, Reinhart Koselleck’s analysis of historical categories (‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation’), Karl Mannheim’s definition of ‘generation’, and Carlo Ginzburg’s notion of microhistory. The account of the reception of Bloch’s philosophy in Hungary and his intellectual divorce from György Lukács is fascinating and thought-provoking, as well as its discussion of the adaptation of the concept of ‘generation’ by Lajos Németh in his 1968 study of modern Hungarian art.<sup>3</sup> It is worth adding that Bloch’s ruminations on ‘non-contemporaneity’ and Koselleck’s studies of the semantics of historical time often serve as references for contemporary reflections on time in art history; Keith Moxey’s exploration of ‘heterochronicity’, alluding both to poststructuralist perspectives and hermeneutical horizons, is a case in point.<sup>4</sup>

The introduction also summarizes the state of research on East-Central European art, including Piotrowski’s notion of ‘horizontal art history’, Edit András’s reflections on the place of Eastern Europe in global art history, Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl’s edited volume *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (2002), and many more publications, research projects, and exhibitions of the past twenty years that have offered alternatives to the North Atlantic ‘canons’. In this context, *1971 – Parallel Nonsynchro-*

1) See, e.g., Claire Bishop and Marta Dziewańska, eds, *1968–1989: Political Upheaval and Artistic Change / Momenty zwrotne w polityce i sztuce*, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

2) Maja and Reuben Fowkes, ‘How to Write a Global History of Central and Eastern European Art’, in Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska, eds, *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, New York and London: Routledge, 2023, 111–12.

3) Lajos Németh, *Modern Magyar művészet*, Budapest: Corvina, 1968.

4) See, e.g., the bibliography in Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2013, 180 and 189.

*nism* can be described as a reference book on East-Central European art and its contemporary, decolonizing historiographies. It discusses many theories and practices of historical narrative but does not consider them to be the only possible solutions.

The publication's subsequent chapters follow the exhibition sections: 'Context,' 'Retrospection,' 'Museum,' 'Imagination/s,' 'In Between Genres' and 'Space Grid.' While the introduction defines the project as parallel to the international art world, the next section, 'Context,' offers a dozen or so short essays on Hungarian art, its institutions, and its historiography between 1968 and 1973, including comments on the institutional system of fine arts, periodizations of Hungarian art, national and self-financed exhibitions, state museums and galleries, and alternative art spaces. This section, richly illustrated with archive photographs of catalogue covers, exhibition openings, and specific artworks, is a primary source of information on post-war Hungarian art. It also includes the biographical notes, short descriptions, and reproductions of thirty-five artworks presented in the 1971 – *Parallel Nonsynchronism* exhibition, ranging from the painting *Artists' March into the Art Fund* (1959) by Sándor Bortnyik (1893–1976) to the print *Hammer and Sickle* (1973) by Sándor Pinczehelyi (b. 1946), artists representing different generations, artistic milieux, and post-war trends.

A similar structure – essays illustrated with archival material, followed by a sequence of artwork reproductions – is applied in subsequent parts of the book. The many visual materials, archival data, and research perspectives are impressive, but the layout could, at times, be more transparent. This lack of clarity may also result from the general incompatibility between an exhibition space and the temporal structure of a book narrative. A reader who has not seen the exhibition cannot, in places, differentiate works presented at the Kiscell Museum Municipal Gallery in 2018 from those that serve only as illustrations to essays (the list of exhibited works at the end of the book is helpful). Regardless of such problems with navigation, the structure reflects the manifold and ambitious nature of 1971 – *Parallel Nonsynchronism*; the volume is an exhibition catalogue, a compendium of knowledge about Hungarian modern art, and an academic attempt at situating local art histories in an international context.

In the 'Museum' section, Enikő Róka and Zsóka Leposa outline a history of the museum collection as a context for the exhibition of Hincz and Somogyi it held in 1971 (see their 'Art Collection and State Representation at the Budapest History Museum'). This collection includes, for example, a bronze sculpture by Somogyi shown in 1970 in Venice and reproduced in the catalogue. Thus, the circulation of artworks can be traced from their presentation in the Hungarian pavilion to their presence in the museum collection. As Sándor Hornyik argues in his text 'Realism, Abstraction, and Contemporaneity: The Modernity of Lajos Németh's History of Modern Hungarian Art', 1968 was significant for Hungarian art historiography as the year of publication of Németh's *Modern Hungarian Art*, which began redefinition of the periodization of local twentieth-century art. Kinga Bódi and Barbara Dudás present the history of Hungarian participation in the Venice Biennale in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the biography of Lajos Vayer, then-commissioner of exhibitions in the national pavilion, and the historical context of Gyula Hincz's exhibitions organized around 1971 (see the essays: "I carried out the program according to plan": Lajos Vayer and the Hungarian Exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, 1968–1972' and 'On the Path Towards Triumph – Gyula Hincz at the 35<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale and the Budapest History Museum').

Many of the local stories presented in the catalogue catch the attention because of their parallels with more general phenomena. Csaba Gál's article 'Following the Red Thread in the 1960s–1970s Textile Art' provides a context for Endre Domanovszky's exhibitions in Budapest and Venice (1971–72). A remark that Domanovszky's designs 'were woven mostly by his wife' prompts the reader to raise issues of contemporary gender-oriented research on textile art and this medium's importance in East Central Europe; it is no accident that many artists from the region succeeded at the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962–95).

The 'Imagination/s' section includes a reconstruction and reinterpretations of László Beke's collection of Hungarian conceptual art, its 1971 display at the art historian's apartment, and its affinities with the 1972 *Imaginations* exhibition conceived by Márta Kovalovszky, an art historian at the King Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár. The section opens with brief notes about Beke's and Kovalovszky's projects, followed by a selection of the artworks included in the 1971 – *Parallel Nonsynchronism* exhibition. The section is supplemented by two essays analysing Beke's project and Kovalovszky's exhibition: Zsuzsa László's 'Realism of the Future: Debates around László Beke's Elképzelés (Imagination) Project', and Katalin Izinger's "'Wherever a door was left open, we got our foot in it.'" Bold and Careful: Exhibitions in the 1960s and the 1972 *Elképzélések* (Imaginations) Exhibition at the Székesfehérvár Museum'. The above summary may make the book's content appear complicated, but it follows the complexities of the 'moment,' 1971, selected from the history of Hungarian art. At this point, all theoretical ruminations on (art-)historical time presented in the introduction read as a reaction to the complex network of factual events meticulously documented in the 1971 – *Parallel Nonsynchronism* catalogue.

This section of the catalogue culminates with the late László Beke's clarifications of the concept of his collection (*Imagination*, 1971), constituting the basis of an exhibition presented at the Székesfehérvár Museum (1972), and his explanations of the title and concept of the exhibition 1971 – *Parallel Nonsynchronism*. Recalling the discipline of diagrammatology, which investigates the fundamental epistemological role of diagrams, Beke provides the reader with his drawings visualizing 'networks of relationships' in modern Hungarian art. At the end of the book, the reader discovers the similarities between Beke's project and Bloch's notion of non-synchronism and Mannheim's concept of generations.

Together with representations of historical time, the catalogue's English edition, intended for international readers, triggers questions about globalizing art history. How is global, or at least transnational or cross-cultural, art history possible when this academic discipline crystallized together with the concept of the nation-state during the nineteenth century? In contemporary debate, the argument that 'art history is closely affiliated with senses of national and regional identity' is not isolated.<sup>5</sup>

Still, the curators, editors, and contributors to the catalogue (fifteen altogether) have made the regional art and its political entanglements understandable to outsiders. For example, the essays in the 'Context' section are supplemented by a diagram which helps readers better understand the complex system of Hungarian cultural institutions during the Kádár era. The diagram represents centralized power structures, with the Central Committee of the Hun-

5) James Elkins, 'Art History as a Global Discipline', in James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?*, New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2007, 9.

garian Socialist Worker's Party at the top, and its subordinated Ministry of Culture managing four leading institutions (The Art Fund of the Hungarian People's Republic, The Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists, The Supervisory Body for Arts and Crafts, and The Institute for Cultural Connections), which were the bodies affecting the programs of art galleries, studios, exhibition institutions, museums, and cultural centres. This picture is indeed worth a thousand words. The names of such institutions differed in various countries of the former Soviet Bloc. However, the principles of the central management of culture, parallel forms of 'bottom-up' organization of artistic life, and the intermingling of the so-called 'official' and 'unofficial' art scenes show some similarities – for instance, with the organization of the art world and cultural diplomacy in the Polish People's Republic.

The catalogue includes brief biographies, descriptions of artworks, and histories of art milieu and movements, which help readers appreciate interpretations of modern Hungarian art. The authors justify their selection of events from the history of Hungarian art, situate them in the context of current research on East-Central European art, and address methodological issues as discussed 'globally' by art historians, thus enabling a comprehensive understanding of art and its institutions in state socialist Hungary. The advantage of the publication – in addition to its archive material – lies in its combination, in one volume, of an exhibition catalogue, a museum collection catalogue, academic articles, and biographical notes. This hypertext, which does not have to be read sequentially, is a collective art narrative presented by curators, researchers of exhibition histories, museologists, and artists. The more art historians confront the entanglements of time, the more they appreciate the polyphony of historical and methodological perspectives.



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