

The Great Book Theft

A Review of: Mária Árvai and Dániel Véri, *A nagy könyvlopás: Francia könyvkiállítás a vasfüggöny mögött / The Great Book Theft: French Book Exhibition behind the Iron Curtain*, Szentendre: Ferenczy Museum Center, 2020. pp. 200. ISBN 978-615-5860-16-4.

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On 24 October 1959 an exhibition of new French books opened at the Múcsarnok (Arts Hall) in Budapest. By the time the exhibition closed two weeks later, most of the books on display had been stolen by the visitors.

In the first instance, the above anecdote does not sound particularly significant, and certainly not an obvious subject for an exhibition in 2020. Yet, there is more to the story than meets the eye: it speaks of the great hunger for information in a country behind the Iron Curtain, the intricacies and contradictions of Cold War cultural diplomacy, the enduring reputation and influence of French art and culture in the mid-twentieth century, as well as the self-perceived cultural deficit of eastern Europe. The exhibition *The Great Book Theft* organised between 20 September 2019 and 1 March 2020 at the Ferenczy Museum Centre in Szentendre explored the event from these angles. The subject of the present review is the exhibition's catalogue, which presents the underlying research in the form of scholarly essays and oral history interviews.

By now, the reader has probably guessed that the culprits who stole books from the Múcsarnok were not hardened criminals, but Hungarian intellectuals eager to read and possess products of the French publishing industry that were otherwise out of their reach for political, as well as financial reasons. Some of them were students at the Art History Department of Eötvös Loránd University or at the College of Fine Arts, and it is this group that the exhibition and the catalogue have focused on. In 1959 Hungary had barely left behind its period of hardline Stalinism and was still reeling from the 1956 Revolution and the ensuing harsh retaliations. Those interested in modern art, especially modern art from western Europe or the USA, had few resources they could legally (or even semi-legally) access. One of the catalogue's main virtues is its meticulous reconstruction of this oppressive environment, mainly through the interviews conducted with a number of one-time students – now well-respected artists and art historians –, but also through archival research. The book begins with an annotated map that shows and introduces all the venues in inner-city Budapest where these young people could at least leaf through a limited range of publications on modern art: bookshops, libraries, foreign cultural institutes. Perhaps it would have been possible to make more of the spatiality of this little world: how did it fit into the fabric of the city? How did it relate to where the students lived? Nevertheless, even without such elaboration, this introduction provides the reader with an immediate, strong impression of the stifling atmosphere.

This almost immersive immediacy is crucial, because what first strikes the contemporary reader about this now sunken world is its difference. Indeed, it is tempting for the reviewer to

begin with melancholy musings on how difficult it is for us to understand this world today, when we have a vast, global knowledge base at our fingertips and the reproductions of most artworks we come across in our readings are just a Google away. Upon further thought, however, it is precisely this unnerving contrast that can help our understanding, because it makes the lack, the need, so blatant, so crystal clear. The catalogue provides a deep, thoughtful and nuanced examination of the different factors that created the situation of need in the 1950s, including not only the political constraints specific to the early post-war Communist era, but also the social and financial inequalities that are still with us, even if in different form. In the end, for all the historical difference of its subject, this catalogue is not a thrilling exploration of a strange and now exotic time, but a timely read about inequalities in information access, which can occur because of information scarcity, but also when valuable knowledge is buried under a deluge of fake or irrelevant news.

The exploration of the complexities and ambivalences of Cold War-era cultural politics, the myriad shades between resistance and collaboration, is currently one of the most fascinating and dynamically expanding research fields in eastern and central European art history and has been the subject of several important exhibitions and catalogues in Hungary in recent years.¹ The present catalogue contributes a new perspective through an unusual, yet fruitful topic. The first part consists of essays investigating the political and cultural background of the 1959 French book exhibition, which came into being when French and Hungarian authorities reached a fragile moment of cultural ceasefire after three years of ice-cold hostility following the Revolution in Hungary. It is probably no coincidence that the press conference for the exhibition was held on 23 October, the anniversary of the Revolution, and that it opened on the following day.

The studies in this catalogue illuminate the paradoxes of western-oriented Cold War Communist cultural diplomacy. On the one hand, such activities were seen as necessary, as they helped promote the Socialist cause and improve the external image of the country after the brutal repression of 1956. On the other hand, however, they threatened to help transmit subversive ideas to perceptive Hungarians. In their well-researched and thoughtful essays, the curators of the exhibition, Mária Árvai and Dániel Véri, examine the history of these interactions, with a special focus on Hungarian–French relations. In ‘From Mrs. Rákosi’s corsets to Honegger’s Oratorio: Chapters from the History of French Cultural Diplomacy in Hungary’, Árvai highlights the fraught situation of the Institut Français in Budapest, whose activities were sometimes allowed, sometimes banned. In the course of the 1950s multiple Hungarian employees of the Institut were arrested and imprisoned, and the French cultural attaché Guy Turbet-Delof (who had, admittedly, helped some Hungarian intellectuals escape to France after 1956) was under constant surveillance and threatened with expulsion. In this context, the 1959 book exhibition can be better understood as a sign of thawing political relations.

In ‘Books Crossing the Iron Curtain: French, Hungarians and the CIA,’ Véri investigates the book exhibitions held in the 1950s and early 1960s as an interaction from which both the ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ side sought to reap political returns. The French exhibition in Budapest was followed by a Hungarian book exhibition in Paris, which, however, caused a much smaller

1) Christian Drobe reviewed two of these in the previous issue of our journal: ‘Abstraction in Hungary,’ *Art East Central* 1, 2021, 147–151.

stir in the French capital: while the exotic fruit of literature from the other side of the Iron Curtain had the potential to cause some *frisson*, the books were mostly in Hungarian, and hence inaccessible to the audience. The essay emphasises the not-so-altruistic reasons why western states disseminated their culture to the Eastern Bloc, including the CIA's oft-cited involvement in the promotion of abstract art. A lesser-known venture was the distribution of books to Eastern Bloc intellectuals by the CIA through intermediaries in western Europe. Between 1956 and 1991 this venture comprised almost ten million volumes. While obviously a weapon of soft power in the Cold War, this was – as the essays, as well as the interviews explain – an invaluable resource for those who wished to gain a broader view of global culture than the one afforded by resources accessible in Hungary. For instance, two of the most sought-after works disseminated this way were Herbert Read's books on modern painting and sculpture.

The essays explain the context and set the scene, but it is the interviews that truly fill the catalogue with life. While preparing the exhibition, the curators spoke to ten artists and art historians about their access to information on western modern art. The basis for selecting the interviewees was their involvement in *The Great Book Theft*, but they all also talk about other resources, their life strategies in the years around 1959, and the role the events and venues mentioned in the catalogue played in their lives. It is one thing to read, in the essays, that the Foreign Language Bookshop was an important venue for accessing literature about western art, and another to find out how the artist László Gyémánt was saving up money for almost a year to buy an album on Jackson Pollock, of which just one single copy was available, only to be disappointed by the American artist's drawings when he was finally able to peruse the book as a potential customer. As for the book theft itself: the significance of the book exhibition becomes tangible once the interviewees explain the irresistible allure of the beautifully produced French art books, which were otherwise completely inaccessible to them, in most cases even in libraries. Despite the high monetary value, they did not steal heaps of the books, just one or two they liked and needed. Many of them held on to these volumes through the decades afterwards and were now able to loan them to the exhibition. And even so, many of the interviews betray long-lasting embarrassment at the act of stealing – despite the not-so-secret fact that, in yet another act of shrewd cultural warfare, the French organisers had actually expected the books to be stolen and had not even arranged return transport.

Although the catalogue is bilingual (Hungarian–English), there are layers to these interviews that can only be appreciated by Hungarian readers familiar with the people in question: readers who belong to the community of Hungarian art historians. It is, for instance, poignant to read about the amount of effort that went into building up the collection of slides at the Art History Department, the collection that was still used to teach this reviewer and which has of course become obsolete in the age of PowerPoint. It is highly moving to find out that Ernő Marosi, the future influential Professor of Medieval Art who sadly passed away last year, stole a book on Romanesque art, hence standing out from among the other participants who mostly focused on much-coveted modern art. Indeed, some of the appeal of this catalogue certainly rests on the general appeal of stories about important people being young and unruly, and this can only be appreciated by those who understand the part these people played in the community. Although the English translation includes biographical footnotes about the interviewees and other people mentioned, these do not provide sufficient context to orientate an outsider. This

is not a serious flaw, as there is no easy solution to the problem: it would probably require a whole separate essay solely for non-Hungarian readers, which is not feasible within the scope of a bilingual catalogue. Still, it raises a general, often-occurring issue: English translations alone are in most cases not sufficiently informative for international readers, and a more complete transcultural translation would require the production of separate texts for this purpose – something that is in most cases impossible due to budgetary and staff constraints.

Nevertheless, while these accessibility problems might prevent non-Hungarian readers from fully appreciating certain aspects of the topic, they do not hinder the understanding of the core issues. Quite to the contrary: the catalogue offers much to ponder for non-Hungarian readers. It is of interest not only as an analysis of the cultural politics of the Cold War or of a section of everyday life under Communism, but also holds wider lessons about knowledge exchange and cultural power. There is, for instance, something uncomfortable about French cultural officials expecting Hungarian intellectuals to steal books at an exhibition. Yes, this is a story specific to a highly regulated, dictatorial environment where these books could not be disseminated in any other way. Yet, it is also a more general story about haves and have-nots; about cultural ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’, if you will. In this respect, it is important that the catalogue highlights not just the political, but also the financial constraints these young students faced. Some books were there, in the bookshop, but still far out of reach.

Furthermore, through its careful examination of the effects of a closed society, closed borders, and restricted access to information on the lives and careers of art historians, the book also adds an important perspective to discussions about the internationalisation of art history and the inclusion of east European voices in global narratives. Questions such as why art historians in eastern Europe have tended to focus on the art of their own country and region are here answered through material facts. These are issues that resonate through the decades, in a country where eminent historian of avant-garde art Krisztina Passuth could still be reprimanded in the mid-1970s at her workplace, the Museum of Fine Arts, for taking lessons in the French language from a native-speaking French instructor employed at the Institut Français. These occurrences now almost seem absurd, but they inevitably influenced the directions Hungarian art historiography was able to take, and hence helped shape its existing tradition. As we come to terms with this fact, new questions emerge about how political pressures and financial disparities can still hinder access and create cultural imbalance, at a time when information flows much more freely than in the 1950s and 1960s. These are questions that all attempts at globalising art history will have to be able to face.



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