

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 1

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I decided to try to briefly show a variety of projects that show some different approaches – one of which is work in public space that consists of quite temporary and spontaneous interventions, and some other works that have dealt with social issues and themes of representation and economics and have been created collaboratively as part of an artist group. We'll come to those later. I might skip through them a bit, and if you need more information, maybe you can ask questions later.

The first work I'd like to show was something that I did in Budapest, where I went on a residency and lived for two years. I was there just after the mid 90s, when there were still a lot of quite visible effects of the social, political and economic transformation from a Socialist to capitalist economy that I was very interested in responding to. As an outsider going there, I felt a kind of freedom to make quite spontaneous work. One work that I did was called *Distance Correction*. It was in one of the metro subways, where there was a lot of signs indicating how far it was to the next McDonald's or Dunkin' Donuts. They were all like saying very round numbers like sixty or eighty metres. I borrowed a measuring wheel from the police and measured each of these and corrected them. (Laughing) I've only got those two examples, but I corrected all of them in the same kind of graphics, so it wasn't really obvious whether this intervention was graffiti, art or advertising and probably as a result they stayed up for a long time. The initial idea came from something quite distant to Budapest, actually. I had been following the McLibel trial in the British press and, so started with the McDonald's advert, but also moved on to some other adverts that were in the same space. The idea came from how in that trial, the London Greenpeace activists lost some of the points of their case on a question of the accuracy of their figures, and so, in this case, I just thought that if I do something here and McDonald's choose to sue me, I've got more accurate information than them. (Laughing)

Also one thing that struck me about being there was the ease with which far right groups could assemble and protest or make demonstrations in the streets. From my experience in Britain or Germany there were always big counter demonstrations to any gatherings of far right groups, but to this group in Hungary that gathered and marched through all the main streets, there was virtually no opposition. There was one girl, who threw an egg, and some guys ran after her, but apart from that there was almost nothing. I documented some of their gatherings, and also, the stickers which were visible throughout the city and which used the symbol of a cog - because more fascistic symbols are banned - yet obviously has a lot of visual similarities to the Swastika, just from the colours and the shapes. Also the statements are very certain, definite statements, like the top one, which says, 'Work, law and honour', and the

second one is, 'Hungary against NATO.' There were other ones that were directly anti-Semitic and said, 'kick out the blood sucking foreigners' and things like that.

Ross Sinclair: Like you?

DH: Yeah, exactly.

(Laughing.)

RS: Nothing personal though.

(Laughing.)

DH: I made a series of stickers that I put up around the city, and these were obviously based on the originals, but I wanted to make them fuzzier, out of focus, with soft colours and very vague comments. One says, 'Maybe sometimes it could be possible,' and another, 'I'm not sure about this anymore,' or, 'I need a bit more time to think about this.' (Laughing) I put these around the city in the same places that these other ones were. The far right group doesn't really exist anymore. They got banned, and the leader went off to live in Australia, which was ironic for a far right nationalist to become an immigrant. Another public interventionist sticker work was in a public square called Batthyanyi Square, where every day, a lot of homeless people would gather and sell stuff that they'd found from the bins and recycle them - clean them up a bit and try to sell them. It was there every day, a regular feature of this square, until one day I went there and it was completely cleared, and I asked around what had happened, and it turned out that the mayor of that district wanted to clear the square in order to renovate it, and what that turned out to be was to install a couple of benches - so it didn't really require the whole square to be cleared. Where they got moved to was across the road, and that road is the border of district one, so they were moved into a different city district, and in effect, it became someone else's problem to deal with this officially illegal flea market. I wanted to draw attention to this movement, so I made a sticker - that can be seen on the left side - a simple icon representing one of the flea market vendors standing above his wares, and put it next to the existing symbols that were there for the metro. Again, rather than installing something that was an obvious defacement or piece of art or graffiti, I wanted to leave something that could look like an official addition. It points towards the new location of the market and also across the river to the parliament, so that even after a few months when the vendors got moved from that spot and the market reassembled itself in another city square, the sticker continued to function, but in another way, as it pointed towards the parliament.

A new project developed out of that work, more specifically it developed out of the photographs that I'd taken as research documents. I took a series of photographs and because I had access to a dark room there, printed them in black and white. Despite being used to being relatively broke most of the time, as I reflected on the resulting images, I felt quite uncomfortable about how those I was representing were in an involuntary and far more severe situation of poverty than I had ever been. Out of that questioning a project developed in which the issue of the very visible problem of homelessness there, which I felt was quite different to the kind of homelessness that I'd seen in Britain, could be addressed, but through the process of which, I would try

to invert the point of view from being that of an outsider looking in, to having the images produced be from those who were inside the situation being represented. Together with another Hungarian artist, Miklós Erhardt, we collaborated, giving out single-use disposable cameras to people in a variety of homeless situations, both in a variety of shelters: single night shelters, month long stay shelters, women's shelters, children's shelters; and on the streets. In so doing, trying to cover a broad range of what falls under the definition of homelessness. We would meet again about a week later, collect the cameras, then when we got the photographs developed, meet again and record an interview with each person about the pictures that they'd taken, knowing that we were going to present them in two exhibitions, in a way that didn't give priority to the aesthetics, but would incorporate the text as an aid to providing a context to each person's image. We made one exhibition in an art gallery and one in the largest homeless shelter in Budapest. The two we felt were important: the gallery because of the academic nature of the Budapest art scene at that time, with its quite elitist selection of who could show in galleries, so in a way, having these homeless, non-artists showing in a prime Budapest gallery, was a small provocation. The other exhibition, in the homeless shelter was intended so that the 'community' that took the photographs could view and reflect on their own situation. The opening in the gallery especially was very well attended. This is one of the participants with his pictures – a selection of about five photographs from each participant was exhibited with the comments below. A website was also made, and some postcards were made that could be sold by some homeless street vendors along with their 'Big Issue' equivalent magazines.

Subsequently, we got invited to propose a work in Turin, for the Biennial in 2002. The context in Italy at that time was quite interesting. Berlusconi was in power in a coalition with some far right elements, presiding over one of Europe's most extensive and porous borders while a relatively new wave of immigration - some legal and some illegal for economic reasons or some seeking political asylum - coming from outside the prosperous EU countries was taking place, resulting in the very noticeable presence of immigrants from outside of Italy. Despite the now integrated settlers from the south having been discriminated against when they arrived to the north in the 50s and 60s, there was quite a lot of quite openly racist sentiment against this new wave of immigrants. So we decided to do a project that would address this situation in the city. First of all, through a variety of contacts that we made at health centres and services, shelters, social centres or political groups that provided assistance to immigrants, we made contact with around 30 recent immigrants from a variety of countries. On a page with the central train station, Porta Nuova - which is the most common arrival point for a lot of immigrants into Turin - in the centre, we began by asking each participant to sketch their ideas of what features constitute the city for them. Participants were asked in to indicate particular places on their maps such as: where they go to eat, sleep, where they'd had a good experience or a bad experience, places that remind them of their home country, where they go to meet friends and relax. They were then given a camera and asked them to photograph each of the places they'd marked on their maps and afterwards, when we'd printed the images we recorded and transcribed their comments. Most of the resulting photographs were of urban landscapes – trees, cars, streets, buildings, and buses – not really people, because taking pictures of people who may have entered the country illegally would cause problems. As with the 'Inside Out' project, the pictures didn't necessarily have to be beautiful – though a lot of them were – and each image was given a context by

the corresponding comment. There's not really time to read them here, but there's a website with all this documented.¹ Each person's individual map was synthesised into a composite map which only included the parts of Turin that were mentioned by the participants, and an installation was made with that map overhead and pictures and comments hanging below, corresponding to the area of the city in which they were taken.

At that point, we were working under our own names, but when we got invited to some more exhibitions, we decided to start working under a group name, *Big Hope*, partly because we felt we were collaborating with other people and it didn't feel quite right foregrounding our names in projects that had many participants.

This was in a building in Zagreb where we worked with logos of local companies - small scale local companies that were slowly going out of business and dying out as they became consumed in the inexorable process of economic globalisation. We used these letters that were part of logos to write the slightly banal statement, 'Where do we end and they begin?' around the outside of the building in Croatian. In 2002 this related to George Bush's 'with us or against us' statements, but also to the slow dying out of these smaller businesses as the bigger global companies move in. In a similar vein, back in Hungary again, in 2003, we worked on a project in a new town called Dunaújváros, which was originally called Stalin Town when it was built around a new iron works as a kind of socialist utopian new town in the 50s. People that lived there found it a good place to live but now, but with Hungary now having entered the European Union, the iron works is no longer economically competitive and a lot of people in the town are losing their jobs. We were interested in trying to start some conversations about economics with a variety of workers in the town. We met and recorded interviews with ten people working in jobs ranging from traditional production jobs to academic and service sector jobs, for example a mechanic, school teacher, waiter, EU advisor. We asked for their opinions on the role of economics in society and their idea of what constituted a good and a bad economy. Some comments we got back were quite banal and some quite astute, but most were critical of economic globalisation and how it's affecting them. We took an image of each of the work places - this is obviously a mechanic in the factory workplace, and presented the work in the gallery with that image alongside a corresponding selection of the interview text. There was also a video, which you can see in the corner there, on which we presented more in depth comments from each person, and also made a printed newspaper that could be taken away from the gallery for further reading. The idea of that was to have different levels of engagement with the work, that there could be this quite surface level where you just read a couple of comments, maybe stay half an hour and watch the video, if you wanted to read more you could take the paper away. Part of the thinking about that was the problem of excessive documentation that can be found in galleries with these kinds of projects, and the unrealistic amount of time people are expected to stay and read up on something. Although we could agree with the many comments that were quite critical of economic globalisation, we felt that the outcome was something that could come across as quite negative, and so we began a subsequent project that we called *Commonopoly*, in which we tried to highlight some of the ideas of possible economic alternatives.

¹ www.bighope.hu

Commonopoly, is obviously a play on the game *Monopoly*, but again with this question about documentation, rather than present a lot of information about our research into alternative economies, we decided to make a more playful game like format, where through engaging in a series of activities that represented a kind of synthesis of the fundamental concepts of some alternative economies, players could gain some very general understanding of existing concepts to be expanded upon and related to their everyday experience and environment. It takes the appearance of a game, but there's no winner, so it's more like a series of activities. You roll this coloured dice, land on one of the boxes, flip up the coloured flap and read the instruction of what you should do with the object or the book or the photograph in the corresponding box – sometimes you have to collaborate with another player in the game to exchange something or to add or to offer something. Some of the ideas were based on research of practical activities and initiatives that exist in Berlin. Like there's a free shop where people give things they don't need, and anyone can go and take some things that they need without paying. There are exchange rings, where people have formed a non-cash currency of hours exchanged providing and receiving services. There are also various cooperative kitchens where you can get very cheap food, and there are groups that are working on the ideas of commons, such as campaigning for free entry to swimming baths, park areas and public transport. So these were some of the concepts that we tried to include in the game. It's been shown in about four places, and three of the places were exhibitions with a theme of economics that also included Oliver. I think they complimented each other quite well, because Oliver's work contains a deeper explication of different, alternative economies – whereas *Commonopoly* includes a brief but more hands on and playful engagement with some of those same ideas.

This next project was something in Graz, in Austria that we were invited to do. It's called the *Protest Songbook*. We sent emails out to people we knew asking them to contribute an idea of a protest song that resonated with them somehow, or had some impact, and to write a little bit about why and what way they found it was successful as a song. The reason for that came from my own strong interest in playing and also in the listening to music, and thinking about how different that is from my approach visual art. Usually I appreciate art that deals with political themes much more, whereas with music, that's not really a criteria for my enjoyment of it – it's more of an emotional expression, and certain protest songs if attached to a particular issue can become outdated. So this work started from an interest in exploring the differences between those mediums. Miklós and myself performed some of these songs in the gallery and also on the streets of Graz. (Laughing) We took the installation out onto the streets. There was also a radio programme part to it – in one of the corners of the exhibition space you could listen to interviews that we did with Ross Birrell, Martha Rosler, the artist in New York, and Elio Gilardi, who's part of the creative group within the Turin Disobbedienti activist group. The way that they started using samba music at their demonstrations was very interesting, so he talked about that. So we asked different questions about the relationship between music and art and politics.

The last one, just to mention briefly was called *The Threepenny Video* and was, again, dealing with economics. We were invited to an exhibition in Budapest on a theme of Brecht - it was the anniversary of Brecht's birth and we decided to work with *The Threepenny Opera*, which contained some caricaturing of polarised figures within Capitalism - the bad business guy, the poor beggars and also someone who's

exploiting the beggars by making a business out of them. We did two workshops – one with a group of homeless people, and one with a group of business people, where we presented certain scenes from the film, using those as provocations in order to document some responses. For example, in the film there's a part where the beggars organise a demonstration, and we asked the participants in the homeless workshop if they could imagine organising a demonstration? What would they put on the placards and where would they march? Also with the business people, we used Brecht's provocations against the criminality of business to see how they responded. So in a sense, it was a way of making our own role sort of neutral, because we could use Brecht as the person making accusations and gather responses from contemporary representatives of those characters. We made two videos with streaming text as the translation, which in this case was German and the original language was Hungarian.