

Nikolett Erőss

Triple Braid, or, What Gives Us Reason to Hope?

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As far as I can remember, last year was the longest one of all. Although we wish to put it behind us, the path it put us on will extend further than we may think. We continue on our protracted journey, carrying the baggage of loss and lessons on our back. All the while we keep gathering into it the things we need in order to understand and endure the “new normal.” On account of the pandemic, even those who had never really faced such issues before have now experienced vulnerability and lack of safety. But the lives of those who lacked safety to begin with became even more burdensome. We’re navigating the same storm, but we are not sitting in the same boat by any measure. We each began our journeys in different vessels, from dinghy to ocean liner.

In Hungary, the country where I live, the government is not unique: it intends to give people a sense of safety by pointing at potential enemies and taking action against them. Besides immigrants, the impoverished and the Roma minority are also in the Hungarian government’s crosshairs, as well as LGBTIQ+ communities. Those who aim to rewrite stereotypical gender roles are considered suspicious at best, just like the NGOs that address dire problems and provide help where it is otherwise lacking.

In addition to other changes, the pandemic has resulted in an even stronger incoherence between hypothetical and real enemies, and has deepened social inequalities and deficiencies in fundamental access to sanitation, infrastructure, and healthcare. We are undergoing a crisis that claims lives in the tens of thousands and results in the existential undoing of hundreds of thousands. It was caused neither by immigrants swarming our homeland, nor by rainbow families disrupting traditional values, nor “unpatriotic” NGOs. We are undergoing a crisis that does not afflict all of us equally.

As in many other countries across the Central and Eastern European region, the pre-pandemic operation of institutional power in recent years had already undermined public confidence in the system’s ability to maintain democracy and justice in Hungary. Years before Covid’s disasters exacerbated the situation, Hungarians found it ever so easy to give up on institutions whose professional autonomy had been curtailed, and which were reduced, via government seizures or closures, to pawns in power maneuvers – that is, if the news of their loss even got out.¹

Instead of reclaiming these institutions, it is proving more viable to create extra-institutional initiatives capable of taking responsibility for themselves. Often these are the programs and groups that stick around to see the painful wounds of the collective body, that tend to them

and facilitate healing, that share news and raise hope.

A project that my colleagues and I worked years to develop was set to open to the public in spring 2020 – but then the pandemic engulfed Europe. The OFF-Biennale, which would've had its third edition last year, is a grassroots series of events in Budapest initiated outside the system of art institutions, realized with the participation of independent curators, artists, cultural organizers, and civil initiatives, and without Hungarian state resources.² Knowing that in today's Hungary, most cultural production is state-financed, such DIY detachment is a token of independence for ourselves and the projects we represent – even if any form of independence here can only be relative.

OFF creates a platform for dealing with topics that are either excluded from mainstream political discourse or are represented as a danger to national integrity. It is a long-term engagement involving extensive collaboration and a context-responsive *modus operandi*. From 2020 onward, the shutdowns and lack of personal presence have enhanced the ongoing projects with new perspectives, including increasing the stakes for those that were conceived in collaboration with marginalized communities, and highlighting issues of representation and care.

In the age of neoliberal self-care, the initiatives represented in OFF are defined by collective responsibility and collective care. They are based on, and also publicly disseminate, knowledge that is otherwise widely inaccessible.

Such collective practices of solidarity are positioned between two extremes on the spectrum of care: on the one hand, invisible domestic work carried out predominantly by women, and on the other, state welfare systems. These two disparate types of collective bodies are both underappreciated and underfinanced.



PAD Foundation for Environmental Justice, from the project *Everyday Shortcomings*, 2021. Photo: PAD / Barnabás Neogrady-Kiss.

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Water

People who live on the margins of society, who have to perform hard labor to receive basic services that are a given for the majority in Central and Eastern Europe, are collectively rendered invisible. An existential precarity defines almost every minute of quotidian life for those who suffer from a lack of public services. It is unfathomably difficult to escape this situation, which is not a result of individual decisions. Hungary does not suffer from a shortage of water; nevertheless, tens of thousands of households have no access to water in their own homes. Thus, a significant part of many peoples' days is spent lugging plastic buckets to and from public wells to get the most basic means for cooking, personal hygiene, and cleaning. Winter through summer, day and night. Water-related household chores are generally done by women, whose domestic work is already invisible by default. The cruel and unnecessary resource scarcity they disproportionally have to deal with is the result of a systemic, structural defect.

Sometimes, during heatwaves, public wells are shut off. This gesture is nothing other than the Hungarian government's show of power, a political weapon aimed at those living in poverty.

If they do emerge from invisibility, people experiencing poverty are framed as lazy and squalid by Hungary's mainstream media; they're consistently represented as passive, apathetic people who refuse to do anything to improve their lives. One focus of the PAD Foundation for Environmental Justice is altering the tone of the visual representation of poverty.³ Deeply rooted visual clichés, negative stereotypes, and sometimes even shows of solidarity can obscure our view of the systemic issues determining poverty in the first place. PAD's team, composed of cultural anthropologists and visual artists, carries out long-term collaborations with excluded communities deprived of public services. Their aim is to co-facilitate solutions to poverty in a manner devoid of any sense of shame. The process of seeking solutions is rendered visible; community members are its productive, creative agents.

Another aspect of this work is revealing the time-consuming challenges that residents of these precarious, isolated settlements deal with on a daily basis. Time passes differently if you need to fill a bathtub with water from a public well that's dozens or even hundreds of meters away, or when, in the winter, frozen wells must first be defrosted by starting a fire. PAD aims to bring these processes into focus instead of simply portraying images of the people who carry them out. The latter can lead to romanticizing poverty, which, according to PAD, can mask the dysfunctionality of the system and the responsibility of those in power, or create a tendency to blame the individual for their systemically induced hardships.

The visual representation of poverty is reorganized by involving those living it in the creation of the images emerging from their existence. One stage of the project involved a public installation made from everyday objects that were no longer in use in residents' households, but that somehow related to the infrastructural shortcomings that circumscribed their days. As people in the neighborhood are always forced into the role of solving some problem with their living conditions, the PAD team augmented the advocacy process with a series of artistic acts that represent this DIY work as a community effort, rendering it visible to the community as well as the social majority, which would otherwise look away or askance.

In the process of creating the monumental artwork, which measured three meters in height, weighed approximately three hundred kilograms, and was coated in white after assembly, the

people involved could experience the transformation of their individual quotidian efforts into a tangible and symbolic form of community action. Such experiences are often missing from neighborhoods on the so-called margins. The installation will be displayed in the central square of the city that the segregated settlement is part of. The collective artwork outlines a fresher and more sensitive image of stigmatized neighborhoods along with a history of the objects that come from them.

The clear line between the lack of public services and the extreme living conditions that such deprivation generates is rarely presented to the broad public. In large part this is for want of appropriate spaces for public communication and informed means of representation and self-representation. The few journalistic platforms that are still standing – the majority of the Hungarian media is now centralized under government control – also regularly use visual clichés to represent those forced to the periphery of society. Thus it is up to collaborative, grassroots initiatives to create new platforms and modes of representation.



Alicja Rogalska with Katalin Erdődi, Réka Annus, and the Women's Choir of Kartal, *News Medley*, 2020. Video still: Árpád Horváth.

Sound

If state television channels confuse information with propaganda, if dissident radio stations are deprived of their broadcast frequency, if local papers are bought up by government-friendly companies and forced to align their reporting accordingly, little opportunity remains to convey personal stories or the experiences of a community. This remains just as true when it is not an option to share these stories on the internet because of infrastructure deficiencies or a less digitally networked lifestyle.

In the past year, though, there was one mostly forgotten channel that the project *News Medley* revived and filled with new content. Artist Alicja Rogalska, curator Katalin Erdődi, and folk singer Réka Annus spent time working

with a locally renowned women's choir in Kartal, a small village in central Hungary. Stepping out of the shadow of the patriarchy, choir members could collaboratively present the life experiences of rural women, disclose their stories that have otherwise been omitted from public discourse, and voice their desires for change. The women's choir was formed in the early 1980s as the successor to the local cooperative's choir, which had been established decades earlier. The artistic team and the choir members selected songs from the group's regular repertoire and collectively wrote new lyrics for them. These alternate lyrics tell the stories of the women's lives, their relation to work and familial expectations, and the coercions and constraints they experience – all in a manner that allows their individual voices to emphasize collective experiences.

The Women's Choir of Kartal is in a special position; unlike similar communities elsewhere, it's not only the elderly of this village who gather to sing and put on public performances. The group also has young members, thus maintaining an intergenerational continuity that is scarce in more homogeneous choirs. The choristers' stories reach back as far as the decades of communism, the period of forced collectivization. They also include the experiences of the recent post-socialist past, as well as of the present.

The news items eventually included in the project's medley of repurposed songs were the result of a monthslong collaboration that continuously expanded spheres of trust. In this particular news outlet, the personal is the political and the private is the public. Topics include hard labor the women have done since childhood, underpaid factory work, the search for individual paths through the regime change of '89, the burden of domestic work that has always been their lot in life and has never been monetarily compensated, forced marriages, and the shame of divorce. A film of *News Medley* was made, and it starts with this enumeration of hardships. As the women sing in a closed circle, facing outwards, and as the personal topics shift towards matters of the village and the choir, their faces open up and the circle dances with arms interlocking. This progressing formation literally embodies collective trust and the supportive power of community. The lyrics become increasingly reflective, rebellious, and also humorous, reinforcing the creators' intentions for *News Medley* to operate as a document of a subaltern counterpublic, à la Nancy Fraser.⁴ The alternative public created by these women allows those who are excluded from dominant narratives and platforms to be heard. Several disparate worldviews are encountered within the

choir; the members' convictions are far from similar. Singing and dancing in a circle creates a powerful bond while simultaneously allowing for difference: turning outward and inward takes place on the boundary between the outside world and the safe space provided by the community.

In this terrain of personal struggles extended into a collective space, the women in the choir also seem to see their own lives in a different light (shed by the encounter between different opinions and approaches). Their rewriting of folk songs at once strengthens and breaks tradition, both reaching back to a traditional form from the past and radicalizing it into a contemporary mode of exchange.

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Tamás Péli, *Birth*, 1983. Installation view, "Collectively Carried Out," OFF-Biennale, Budapest History Museum, 2021. Photo: Ákos Keppel, BTM.

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Oil

We rarely experience a painting metamorphosing into an event – the air around the artwork beginning to stir and becoming perceptibly refreshed. Recently, however, one painting did just that. This was made possible by the tenacious, decades-long work of several people who participated in this metamorphosis.

A Hungarian painter of Roma descent, Tamás Péli completed his panel painting *Birth* in 1983. The enormous work, painted on fiberboard, is an allegorical vision of the origin of the Roma people and their integration into Hungarian society. It was conceived and exhibited at the refectory of a children's home that operated in a late-nineteenth-century mansion in Tiszadob, a small village in the Northern Great Plain region of Hungary. The painting held special significance at an institution that predominantly housed Roma children who, through loss of family and community, suffered irreparable damage to their knowledge of their people's origin and culture. The process of making the painting was an event

in itself: as a prominent member of a circle of Roma intellectuals that first formed in the 1970s, Péli created a truly discursive space by inviting his disciples and colleagues to help complete the work.

The children's home operated until 2007, and then the mansion underwent renovation starting in 2011. The children would never return to the beautiful building complex reminiscent of a château in the Loire Valley. Nor would the painting. Dismantled into four panels, it was wrapped up and left in the corridor of a museum in the nearby city of Nyíregyháza, forgotten. A mythical, community-forming and -preserving artwork, rendered invisible in this manner, was deprived of its magical powers.

While the painting is powerful and culturally significant, it is not unproblematic. In fact, the reason the painting has become so important to Roma and non-Roma people alike is that the work – despite its fundamental optimism – provokes a number of unsettling questions about Roma (and other minorities') identity, as well as their contemporary culture and the institutions that maintain it, or rather the lack thereof.

The mythological core of the painting is the goddess Kali, who shows her son, Manush, to a god on horseback. They are surrounded by symbolic animal figures and scenes that refer to the roles of the Roma people in Hungarian history, complemented by the representation of Roma intellectuals who were influential figures at the time the painting was conceived. This group of intellectuals also comprised the painting's first spectators, besides the children. Rendered in vivid colors, the vast mythological-historical vision the artwork depicts extends as far as the recent past, and its future is being revised now, in the present.

As a prerequisite to this revision, conditions for its renewed visibility had to be created. The three curators of the "Collectively Carried Out" exhibition – sociologist Anna Szász, historian Eszter György, and literary historian Teri Szűcs – have been planning to present the painting for years. On account of the painting's enormous physical dimensions, its fragility, and the deficiencies of the infrastructure of host institutions, their project was thwarted time and again. My OFF-Biennale colleagues and I started working on the possibility of exhibiting the painting in Budapest as part of the biennial, and we found a partner in the Budapest History Museum. The exhibiting conditions provided by that institution – museum infrastructure and a generous, ornate, historic environment in the former Royal Palace at the Buda Castle – stand in stark contrast to the narrow museum corridor where the painting has hidden over the past decade. That contrast is necessary for initiating

broad discourse around the work.

The current government has sought to use the area around the historic Buda Castle as a representation of its power. The new quarters it established around the historic building complex allow less and less room for the cultural and academic institutions that moved there during the socialist period, which now once again face, or have already undergone, relocation. The Budapest History Museum is run by the opposition-led Municipality of Budapest and, in remaining in the castle, occupies a rather emblematic site. The museum's recently revamped vision, which is more open to community thinking and sees conflict as constructive, is favorably suited to the presentation of the Péli panels.

Hungary has no Roma art collections, and Roma contemporary art is scarcely, if at all, represented in public collections. Because museums, since the nineteenth century, have generally functioned to embody and strengthen the ideology of the nation-state, and because this remains the case in Hungary, the Roma people have had no place in Hungarian museums. Tamás Péli's painting was made for a community space not only because this was where he could best fulfil his intention for the piece, but also because there was no question of the art establishment making room for it.

Conceiving of a collection of Roma contemporary art today requires an artistic approach, as the existing institutional infrastructure is insufficient and occasionally even obstructive. The imagination of Hungarian art institutions is still strongly bound to the decades-long practice of ethnographically presenting Roma art – the liberation of which is one of the project's goals. Presentation and visibilization is but a point of departure, and Péli's painting is a Trojan horse that allows perspectives opposed to preserving the canon to slip into the very space that hosts it. This raises an array of questions regarding Roma contemporary art as well as Roma integration and autonomy, all without disregarding these realities as they pertain to art institutions and all they represent. The RomaMoMA project, a collaboration with ERIAC in Berlin, is a partner in such thinking, having undertaken the theoretical construction and performative creation of a potential Roma Museum of Contemporary Art.

Is there a need for a Roma museum of contemporary art? Who would shape its collections, and according to what criteria? Is it possible to avoid the traps of stereotypical representation? How would such a collection represent the civil rights and emancipatory struggles of the Roma people, along with the historical and present-day contexts of these

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efforts? These are the questions that inform the discourse around RomaMoMA, which defines itself through works and collaborations, and prefiguratively creates itself, its own setting, and its public, without waiting for the establishment of a stable infrastructural foundation.

The Péli panels tell a story of multitudinous birth: the birth of the Roma people, the “Romangarian” / “Hungaroma” people, the birth of the Roma intellectual movement that’s been active since the seventies and is now experiencing its own rebirth. It is a mythical artwork empowered by the Roma community, which, in looking after the painting, in fact looks after its itself. The painting has several wounds: the fiberboard is pierced by screws, the surface is chipped along the corners and edges, and the assembly, disassembly, and moving of the four panels has also left several scars. The thoughtful installation in the Budapest History Museum by artist Tamás Kaszás erects a stage made of raw planks, battens, and laths, whose dimensions are identical to those of the painting. The artwork’s four panels are installed on this structure, each an inch apart, seemingly conscious of being torn apart yet belonging together.

By connecting the mythological origin of the Roma people and their embeddedness in Hungarian history to the self-representational statement of a contemporary (1980s) artist, Péli positions the work in the tradition of European historical-allegorical painting. He places it in another tradition as well, which is more contradictory and problematic from a contemporary perspective. The extremely eroticized representation of Roma women in the piece ranks them lower in the fight for independence. They are but decorative extras in the painting; despite their powerful presence, they are exposed to the male gaze. Péli’s work was a gigantic emancipatory step towards the recognition of the Roma people and Roma art, but he left the task of women’s emancipation to women themselves. This is also the painting’s legacy, which we should draw on nevertheless – and debate fiercely.

This combination of personal and political engagement is evident in all the aforementioned collaborations comprising the OFF-Biennale. These projects provide platforms of participation where people silenced and made invisible by hegemony are their own agents in becoming heard and seen. OFF intends to support, expand, and interlink all of the efforts represented in the show. The idea is to have a space where small islands of freedom can adjoin – a space that facilitates thinking about the nature of the collective body, which is otherwise difficult to define. This edition of the OFF-Biennale seeks to

reflect on whom we should show solidarity with and what duties and responsibilities this entails for our organization. Instead of the (more or less) predictable functioning of government-financed art institutions, OFF is defined by constant adaptation to changing situations – which sometimes feels like trying to build a foundation on quicksand. Nevertheless, to our collaborators and partners we seek to offer stability and solidarity.

In Hungary, it is difficult to talk about the collective body because the metaphor of the national body looms in the background. The latter is a vague concept; we hear about its sublime quality, but also about its pain and wounds, about the dangers afflicting it, and about those whose presence disturbs it, those who basically do not belong in it. The national body is posited as a given entity, its order and maintenance determined by the ruling power. By contrast, the communities of the excluded and their allies shape themselves – *embody* themselves – collectively. This does not magically render collaboration easy, as synthesizing diverse ideas is a long learning process for all. The freedom inherent in it, though, is the very life energy of the variable, vulnerable, and constantly evolving collective body.

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The process of transferring a number of higher-education institutions (including their real-estate assets) from public ownership to foundations set up by the state is called a "model shift." In these cases, professional and economic decisions are made by a politically based board. One prominent, recent example of the transfer of public assets to foundations and the erosion of university autonomy is the case of the University of Theater and Film. See Nagy Gergely, "Stateless Democracy at an Occupied University," trans. Péter Veres, *artportal*, January 9, 2021 <https://artportal.hu/magazin/stateless-democracy-at-an-occupied-university/>.

2

See <https://offbiennale.hu/2021>.

3

See <http://pad.network/about-us/>.

4

See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25–26 (1990): 56–80. See also: Alicja Rogalska, Katalin Erdődi, and Réka Annus, "There Is a Strength in the Collective Voice, Especially the Collective Female Voice," *We Are Not Made of Sugar, We Are from Concrete*, ed. Katalin Erdődi (OnCurating Zurich, 2021), 21–37.

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