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Decolonising Central European Nature

A Hereish Perspective

Determining global warming to be ‘perhaps the biggest issue in all of human history,’ American author Jonathan Franzen stated recently that ‘every one of us is now in the position of the indigenous Americans when the Europeans arrived with guns and smallpox.’¹ This implies that anthropogenic climate change, a result of heedless exploitation of the natural world, is now turning the tables, rendering all earth’s inhabitants unprotected and perishable subjects exposed to *force majeure*. Climate change is evidently not the sole factor in the encroaching global environmental crisis, but rather intertwined, among other issues, with species extinction and the dispersal of toxicity through air, water and soil, while the source of the problem is regularly located in a technocratic capitalist order thriving on domination and extraction. So, what would the process of decolonisation entail in this case? And how to formulate a response from a particular situated position when the current planetary transformation exceeds all geographical, political and conceptual boundaries?

Expanding the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, understood as a regime of political control over individual biological existence, to encompass strategies that exert power over the non-living matter of the Earth, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has proposed the concept of geontopower. It delineates the forms of late liberal governance in the age of the Anthropocene, where the destabilisation of the distinction between Life and Non-Life corresponds to the spread of a rampant extractivism and control to the furthest reaches of the planet. To reveal the planetary scope

of geontopower she suggests we follow the streams of ‘toxic industries whose by-products seep into food, forests and aquifers, and visit the viral transit lounges that join species through disease vectors,’ insisting that we neither ‘scale up to the level of the Human or the global,’ nor stay within the confines of the local, but instead ‘remain *hereish*’.² The elusive, in-between condition of the hereishness appears especially relevant for the discussion of decolonisation of nature in a Central European context.

Falling between the established categories is a characteristic of the Central European position in relation to the prevalent interpretation of post-colonial theory. The generalised and unreflective concept of Eurocentrism was vocally disputed by art historian Piotr Piotrowski, who regarded it as problematic from the perspective of the peripheries of the continent, pointing out that ‘there was not one Europe: it was both the colonizer, and colonized, imperial and occupied, dominating and subordinated’.³ The modern history of Hungary also reflects this duality, manifest in the country’s particular place within the Austro-Hungarian Empire as both a subject of the imperial power of Vienna and an agent of domination over an extended territory stretching from the Tatra Mountains to the Adriatic Sea. The hereishness of the Soviet approach to colonialism could be summarised by the notorious Khrushchev shoe banging incident at the United Nations in 1960, which was triggered when a delegate from the Philippines challenged the Soviets to extend their proclaimed support for those oppressed by capitalism and with anti-co-

1 Jonathan FRANZEN: The Long View, *The Guardian*, 4 November 2017.

2 Elisabeth A. POVINELLI: *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham–London, Duke University Press, 2016. 13.

3 Piotr PIOTROWSKI: East European Art Peripheries Facing Post-Colonial Theory. *Nonsite.org*, 12 August 2014. available at: <http://nonsite.org/article/east-european-art-peripheries-facing-post-colonial-theory> (accessed 1 November 2017).

lonial movements in the Third World to the citizens of Central Europe.⁴ In the post-communist era, where cultural and political de-colonisation competes with economic neo-colonialism and counter-globalisation elides into duplicitous populism, the urgent question of the survival of the natural world haunts attempts to think de-colonisation in purely anthropocentric terms.

Decolonisation of nature has been conceived as generally raising the question of how to unravel the 'legacy of imperial, anthropocentric and utilitarian attitudes towards nature' that arose during the age of empires yet survived into the post-colonial era.⁵ In other words, as art historian T. J. Demos has pointed out, decolonising nature would entail 'releasing the environment from its reduction to "natural resources," as if it exists purely for human exploitation and consumption'.⁶ At first glance, it might appear that the agenda of decolonisation is primarily directed towards contesting the treatment of the natural world as an economic resource for fuelling industrial development in capitalist societies. Indeed, it was a truism of the socialist system that environmental degradation, just like colonialism, was a problem restricted to the capitalist world. However, as dissident Marxist theorist André Gorz pointed out in his pioneering *Ecology as Politics*, the orientation towards growth in the socialist model closely resembled the fixation on increasing production and profits that drove the capitalist system.⁷ The logic of growth and progress that was embedded in both versions of industrial society, with their gaze directed into a rosy future, was notably also shared by colonial settlers who ruled over both the indigenous populations and their natural environment. It has now become evident that such practices belong to the wider project of modernity which by following a 'singular path of optimism and salvation' justified the 'ruthless ambition' required for violent destruction carried out in the name of progress.⁸

The role of art in processes of decolonisation of nature was envisaged by Demos in terms of 'cultivating the more-than-human world' through artistic practices that reformulate social values and expound the

'politico-ecological imperative to mobilise creativity itself as a desperately needed resource in the reconstruction of the conditions of life's ongoingness'.⁹ Notably, the author primarily addresses these questions in relation to contemporary art.¹⁰ The issue we would like to raise is how the processes of past colonisations of nature could be detected in specific periods of art history? To what extent could art works be analysed as documents of wider social and political attitudes to the natural environment? Furthermore, are there events in art history that could be associated with the project of decolonisation, moments in which social and environmental agendas overlap and are unified in a struggle for liberation? Finally, is there something specific to the way contemporary artistic practices originating in the Central European region have developed particular approaches to environmental crisis?

In order to tackle these questions we focus on the moment of the onset of communist rule over the Eastern bloc, and specifically the period of the imposition of the imported Soviet model onto social, political and cultural structures. The enforcement of the precepts of socialist realism is considered in terms of its role in vanquishing the existing artworld, as well as delivering an encoded message of nature domination. On the assumption that it is possible to view elements of entangled herish approaches in the processes of de-Stalinisation in terms of decolonisation, we intend to search for such decolonising traces in the course of art history. Another period of concern is the years around the fall of communism, when environmental history, various forms of social liberation and artistic engagements with nature came into constructive alignment. Also touched upon are recent artistic practices that engage in discussions of socio-political developments in post-communist territories refracted through their attitude to the natural world. In doing so, we concentrate our attention on Hungarian art history and more specifically on the exhibition histories of the Budapest Kunsthalle / Múcsarnok.

A snapshot of the interwoven issues raised by the treatment of natural elements within an art institution

4 See: Janusz KOREK: Central and Eastern Europe from a Postcolonial Perspective. *Postcolonial Europe*, 27 April 2009, available at: <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/essays/60--central-and-eastern-europe-from-a-postcolonial-perspective.html> (accessed 1 November 2017).
5 William M. ADAMS—Martin MULLIGAN: Introduction. In: William M. ADAMS—Martin MULLIGAN (eds.): *Decolonisation of Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Postcolonial Era*. London, Earthscan, 2003. 6.

6 T. J. DEMOS: Creative Ecologies. *Take on India*, vol. 3. no. 1. January–June 2017. 19.

7 André Gorz: *Ecology as Politics*. Boston, South End Press, 1979. 11.

8 Anna TSING et al.: Introduction. In Anna TSING et al. (eds.): *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet / Ghosts of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis—London, University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 7.

9 DEMOS 2017 (See note 6) 21.

10 T. J. DEMOS: *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016.

could be glimpsed in a work carried out in 2003 by Slovenian artist Jože Barši. It was realised in the Múcsarnok the context of the exhibition *Poesis*, curated by Judit Angel, which looked at the creative potential in everyday situations.¹¹ The artist asked the Múcsarnok employees to pose for a group photo on the steps of the building with their favourite plant, turning the potted greenery and flowers into agents of institutional critique. *The Múcsarnok Staff* (Fig. 1.) alluded to the latent power of the vegetal to dissolve institutional hierarchies and professional rivalries, with new social bonds created between the employees as human carers of plants. This work, belonging to the period of post-transition and realised on the eve of Hungary joining the European Union, captures the moment when an open, egalitarian worldview was part of the wider social atmosphere.

A starkly different climate was in the air in the late 1940s when local communist parties consolidated their power across the Eastern bloc, bringing an end to the artistic pluralism of the post-war coalition period and resulting in the implementation of Soviet socialist realism within the cultural and artistic spheres. The new order obliged artists to concentrate their efforts exclusively on the depiction of social reality and to offer an affirmative, transparently understandable reflection of the immense changes taking place in the life of their countries. This was not just matter of a stylistic demand to faithfully reflect reality, but rather artists were also to follow specific requirements of obedience to the communist party (*partiinnost*), ideological content (*ideinnost*), to be for and about the people (*narodnost*) and to be associated with the positive hero (*tipichnost*).¹² Such officially set rules could also be taken as a key to unlock the Stalinist attitude towards nature recorded in socialist realist paintings through their preselected choices of nature-oriented themes and stylistic treatment of landscape art, as well as in instances when the natural environment featured incidentally or as a background in other genres of official art.

Russian artist Fedor Shurpin's (1904–1972) iconic portrait of Stalin entitled *The Morning of our Native Land* (1948), in which the Soviet leader was portrayed as a solitary figure against the backdrop of the Soviet countryside, could serve as a case in point. The expanses of low-lying landscape behind the larger-than-life ruler are interwoven with symbolic features such as tractors



1. Jože Barši: *The Múcsarnok Staff*, 2003
Courtesy the artist

ploughing vast fields fringed by freshly planted trees, while a row of electricity pylons stretches into the distance, where smoke billowing from factory chimneys merges with the clouds in the blue sky. The scenery offers an ideological setting that glorifies Stalin's achievements in transforming the countryside, with the artist himself elucidating that 'in the sound of the tractors, the movement of trains, in the fresh breathing of the limitless, spring fields – in everything I saw and felt the image of the leader of the people'.¹³ Indeed, the leader depicted with clasped hands to suggest satisfaction at a job well done gazes confidently to the dawn of a bright new beginning, while the landscape behind him emanates the ethos of unstoppable progress embedded in the five year plan.

The painting was made in a year that was not only a turning point in the cultural and political history of the post-war period, but which also saw the launch of a unique experiment in the environmental history of socialism. The resolution 'Plan for Shelter Belt Plantings, Grass Crop Rotation, and the Construction of Ponds and Reservoirs to Secure High-Yield and Stable Harvests in Steppe and Forest-Steppe Regions of European Part of the USSR,' which became known as the *Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature*, was unanimously adopted by the Soviet Communist Party on 20 October

11 Judit ANGEL: *Poesis: The Everyday Differently*. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, Múcsarnok, 2003.

12 See: Matthew CULLERNE BOWN: *Socialist Realist Painting*. Yale, Yale University Press, 1998. 141.

13 *Ibid.* 237.

1948. It contained three basic elements: the 'sculpting of rivers', including the Volga, Don and Dniepr, by building dams and turning them into a service for industry, agriculture and cities, the planting of massive forest belts to protect farmlands from drought and hot dry winds, and the construction of an extensive network of roads and railways.¹⁴ Setting in motion geo-engineering on such a colossal scale revealed the aberrant merging of utopianism and pragmatism in Soviet attitudes and practices towards the natural environment. As environmental historian Paul Josephson has observed, Soviet approaches went beyond those 'common to Enlightenment thinking about the desirability of reshaping nature to serve human needs,' since they entailed employing 'research, financial, industrial and state institutions as major actors' in a process whose ultimate goal was to actually 'subjugate nature'.¹⁵ In other words, these measures could be interpreted within the context of the socialist version of industrial modernity as exemplary of the colonisation of nature.

Socialist realist paintings did not only served the purposes of state propaganda at home, but were equally used as a tool to promote Soviet ideology in the territories of Eastern Europe. Touring exhibitions dispatched from Moscow to the capitals across Eastern bloc were carefully organized to deliver an appropriate message both about style and content not only to the wider populace, but also to the art world. The itinerary of a large survey of *Soviet Painting* with more than sixty works in 1949 included Berlin, Dresden and Budapest, where the minister of culture used the opening speech to directly instruct Hungarian artists to pay attention 'not to Paris but to Moscow' and learn from 'Soviet culture and art how to create for the Hungarian working people'.¹⁶ The catalogue of the Hungarian edition of the exhibition held in the National Salon on Elizabeth Square emphasized the 'closeness of the art of Soviet masters to the reality of their environment,' which was evident in the attention they devoted to portrayal of 'the new man and woman building communism, the glorious past of the Soviet peoples' and significantly – 'the unlimited transformations of the natural diversity of their native land'.¹⁷

It is this latter category that is most relevant in this context, with paintings diligently illustrating the changes that the landscape was exposed to in the quest to extend the reach of socialist modernisation to the far flung corners of the largest country on the planet. Among the paintings on show, was the canvas *The Conquerors of the Steppe* (1948) depicting four young Uzbeks equipped with plans and scientific instruments surveying their unspoiled country, while the heavy machinery painted prominently in as much detail as the human figures stands as a guarantor of their mission to turn unused wilderness into productive arable land. The landscape painting *Timber Rafting down the Irtysh* (1948) took as its subject the large scale undertaking of tying logs together into rafts and floating them downstream for industrial use, while on the painting *Hunters* (1948) the frozen tundra is a mere backdrop for a group of warmly dressed men with guns in their hands returning from an implausibly successful kill, each with numerous plump birds, including wild geese, ducks and even a large tundra swan hanging across their shoulders.¹⁸ An unambiguous message about nature as a resource to be exploited and force to be tamed was thereby delivered to audiences in the new territories under Soviet control.

Explicitly promoting the ideas of expeditious progress and the boundless plenitude of the natural world, these paintings could also serve as documents attesting to what was actually taking place in the countryside at that time. For instance, environmental historians have pointed out that in their 'effort to bring the modern machinery of tractors, combines and harvesters, as well as fertilisers, to the countryside,' Soviet agronomists and planners encouraged 'profligate use of land, accelerated erosion, and poisoned the soil,' while hastening the decline of local cultures and communities.¹⁹ Furthermore, while the hunting scene might have been intended to illustrate the promise of abundance of life under socialism, a potent message in a time of hunger and scarcity, it also unintentionally revealed the attitude towards other species and the failure to consider the consequences of the extermination of wild animals. It corresponded with a particular moment in the environmental history of the largely indigenous Russian

14 *Ibid.* 119–120.

15 Paul JOSEPHSON: War on Nature as Part of the Cold War. In: *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*. ed. J. R. MCNEILL–Corinna UNGER. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010. 26.

16 Quoted in: Gábor RIEDER: *Socialist Realism: Painting in the Rákosi Era*. Debrecen, Modem, 2008. 18.

17 *Szovjet festőművészet* [Soviet painting]. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, Műcsarnok, 1949. n. p.

18 The painters were Ljutfula Abdullajev, Kondratij Bjelov and Vasilij Jakovlev respectively.

19 JOSEPHSON 2010 (see note 15) 73.

north when 'Soviet colonisation meant increasing use of guns to hunt animals, leading to overhunting and some extinctions'.²⁰ This was the moment in which 'the assimilationist view of the natural world aligned neatly with the empire-building project of the Russian state'.²¹ The question is how translatable these imperial power relations were to the territories of Eastern Europe.

Perhaps answers could be sought in the socialist realist paintings produced by the artist from Eastern Europe. For instance, the mood of *Homeward Bound* (1954) by Kossuth prize winning artist József Csáki-Maronyák (1910–2002) is strikingly similar to that of the Soviet painting *Hunters* by Vasilij Jakovlev although in its Hungarian rendition the superabundant spoils are from a fishing catch on Lake Balaton.²² Posing with a large catfish in one hand and the pole of a fishing gaff in the other, the young fisherman keeps his balance on the writhing lake waters, while the collective character of the outing is emphasised by the presence of two other fishing boats to the stern. Although the primary goal of the painting was to deliver a confidently optimistic vision of the socialist future, additionally underscored by the satisfied expression on the face of the perfectly poised fisherman, it also points to a complete disregard for the effects such fishing trips have on the lake, exemplifying the attitude that nature is nothing more than a resource for unlimited exploitation.

Among the prescribed themes that were handed out to Hungarian artists in preparation for the First Hungarian Art Exhibition of 1950 were subjects that included 'the first tractor in the village', 'collective work on the fields' and 'afforestation', illustrating the degree to which depictions of the countryside were expected to express a clear socio-political message.²³ The show was held in the recently reopened Múcsarnok, following on from an exhibition of Gifts from the Hungarian People to Stalin for his Seventieth Birthday, with the 'first' in the title underlining the belief that a new era had begun superseding earlier Hungarian artistic endeavours. As the catalogue reveals, artists were sent on study trips to far-flung collective farms to witness socialist progress at

first hand, with Zoltán Csekei (1914–1953) for instance, 'making numerous visits to and painting a lot about life in tractor stations' after his return from the Soviet Union in 1947.²⁴ His work entitled *Tractor Brigade* successfully combined the theme of the technological development of agriculture with that of rural social change in its depiction of a young female tractor driver shaking hands with male colleagues, marking the completion of her technical training. The tractor, flanked by a variety of oil cans, takes central stage in this rural scene, which is notably devoid of elements of traditional village culture or farm animals.

This could also be perceived as indicating that the transformation of agriculture in Eastern Europe in the 1950s, despite being framed at the time as a unique feature of the socialist system, was inseparable from global trends at the onset of what has been recently termed the Great Acceleration.²⁵ The worldwide shift from the mid-twentieth century to industrial-scale farming based on the deployment of artificial fertilizers and pesticides also made food production highly dependent on fossil fuels, with the result, as environmental historian John McNeil vividly put it, that 'our food is now made from oil as well as sunlight'.²⁶ In that sense, the abundance of tractors in socialist realist paintings can be taken as a marker of the beginnings of the 'petrolization' of socialist societies that largely paralleled developments in the capitalist West.²⁷

Following the death of the Soviet dictator in 1953 an uneven process of de-Stalinisation got underway across the Eastern bloc, leading also to an ideological dilution of the socialist realist art doctrine. This had implications for the depiction of the natural world, which were noticeable for example in the changing status of the genre of landscape art. At the height of Stalinism representations of the countryside that did not have a clear ideological message, such as through deployment of symbolic harbingers of socialist transformation, were frowned upon by the artistic authorities and noticeably absent from lists of approved artistic themes. However from the mid-1950s neutral landscape scenes

20 *Ibid.* 17.

21 Andy BRUNO: *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017. 12.

22 *Új Magyar Képzőművészet IV* [New Hungarian art IV]. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, Képzőművészeti, 1954. 37.

23 Márta KOVALOVSKY (ed.): *The "Fifties": Hungarian Art of the Twentieth Century*. Székesfehérvár, István Király Múzeum, 1981. n. p.

24 *Új Magyar Képzőművészet* [New Hungarian art]. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, Művészeti Alkotások Kiadó, 1950. 91.

25 See: John MCNEILL–Peter ENGELKE: *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016.

26 John MCNEILL: *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century*. London, Penguin Books, 2000. 26.

27 For the petrolization of the West, see: Christophe BONNEUIL–Jean-Baptiste FRESSOZ: *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. London, Verso, 2015. 138.



2. Gardening in Hungarian Art, installation view, 1956

reappeared in national survey exhibitions, with many artists who had been prominent advocates of socialist realism turning to the landscape genre as a means to detoxify their art from its association with the Soviet inspired artistic style. A case in point in Hungary could be traced in the work of Béla Bán, who in his solo exhibition of 1955 at the Adolf Fényes Exhibition Hall, a venue that at the time operated as a subsidiary of the Múcsarnok, showed dozens of watercolours dealing with landscape themes.²⁸

The role of landscape genre as a touchstone for issues of de-Stalinisation, with its implicit hereish element of decolonisation, came strongly to the fore in Hungarian art context the following year. Here again one could detect the typical take on the depictions of nature as a malleable subject matter condoned by the authorities as a way to divert artists away from controversial topics in times of political crisis. Nevertheless, this occasion was taken as opportunity to bring into daylight works that were suppressed during the period of high Stalinism. The exhibition *Gardening in Hungarian Art*, which was staged in the preeminent venue of Múcsarnok in summer of 1956, became therefore an unlikely focus for cultural politics in the Hungarian art world, anticipating the revolutionary atmosphere of the autumn, when a concerted attempt was made to liberate the coun-

try from Soviet ideological domination. Such currents coalesced in the show with exhibition strategies and presentational elements that pointed to the intimately related topic of the decolonisation of nature. (Fig. 2.)

The official press announcement for *Gardening in Hungarian Art* opened with the curious statement that although the exhibition had an 'unusually sounding name', lovers of 'garden art' and those who are familiar with 'cultured nature' would immediately realise what it was about.²⁹ Based on the premise that 'changing styles of garden design reflect the social life of particular historical periods', the exhibition set out to show the creativity and mastery of gardeners through the ages, however not 'in the original', but through the 'artistic translation of the best Hungarian painters'.³⁰ These were mostly painters associated with the early twentieth century Nagybánya artist's colony, whose 'commitment to plein air naturalism and the primacy of impressions from nature'³¹ was regarded as reactionary by socialist realist art critics. A review of this self-funded exhibition in the daily paper *Szabad Nép* noted that the head of the Fine Arts department of the Ministry of Culture had quipped that 'the whole exhibition seems to have been organised in order to hang canvases that have for years been "forbidden"'.³² For another reviewer, infused with the revolutionary ferment of late summer of 1956, the 'sensation' provoked by the exhibition lay not in its 'interesting and unusual theme', but in the opportunity it provided to 'win back the esteem of Hungarian painting' and 'confront the tendency to falsely restrict, under the influence of dogmatism, the assessment of our artistic past'.³³ The decolonizing impulse conveyed in these words was directed towards liberation of Hungarian artistic tradition from the imposed ideological constraints. (Fig. 3.)

The exhibition was however more than a ruse to subvert the official canon, since its somewhat eccentric and innovative proto-curatorial approach also pointed to novel environmental concerns, which could be seen as a reaction within the context of de-Stalinisation to the period's brutal indifference to the natural world. Photographs of the exhibition reveal an unconventional installation with the inclusion of living plants in

28 Katalin DÁVID: *Bán Béla*. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, Fényes Adolf Terem, 1955. n. p.

29 'Kertészet a Magyar Képzőművészetben', press release, Múcsarnok library archive, 1463 3-3.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Gábor ANDRÁSI et al.: *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century*. Budapest, Corvina, 1999. 12.

32 Artner TIVADAR: Szép Kiállítás – Katalógus Nélkül [Nice exhibition – without a catalogue]. *Szabad Nép*, 9 September 1956.

33 Miklós CSEH: Kertészkedés a magyar képzőművészetben [Gardening in Hungarian art]. *Irodalmi Újság*, 8 September 1956.



3. Gardening in Hungarian Art, installation view, 1956

garden-like arrangements and the provision of veranda-style wicker chairs to encourage relaxed contemplation. Although predominantly delivering the theme of gardening through paintings, there were also several sculptures positioned amongst shrubbery of garden plots installed under the glass ceilings of the exhibition space. Statues of a dancing woman and singing girl by Ferenc Medgyessy were presented in a down to earth fashion, accessible, intimate and immersed in the greenery, representing the joyfulness of Hungarian village life. There could not be starker contrast to the towering public monuments that had been recently erected as sites of ideological ritual to enact the country's submission to their Soviet 'liberators', which would a few weeks later be toppled by the revolutionary crowd.

A transcript of a presentation by co-organiser of the exhibition András Balogh, a lecturer at the School of Landscape Gardening, reveals the horticultural think-

ing behind display. This involved not only taking into account 'the climatic conditions of the Múcsarnok' but also choosing 'plant materials' that would be most appropriate for particular art works, such as oleander for the depiction of the Mediterranean coast.³⁴ During his talk, he also criticised landscape gardeners of the past for failing to consider 'biological structure' and treating plants 'as objects, but never as an organic whole', while denying them their place in 'the community of life'.³⁵ There are perhaps surprising correspondences here with the work of more recent researchers in the field of plant theory that likewise criticise the 'mechanistic approach to vegetable life, reduced to its constituent parts' advocating instead a 'perspective attributing greater agency to plants in dynamic relation to their environments'.³⁶ As if speaking about the City Park surrounding the Kunsthalle, Balogh also voiced criticism of the current treatment of parks that had allowed a 'line

34 Typewritten notes, 'Kertészet a Magyar Képzőművészetben', 28 July–16 September 1956, special documentation, Múcsarnok Library and Archive, X. 1956.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Monica GAGLIANO–John C. RYAN–Patrícia VIEIRA: 'Introduction'. In: *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. Ed. by Monica GAGLIANO–John C. RYAN–Patrícia VIEIRA. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017. xiii.



4. **Sándor Pinczehelyi:** *Ressource Kunst*, 1990
wire screen, plaster, slag, 200x200 cm
Courtesy the artist

of trees dating back to the time of Maria Theresa to be cut down for firewood,' and the replacement of 'ancient Hungarian plants' by species that are 'fast-growing, showy, but foreign to our homeland' such as 'plane tree, horse chestnut and black locust'.³⁷ Notably here is the propensity in some circumstances for the decolonizing impulse to draw on patriotic sentiment to defend the autochthon from external interference.

With its emphasis on gardening, plants and sensory perception of nature, the exhibition could also be viewed as the expression of an emergent concern that in the headlong rush for modernisation people were losing touch with the natural world. These are indeed instances when art takes on an active role in renewing and regenerating more attuned relations to nature, recognised as an aspect of contemporary environmental art, but also tangible on this rare historical occasion, where social and natural liberation merged into one agenda. Extraordinarily, in light of the environmental and cultural politics of Eastern Europe in the period, included also in the exhibition programme was a screening of the 1953 film *White Mane* by French filmmaker Albert Lamorisse that dramatised the relationship between a young boy and feral stallion in the wilds of the Camargue. Their companionship is threatened by adult ranchers, perpetuating the struggle between the forces of power, domination and control on

one side and those of freedom, equality and solidarity with companion species on the other.

By the 1980s the scale of environmental degradation accumulated by state socialism had reached a level that could no longer be covered up and the secret reports about the condition of the environment started to leak out into the public sphere, turning into international affairs, and triggering mass protests. The consequences of industrial pollution in the Black Triangle between Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany blew over the Cold War divide, chemical pollution from Romanian factories led to protests in the Bulgarian town of Ruse on the other side of the Danube, while the same river was a central concern for the environmental movement in Hungary, with massive gatherings to oppose the plans for a hydroelectric dam between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Chernobyl disaster on 26 April 1986, a nuclear meltdown that released clouds of radiation across the continent, was a final blow to the environmental record of the socialist bloc. As a consequence, green parties featured regularly on the ballots of the first free and democratic elections across Eastern Europe during the political changes of 1989.³⁸ It was a period when social struggles became inseparable from the toxic environment of late socialism that had no concern for the ecological consequences of their incompetently run and technologically deficient industrial complexes.

Attitudes to environmental art at this crucial juncture were also revealed in Hungarian context by the critical reception of the travelling exhibition *Ressource Kunst*. (Fig. 4.) The show, which originated in Germany and mostly presented the works of Western artists, had several stops before reaching Múcsarnok in 1990, on the occasion of which it was expanded with the inclusion of several Hungarian artists. Art critic Julianna P. Szűcs used her review in the daily *Népszabadság* to reveal how an abiding yet 'illusory deep faith in the human' had been dispelled by a new awareness of environmental questions, expressing the need to stop viewing Beuys's honey pump as 'capitalist stupidity' and Smithson's spiral as a 'well advertised bluff'. She listed the sequence of staggering ecological events as follows: 'Then came Bős-Nagymaros [dam]. Then we saw the denuded fir trees of the North Czech lands. Then we experienced the West Berlin smog alert caused by Trabants. Then

37 Typewritten notes, 'Kertészet a Magyar Képzőművészetben'.

38 For the rise of environmental movements across Eastern Europe af-

ter the Chernobyl disaster, see: Padraic KENNEY: *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002.



5. *Nature Alliance: Nature and Art in Hungary 1960-2000*. Műcsarnok, 2016 exhibition view (Photo: authors)

Chernobyl exploded. Then the 8am news started to read out pollution levels. Then we started to see art with different eyes.³⁹ Again this is an instance where the role of environmentally engaged art is invoked for its revelatory and emancipatory values.

Art historian Katalin Keserü expressed a different view in her piece on the exhibition in *Új Művészet* entitled 'Revolutionary Decadence or the Colour of Tomato Soup,' criticizing it for a perceived lack of revolutionary vigour and activism. The title contained an oblique reference to the well-known culinary metaphor for the softer, less ideological Goulash Communism of the Kádár era and the un-revolutionary nature of the negotiated 'system change' of 1989 in Hungary. Observable here was the fact that even declaratively environmental art often failed to materialise into more solid, engaged, activist responses to acute environmental problems. During her directorship of Műcsarnok (1992–1995), Keserü initiated

another exhibition dealing with the subject of nature specifically in the context of Central European art. Taking place in Ernst Museum in 1994, *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe* brought together practitioners from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, Macedonia, Romania, Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia. According to the catalogue introduction, it was motivated by the desire to investigate the 'regional and universal' in the art of Central Europe.⁴⁰ As one of the early examples of comparative curatorial projects that originated in the region and searched for common ground with other post-communist countries, it was indicative for its typically apolitical treatment of nature in art as a common and unproblematic subject matter.

Fourteen years later, in summer of 2016, the Műcsarnok was once more the site for curatorial investigation of art and nature, although in discernibly altered cultural conditions. In fact this endeavour consisted

39 Julianna P. Szűcs: Review of Resource Kunst. *Népszabadság*, 26 May 1990.

40 János STURCZ (ed.): *Naturally: Nature and Art in Central Europe*. Budapest, Ernst Múzeum, 1994.



6. **Bence György Pálincás–Kristóf Kelemen:** *Hungarian Acacia*, 2017
Courtesy the artists (Photo: Krisztina Csányi)

of three parallel exhibitions under the common title *Branches/ Nature Art – Variations*, the central part of which was entitled *Small Gestures* and co-curated by Keserü with John K. Grande, a Canadian art critic with a strong affinity for Transylvania. One side of the space was given over to *Eco-Avant-garde*, an exhibition of Iranian environmental art curated by Mahmoud Maktabi, while the third part was signed by Keserü alone, with the title *Nature Alliance* and more significantly, the subtitle *Nature and Art in Hungary 1960–2000*. The complications with the titles, curators, and the merging of three shows with very different agendas tenuously connected by the theme of nature, was symptomatic of a deeper institutional malaise. Since 2013, when the running of the Kunsthalle was handed over to Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA), the profile of the venue had diverged from mainstream contemporary art to pursue a programme in line with the conservative outlook of the new body.⁴¹

In her exhibition *Nature and Art in Hungary 1960–2000* (Fig. 5.), Academy member Keserü approached the issue of nature in art in strictly national terms. Although it might be put down to purely linguistic considerations, this phrasing indicated a delineation of a territory within state borders, however the exhibition also included

artists of Hungarian ethnic origin working in Romania, but did not extend to Slovakia, where for instance several ethnic Hungarian artists are particularly committed to environmental themes. Questions could be raised about the timeline of the exhibition, which conspicuously began after the socialist realist period, but before the neo-avant-garde took to the stage, while ending for inexplicable reasons at the turn of the millennium. Could it be that this was also a convenient way to exclude contemporary, more politically radical artistic engagements with the subject? The familiar treatment of nature as a universal, idealised and transcendental concept in an exhibition that set out to explore the renewal of 'the living community of nature and civilisation' while renouncing 'the privileged role of man',⁴² could handily serve to camouflage ideological interests. It also established a contemplative distance from surrounding realities and localised environmental issues, by turning a blind eye to the ecological activism of the Park Defenders encamped a few hundred meters from the venue and engaged in a struggle to save pockets of city nature from cultural redevelopment. The post-truth decolonisation of nature proclaimed inside the white cube was countered outside with acts of solidarity with trees against the paradoxical colonisation of a green area by art edifices under construction. The most recent power relations displayed in this case, although inseparable from the current global crisis of democratic practices, still therefore bear the traces of hereish circumstances.

The interference of colonial and de-colonising processes within the particular context of contemporary Hungarian art and society came to the fore in project *Hungarian Acacia* (2017) (Fig. 6.) by Bence György Pálincás and Kristóf Kelemen. The work addressed the position of the black locust tree within the natural environment and in human value systems, notably the same species the horticulturalist in the gardening exhibition of 1956 had highlighted as a threat to native Hungarian landscape. They reveal contradictory attitudes to this natural coloniser, which is regarded by conservationists as an invasive species that is alien to local ecosystems and was therefore put on a European Union black list of undesirable plants. Paradoxically in view of the fact that the tree is a biological newcomer to the country, the Hungarian government took the counter measure of declaring the black

41 Edit ANDRÁS: Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime. *E-Flux Journal*, no. 57. September 2014.

42 Exhibition wall text, 'Nature Alliance: Nature and Art in Hungary from 1960 to 2000.' Budapest, Kunsthalle, 27 July – 16 October, 2016.

locust to be a Hungaricum, a special brand defined as 'a collective term indicating a value worthy of distinction', which is awarded 'thanks to its typically Hungarian attribute, uniqueness, specialty and quality'.⁴³ Taking the form of a post-truth documentary theatre piece, the artwork offers a critique of the arbitrariness of human decisions about the lives of plants while locating parallels in the treatment of refugees in Europe and Hungary. What is suggested is the need to decolonise prevalent social attitudes to the dislocated and disadvantaged, as well as to reflect on the continuing unthinking domination of the human species over the natural world.

A consistent feature of the long history of the interrelation between artistic practice, the natural environment and the exercise of geontopower has been the repetition of a pattern of colonisation and decolonisation. The entanglement of the narrowly human, social and political aspects of colonisation with the intensification of the domination of nature, as well as a seeming commonality between the emancipation of human and non-human spheres, is also perceptible, both in the so-

cial and environmental history of the region and as a recurrent element in artistic engagements with art and nature. Such overlays and reciprocities correspond to the hereishness of the Central European social, political and cultural context, which is also manifest through the oscillating exhibition histories of the Múcsarnok. What has changed over time however is awareness of the wider implications of attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world, since the challenges posed today by climate change, extinction and toxic devastation to both human and non-human species far exceed the imagination of political and cultural ideologies forged in an age of growth and expansion.

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43 'What is Hungaricum?' <http://www.hungarikum.hu/en/content/what-hungarikum> (accessed 10 November 2017).

A természet dekolonizációja Közép-Európában

Egy „itteni” perspektíva

Közép- és Kelet-Európa földrajzi területén és természeti környezetén a kolonizáció több hulláma is végigsöpört a modern időkben. Az államszocializmus, de leginkább a sztálinizmus időszakában az új társadalom felépítésének tervezői a természet és az anyagi valóság ideológiai értelemben vett ellenállását akadálynak tekintették, amely csak a bioszféra szövetének masszív infrastrukturális átalakításával hidalható át. Az 1989 utáni neoliberális globalizáció feltételei között pedig a rövid távú gazdasági nyereség oltárán áldozták fel a környezetvédelmi és ökológiai szempontokat. Ekkor már gazdasági erőforrásként tárgyiasították és igázták le a természetet, hogy serkentsék a gazdaság növekedését és egyre több profitot halmozhassanak fel a globális pénzügyi központokban. Még az utóbbi évtizedekben virulenssé váló nacionalista populizmus megerősödése sem vezetett a természet globális, kapitalista kiaknázásának enyhüléséhez, sőt ahogy számos példa mutatja, csak még tovább fokozta azt.

Tanulmányunkban azt vizsgáljuk, hogy a természet kolonizálása és dekolonizációja hogyan ment végbe a közép-európai művészetben és művészettörténetben, de elemzésünk elsősorban Magyarországra koncentrálna. Egyrészt bemutatjuk, hogy a budapesti Múcsarnok kiállításainak és kurátori tevékenységének történetében hogyan jelent meg a természet tematikája az ötvenes évektől napjainkig, másrészt azzal is foglalkozunk, hogy az egykori és a mai kortárs művészek miként reagáltak a természet kolonizálásának különféle formáira és ideológi-

áira. A természet dekolonizálásának kortárs művészeti praxisát az újabb ökológiai és filozófiai irodalommal összhangban a geo-ontológiai hatalom (geontopower) és az itteniség (hereish) fogalmi felől értelmezzük, amelyek úgy kapcsolják össze a globális és a lokális perspektívákat, hogy az releváns lehet a közép-európai művészet kapcsán is. Ennek kapcsán azt a problémát is érintjük, hogy a szocialista időszakban a Közép-Európában élők hogyan viszonyultak a természethez, és ez a viszony milyen mértékben tekinthető – André Gorz kifejezésével élve – az ipusztériális modernitás részének. Mikközben rámutatunk a természet kolonizálásának jelenségeire a különféle művészettörténeti korszakokban, azt is elemezzük, hogy a műalkotások milyen mértékben tekinthetők a természetről és a környezetről alkotott társadalmi és politikai elképzelések lenyomatainak. Olyan sajátos jelenségeket értelmezünk, amelyek mentén a társadalmi és az ökológia ágendák összefonódtak, és arra a kérdésre is megkísérlünk válaszolni, hogy a művészettörténeti jelenségek és események hogyan is kapcsolhatók össze a dekolonizáció szélesebb értelemben vett társadalmi és politikai valóságával.

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TÁRGYSZAVAK

ökológia, geo-ontológiai hatalom, itteniség, kolonizáció, dekolonizáció, szocialista realizmus, szocialista művészetpolitika, gulyáskommunizmus, Múcsarnok, antiglobalizáció, Elizabeth Povellini, André Gorz, T. J. Demos

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