The Price of Freedom

Marion Döring in Conversation with Gergely Nagy and Kristóf Kelemen on the Hungarian Art Scene

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Interview Participants: Gergely Nagy (GN), Kristóf Kelemen (KK)

With the October 2024 event “The Price of Freedom: Voices from the Hungarian Art Scene”, the European Alliance of Academies expressed a sign of solidarity with artists and cultural professionals from Hungary, who, under the influence of Viktor Orbán’s government since 2010, have experienced an increasing threart to artistic freedom in their country. The artistic contributions show that the Hungarian cultural landscape is shaped by diversity and dynamism, despite political restrictions, lack of funding and difficult working conditions. Marion Döring spoke with two of the participants.

MD: To better understand the situation in Hungary today, let’s go back in both of your lives. Kristóf, you were born in 1990 into a country that, just a year before, had proclaimed the Republic of Hungary as a democratic state and that, in a way, prepared the ground for the historic turning point in Europe. It was Hungary that opened its borders with Austria to the citizens of the GDR in 1989, and we all know that this was the beginning of a new political era in Europe. What are your memories of the political environment in which you grew up in the 1990s and the first decade of 2000?

KK: My first memory about the political situation was related to the right-wing conservative Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán. For eight years, I attended a Catholic school in Pécs (one of the biggest cities in the countryside), and at this school, it was quite obvious that anybody who considered themselves Catholic had to vote for Fidesz. And lots of anger and bad things happened in the students’ circle. If somebody even mentioned that their parents didn’t vote for Fidesz, they became victims of a lot of harassment. My parents were clever enough to tell me that I couldn’t say they didn’t vote for Fidesz. It was in 2002, and, yes, I found myself hiding this information at my school. Later, when I left the Catholic school, I realised how politics divided society into two parts, and I wanted to focus more on political issues. When I moved to Budapest in 2010 and started to study at the University of Theatre and Film Art, Fidesz won the elections for the second time and began to build up a new system. So, my whole professional life has been focused on the Fidesz government era.

MD: Gergely, you were born in 1969, so 21 years before Kristóf, into a still socialist totalitarian regime. What are your memories of that time?

GN: I was 20 when the regime changed in 1989. My family’s position marked my entire adolescence and my early 20s. I was living with my mother. I was an only child, and she is an art historian who belonged to the critical intellectuals here in Budapest. So, obviously, she was not associated with the former regime, and I was very open to everything that showed any kind of alternative to state socialism. I have to say that the late 1970s were much

different from the 1980s because, during the ’80s, there was a gradual change in the regime. It became softer and softer. Still, it was quite harsh for me. When I did my obligatory military service in 1987–88, during almost the last two years of that regime, we were watched by the Hungarian Secret Service and interrogated regularly. So, some oppressive structures were still working.

My mum took me to artist studios and performances when I was little. I practically grew up in the critical art scene. Later, I was actively involved in the underground music scene: I attended these concerts, frequently accompanied by visual art events and screenings. I also started to perform in a band. So, for me, these different artistic fields that represented some kind of resistance towards the regime were somehow connected. And it strongly determined my later interest in culture. I also attended the University of Theatre and Film Art. I studied dramaturgy there – during and after the regime change. 1989 was one of the most significant events in my life. I was simply thrilled that the former regime had ended. And I would never have expected that we would face something so similar to the regime we had before.

MD: You are talking about today? So, you must somehow feel like you’re being thrown back into a climate you grew up in.

GN: Exactly – regarding the intellectual positions, the division of the nation, the language that power misuses.

MD: Like a *déjà-vu*, something you have seen before … Kristóf, I saw your immersive performance “Necromancy” at the European Centre for the Arts in Dresden-Hellerau, and this performance ties in here, in the period of Gergely’s childhood and youth. Your VR performance, which is still being shown in many European theatres, reminds us of what happened 50 years ago, when the Hungarian state tried to take control of the art scene, of the legendary “Squat Theatre” in Budapest. So, was it also a *déjà-vu* for you that let you create this piece of theatre?

KK: Yes, absolutely. That was, of course, the most interesting part for me: the similarities, the artistic approach of these people in the 1970s and how they tried to find their own small circles of freedom within this framework of state socialism. The theatre group called itself the “Apartment Theatre in Dohány Street” because they started to produce theatre in a private flat when their public operation became illegal. The way they approached art-making became something like a life concept. It was very inspiring to understand how they started to create an alternative reality for themselves to stay inspired. This was my main interest in the whole VR project because I feel – and now I can say the same of the contemporary issues – that there is a major depression going on and some kind of narrative of the decay in the theatre world in Hungary. I believe we are now in an age where everything will get shittier and shittier every year. I started to feel that I needed to create my own reality with the belief that it is possible to change things, so I keep trying to imagine new situations for myself and the community.

MD: It means returning to the past to get inspiration and energy for today, right? Because you can learn from that theatre group and how it reacted to the situation back then?

KK: Yes, and I believe this whole past is still strongly present. The ghosts of the past are here. The project is called “Necromancy”, so it’s like we are summoning the ghosts.

Hungarian society didn't want to face its history. The memory of state socialism and the last 35 years (after the end of the Soviet regime) are still very confused. For me, it's natural that I think about the issues of the past like I do with current issues. All of our social interactions and traces of political fantasy bear different influences from the past. For me, it's interesting how I can create a dialogue between these moments of time and reflect on this phenomenon in the framework of an art piece with the support of artistic imagination. I wrote my PhD dissertation about the state socialist period at my university, and I realised how complicated and inspiring it is at the same time if we try to understand such a *lieu de memoire*.

MD: Somebody who is asking about that all the time is Gergely: You have done a lot of research on the Orbán system and the personal dilemma of artists and cultural workers in Hungary.

GN: Let me just react to Kristóf because the "Apartment Theatre" was also a significant point of reference for me. My final thesis was written about their activities, which were not easy to research because there was no official documentation of their work in Hungary. The other part of their activities, when they left the country in 1976 and went first to Amsterdam and then to New York, was a different story we did not really have access to. However, I had the chance to do a long interview with Péter Halász, one of the main figures of the group, and his attitude and thinking had a profound impact on my views in my early 20s. These references come back when we talk about the system the Orbán government has implemented over the past 15 years. Today, the question is no longer about freedom of art, of expression, or of the media: These things have not existed in Hungary for many, many years, at least since 2011, when Fidesz introduced the new constitution. Of course, they do exist in private and underground circles and peripheral areas, but there are no institutional guarantees for the freedom of the arts. The government's main aim is to ensure that certain critical art practices disappear or never come to life. That means practising censorship without formal censorship, building up an institutional system based on political selection through financial tools, ideological control, and by choosing the right people for the right positions.

The main problem we face today is a total reshaping of the legislation and the institutional context for arts and culture. The institutions maintained by the state and using public funding have become completely alienated from the active agents of culture. The Hungarian cultural institutional system has excluded itself from international discourse. Of course, there are also important exceptions. Budapest and some other opposition-run cities are still maintaining a different system. However, although they are still free, these institutions have no proper financial support because the government absorbs funding from certain cities with opposition leadership.

MD: This was the same impression we had when, in May 2023, we came with a delegation of the European Alliance of Academies to Budapest to meet representatives from the art scene. What we truly witnessed was this depression, a complete lack of energy, and utter hopelessness. It was so unlike the situation in Poland, for example, where you still had the feeling that people are willing to express their opposition and demonstrate in the streets – and where they finally succeeded in recent elections. Do you see any hope that this might change one day in Hungary, too?

GN: What you said is absolutely right. We see a kind of fatigue and tiredness here in the art circles. Lots of artists and cultural workers have left Hungary. Many of them went to Berlin.

Today, there is a strong Hungarian art community in Berlin. And then there are those who stay here, who work under pressure, and who are in poor financial circumstances. The government even eliminated the taxation form allowing art workers to handle their incomes and pay taxes. It knows that it's important for lots of people, and it knows who these people are. It knows them by name. It's not a big community, so there are more and more attacks against people in this community. No wonder they abandon their activities if they emigrate or turn their back on this whole situation. I totally understand it.

The big dilemma in the art and culture scene concerns both those inside and those outside the institutions. Those inside are forced to make more and more compromises, which can very easily make them lose themselves and their ideas. However, it is fantastic that we still have artists trying to maintain their activities, create their own projects, and reach their audiences. It is the only guarantee for any kind of restart.

KK: I think it's very important to see that the situation in Hungary is not separate from the rest of the world. The complex situations in Europe, or worldwide, greatly influence Hungary's politics. When we are talking about Orbán's autocratic system, it's also important to understand that it makes a very good match with the global capitalist system: allow businesses to pursue their own purposes and increase their private properties; don't deal with the growing national debt and the brutally high inflation; and ignore economically non-beneficial sectors like healthcare and education. On a philosophical level, the capitalist system is also about destroying our imagination of change, and the Orbán regime uses this to its advantage. My personal approach is to stay inspired, be active and work, and not let myself be pushed down by hopelessness but to try to find creative answers to this situation.

MD: Are you in touch with fellow artists in other countries so that you don't feel alone but also get inspiration and solidarity from outside? Do you, perhaps, miss solidarity from your European fellows?

KK: More and more, I try to find allies internationally and to make connections from different generations. I started to realise that I wanted to learn more from outsiders or other contexts, approaches and attitudes that are different from mine. It's the most interesting part of international meetings when we realise we are in very similar situations, within a broader, global context. We understand that our most essential problems are common problems. In Germany, for example, the AfD's increasing power also shows that we are not separate from each other.

MD: Exactly. We are facing this development in more and more European countries. The Council of Europe report, "Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe", published almost two years ago, recognises the growing impact of populist politics in Europe on freedom of expression and artistic freedom. A right-wing movement is rapidly growing all over Europe, including Germany, the Netherlands (where a right-wing government came into power only recently), Spain, Sweden, Italy, and France. Do you think the international art scene needs to do more to create networks for cooperation?

GN: I don't know what would be an appropriate strategy against these tendencies and movements, but what I see is that the international community and also the people working in arts and culture are much more concerned, for example, with the question of Ukraine, what is going on there and how those people will survive. Because the question there is really one

about mere survival. So, compared to the situation in Hungary, they are two completely different worlds. Here, we are pretty much free to do what we want. We don't have funding, and there is censorship and self-censorship, and there is growing oppression towards us. However, it's still a relatively good situation if you compare it to other parts of the world, like Afghanistan, China, Turkey, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. So, I tend to see things from a practical, rational approach. I think the cultural community needs funding, structure and institutions here in Hungary. The government eliminated the alternative funding possibilities. They sent away the grantmakers and the big donor organisations. So, resources are desperately needed. And if there are resources, there will be structures, strong, safe spaces, institutions backing the art scene, and it will be more productive.

MD: Should Europe interfere more here?

GN: Yes, I think Europe should do more as a political entity. Culture and education are in national competence, so there are no general EU policies regarding these, but these are the areas where the Orbán government did enormous damage. So, yes, Europe as a political entity should be more concerned about that, especially with regard to this half year when Hungary has the EU Council's presidency, and Orbán takes over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU. I think the Hungarian government will use culture to show a friendly face towards Europe. They're going to use it as a political tool, to show that we are open, we have fantastic institutions here, there's an optimistic culture production – which is, by the way, true, if you take a look at their shiny new buildings with people busy doing things inside. But it's only on the surface. Behind it, the whole system is rotten and is collapsing. The first thing that European organisations could or should do is not take part and not collaborate with the Hungarian government in these activities, not help them show a friendly face through culture. It is essential to be clear about this: Hungary is not a free country, and artistic creation is not free.

MD: This was also why the European Alliance of Academies, the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany organised "The Price of Freedom" in October 2024, an alternative cultural programme with Hungarian artists, in which you both participated.

KK: I'm always happy when I perceive interest from outside in our social and political situation. But I think it is also very important when cultural institutions (here in Germany or other countries of Europe) support Hungarian artists with real working opportunities or openness to international cooperation. We need free spaces that are not separated from the European context, where a critical approach is fundamental and beneficial not just for the Hungarian community but for European society as a whole. We need spaces where we can deal with our crises as artists, using our powers of passion, humour and imagination.

MD: Yes, because this is and will be the oxygen we all need in the challenging years and the decades to come. We have to be vigilant and attentive, and we have to work together.

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The European Alliance of Academies is an initiative of 70 European art academies and cultural institutions to show solidarity with art institutions under threat and to campaign for the freedom of art throughout Europe – through artistic collaborations, public events and discussions with political actors. Foounded in 2020, the transational network was initiated by filmmaker Jeanine Meerapfel. On 12 October 2024, the event “The Price of Freedom: Voices of the Hungarian Art scene” took place in Berlin with Zsófia Bán, Miriam Bruns, Anna Gács, Dakoda Percussion Group, Nikolett Erőss, László Göndör, Kristóf Kelemen, Jakob Ladányi Jancsó, Gergely Nagy, György Szabó, Kinga Toth and Diána Vonnák, among others.