

Agents for Change

The Contemporary Art Centres of the Soros Foundation and C³

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983 when George Soros first spoke of his Budapest-based Foundation plans practically nobody believed him. Why? Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, the very idea of an autonomous Foundation had been an alien concept in Hungary and by extension the entire Soviet Bloc. The creation of an independent non-profit organisation in the mid-1980s – even with the ‘softening’ political atmosphere – seemed out of the question.

George Soros, the successful American investor of Hungarian origin, has been an active philanthropist since the 1970s. In 1979 he established the Open Society Fund in New York, an organisation that supports activities in more than fifty countries worldwide. The aim of this initiative was to promote the ‘open societies’ concept originally proposed by the philosopher Karl Popper. Adopting Popper’s theories, the Society’s mandate states:

While there is no set definition of what an open society is, among the key elements are: reliance on the rule of law, the existence of a democratically-elected government, a market economy, a strong civil society, respect for minorities and tolerance of divergent opinion.¹

In the following years, when the Soros Foundation and the network of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts (SCCA) became a reality, lavish praise as well as harsh criticism was regularly heaped on the organisation and the people associated with George Soros. This might be partly explained by the fact that the atypical methods employed by the SCCA in various circumstances seemed strange and unfamiliar to Central Europe, strange – bordering on the alien.

Subtleties in communication methods, integration issues within the local community, as well as other matters, have caused misconceptions and misunderstandings resulting in allegations of partiality and even

1. Open Society Foundation,
[http://www.osi-az.org/
faq.shtml](http://www.osi-az.org/faq.shtml)

nepotism. Nonetheless the innovative cultural incentives greatly contributed to stimulating positive effects.

The unique beginnings and the subsequent operation of the SCCA network including the Center for Culture and Communication (C³) cannot be fully appreciated without considering the regional sociocultural context. So, working in this controversial territory and within the scope of this brief commentary, it is our difficult task to present the essence and the influence of SCCA initiatives and support. What follows is not intended as a critical evaluation of the SCCA network and C³, Budapest. Such a study would require in-depth research into decades of relevant cultural history. Instead we present a cultural narrative in the context of documented evidence and our own experience.

THE FIRST STEPS

In 1984, after lengthy negotiations with the authorities, a compromise was reached and the Soros Foundation was established in close collaboration with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In the beginning the Academy and some of the authorities had what amounted to the power of veto in operational decisions. The stated goal of Soros (and his Budapest-based advisory board) was to support fresh contemporary intellectual deliberations and initiatives linked to developing autonomy. The Foundation aimed from the start to bring a new working morality, a new informal style, creativity and, most importantly, transparency into the sociopolitical landscape, thus introducing a tool of pluralism unknown in the previous forty years. These decisions reflected the operational methods of Soros who has been described as ‘the Champion of Change’ – thus the Foundation and later the Contemporary Art Centers followed an elastic agenda, always on stand-by and ready to adapt. Several books, articles and interviews have been published on Soros, and especially on the connection between the person and his role in the operation of the Foundation. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse these sources, although we would like to mention that Soros commented that he found it surprising how his ‘public role-play’ grew into a practically independent ‘personality’.²

While the Soros Foundation’s support of culture and, by extension, contemporary arts, is widely known, it is important to draw attention to the significant aid provided to many other worthwhile causes such as health (including hospital equipment), the oral history programme, English-language education, libraries (including a library for the visually impaired), postgraduate education, manager education, student exchange programmes, the ‘milk’ programme for elementary schools, publishing, and environmental and ethnic minority causes including the Roma. It is crucial to note that no pre-existing plans or precedents were available at that time. The entire funding structure and all its details were developed out of necessity. To elucidate some of these programmes we would like to mention one of the first initiatives: the Xerox programme. For those who live in developed industrial countries it might be difficult to believe how the gradual distribution of one

2. Béla Nóvé, *Tény/Soros*, Balassi Publishing, Budapest, 1999, p 33

thousand copying machines to libraries, schools, health centres, churches and research institutes changed the informational environment in the country. Just imagine the practically overnight development of a public communication and information service in a state where previously every typewriter had to be registered, copying was strictly monitored and copy machines were locked up overnight due to fear of subversion during the security-conscious Socialist period.

The list of projects supported by the Soros Foundation is long and complex, and includes the establishment of the Central European University in 1995.³ Over the last ten years CEU graduates have played significant professional roles in a regional and international context. Today the CEU Alumni Association has a membership of 6000 residing in eighty countries.⁴

Over the years, funding support has been widespread, contributing to numerous disciplines in many countries, yet the Foundation has never granted support for political parties in Hungary,⁵ or organised dissent,⁶ and despite pressure Soros never invested in other business initiatives during the fifteen years of his intense non-profit based support in this country.⁷

1985–1991 SOROS FOUNDATION FINE ARTS DOCUMENTATION CENTER

From early on the Foundation's activities included major support for the arts, especially for innovative or experimental art projects. The significance of this is made clear when one considers that experimental or alternative art practice was practically prohibited in the Socialist era. It is hard to imagine today why an abstract painting was such a fearful symbol of dissidence for the authorities in Hungary and the entire Socialist Bloc region. For decades, all attempts to promote unofficial forms of visual art were discouraged; this explains the importance of establishing a platform for producing and showcasing contemporary art forms.

In May 1985, an agreement was reached between the Soros Foundation and Katalin Neray, Director of the Múcsarnok (Kunsthalle, Budapest) to establish the Soros Foundation Fine Arts Documentation Center. Under the direction of an International Advisory Board, the resource centre provided information on contemporary Hungarian artists to students, scholars, collectors and dealers from within Hungary and abroad. The first year of the new institution was dedicated to drawing up artist profiles, including English translations and some grant support. This activity was invaluable at a time when centralised art administration was breaking down, but there was as yet no sign of what was to replace it. Furthermore the methodical organisation of portfolios offered enormous assistance to artists seeking international integration. Portfolio development and project administration were unfamiliar practices to Hungarian artists in the 1980s. Of course for seeking commercial outlets abroad or for the promotion of artworks in the international exhibition network it was absolutely essential to submit professional portfolios. The assistance provided by the Center might seem insignificant in a developed country, but it

3. Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, <http://www.ceu.hu/>

4. Central European University, Alumni Association, <http://www.ceu.hu/alumni/index.html>

5. Nývé, *op cit*, p 195

6. *Ibid*, p 193

7. *Ibid*, p 26

represented a major reinforcement for artists with international ambitions in Hungary.

In 1991, the Documentation Center expanded its activities under the name Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), Budapest, with the aim of better supporting contemporary Hungarian culture. Continuing its comprehensive documentation, SCCA also organised different art projects, managed a grants programme for contemporary Hungarian artists and arts institutions and contributed to the printing of catalogues. Throughout its history SCCA aimed to introduce the latest, most up-to-date concepts in the shape of progressive and innovative projects, which eventually led to the founding of the Center for Culture and Communication, C³.

1992–1999 THE NETWORK OF THE SOROS CENTERS FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

The Budapest-based SCCA served as a model for opening similar hubs in countries where the Soros Foundation was already present. The notion of this expansion came from George Soros himself. Between 1992 and 1999, twenty Centers were established in seventeen countries with a mission to support the development and international exposure of contemporary art in Eastern and Central Europe, the countries of the former Soviet Union and Central Eurasia as a vital element of an open society. In the initial years the centres were developed and operated by an exacting ‘code of Soros rules’, nicknamed by insiders the ‘Bible’. While this adherence to ‘McDonalddian’-style methods was criticised, it might also explain why in a region where cultural environments differ from country to country, these organisations collaborated successfully with each other, as well as with other arts organisations. The string of SCCA’s annual exhibitions of local contemporary art both documented the work of local artists and offered grants programmes. A critical constituent of the network’s operation was its educational programme, including the organisation of seminars, conferences and lectures. It was expected that after a few years these various centres would gain their own identity.

The role of the art centres was vital at a stage when Western interest was focused on the opening up of Eastern Bloc societies. The art centres provided information on the local art scene, organised studio visits and exhibitions, and supported their artists. One of the first large events organised and supported by the SCCA network, featuring Eastern European participation, took place at the São Paulo Biennale in 1994. Perhaps the last major manifestation of the SCCA mission was the 1999 exhibition ‘After the Wall – Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe’ organised by Moderna Museet in Stockholm, but whose curators were assisted by the work the art centres had already done in selecting exhibition material. A subsequent example of collaboration is evident among the editors and contributors to *Praesens*, the Central European Contemporary Art Review, who were initially participants of the network and offered advice on further contributors. Despite the numerous projects organised in many countries, the legacy of the SCCA network remains difficult to gauge at this time, but it suffices to note that its activities

revived the tradition of alternative concepts and inspired artists, curators, writers and musicians for years to come.

1991–1996 SOROS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS BUDAPEST

From its beginnings SCCA Budapest initiated and organised a series of exhibitions and events on themes seldom (if ever) before presented in Hungary. These included 'Sub Voce' (1991) the first show of video installations, 'Polyphony' (1993) the first forum for issue based art, 'V = A · Ω', a novel exhibition of electronic art installations in 1994, and the 'More than ten' (1994) exhibition of Hungarian Contemporary Art, marking the first decade of the Soros Foundation's cultural activities in Hungary.⁸ Some of these exhibition projects, especially the subsequent exhibition 'The Butterfly Effect', merit further description.

In 1991 'Sub Voce', the first large-scale exhibition of Hungarian video installations at the Műcsarnok (Kunsthalle), included an open-call procedure for the selection of works to be exhibited, and also provided financial support for productions. This procedural shift illustrated an unusually transparent process for Hungary at that time. Simultaneously with this show, a Dutch touring exhibition of video installations, 'Imago: *Fin de siècle* in Dutch Contemporary Art', was exhibited in the same venue.⁹ The work in this high-tech exhibition clearly demonstrated the contrast between the established scene in the Netherlands and the Hungarian situation, providing a strong impetus for future Hungarian video art production.

The 'Polyphony' exhibition of site-specific works, installations and a symposium was presented in 1993 on the initiative of Suzanne Mészöly (then director of SCCA). The exhibited artworks engaged with social issues or so-called 'issue-based art'. This was not only a novelty but also occurred barely four years after the fall of the Wall; it took political risks by publicly endorsing provocative works. The installations were shown on the streets, buses, telephone booths, the banks of the Danube, the parks of Budapest and even beyond the city limits. Not surprisingly this innovative project was controversial and received a mixed press. In the end the completed thirty projects provided an inventory of the complexities surrounding 'political art' in post-Communist societies, as Susan Snodgrass reported in *Art America*.¹⁰

Of all these projects, 'The Butterfly effect', an exhibition of media works and a series of events by Hungarian and international artists in 1996, had the most far-reaching outcome. The catchphrase for 'Butterfly', 'the coordinates of the moment before discovery', caught the attention of artists and the general public alike. Promoting the phenomenon of 'sensitive independence on initial conditions', the 'Butterfly Effect' web pages provided the following information:

We have no way of knowing what effect technological media will have on the future of contemporary art. Today's situation is just as unpredictable as that of the last century, prior to the new discovery of film, television, holography and the computer. If, while examining the routes to our present we realize what the original idea or invention meant (or could have meant) at the time, keeping in mind even aspects which were later

8. Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts, <http://www.C3.hu/scca/index.html>

9. Imago, <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history>

10. Susan Snodgrass, 'Report from Budapest: in a Free State', *Art America*, 1 October 1998. It includes information on the art scene outside the capital.

forgotten, then we may be able to 'see into the future'. Applying this method, we can perceive the new in the old, recognizing the original richness of that which later became tradition. We can see the old in the new, too, with its transience and the boredom of its fashionability.¹¹

The extensive Butterfly project – the first large-scale media art event in Hungary – included a historical exhibition of Central and Eastern European technological and experimental inventions, an exhibition of contemporary media artworks by Hungarian and international artists, an international retrospective of video, film and animation works, multimedia performances and symposia on media theories and practice and technological discoveries in the field of media art. This programme reflected the high ambitions and standards of the Center and prepared the ground for future projects. The incredible public successes of 'The Butterfly Effect' eventually led to the establishment of the Center for Culture and Communication (C³) Budapest.¹²

1996 C³ CENTER FOR CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION BUDAPEST

C³ opened in June 1996. One of the primary reasons for establishing this centre was to develop a large-scale facility for Internet access including schools, NGOs and private individuals. The popularity of 'first time public Internet access' during the Butterfly Effect events prompted the Foundation to extend SCCA's function into a wider public sphere. As a result, C³ was launched as a three-year pilot project by a cooperative effort between the Soros Foundation, Silicon Graphics Hungary and MATÁV: the Hungarian Telecom corporation. In addition to public access C³ also offered educational tools such as ongoing courses for Internet use. Within the emerging C³ it was feared that unless a commitment to the expected public role were fulfilled the artistic aims of the institution would be thwarted. When it became clear that the key expectation of some of the supporters was the opportunity to showcase their products a contentious situation arose in the non-profit-motivated environment.

Of course C³'s mandate went much further than public Internet access. Media art educational concerns featured strongly among C³ goals. In the history of Hungarian media art one of the first steps taken was the establishment of the Intermedia Department in 1990 under the direction of Miklós Peternák at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts.¹³ Peternák became the director of C³ in 1997 and he prioritised an educational outreach programme at C³ linked to educational institutions.

From the late 1990s C³ maintained an extensive artist residency programme.¹⁴ Among the beneficiaries of this programme were many outstanding international artists. One of its main goals was to expose Hungarian artists to an international exchange of ideas and media art practice. International participants included Masaki Fujihata, Olia Lialina, Bill Seaman, Bjørn Melhus, George Legrady, Matthew Barney, Alexei Shulgin, Etoy and JoDi. Many important installations, showcased worldwide, resulted from this process and the projects created during these residencies also influenced and involved many local media artists.

11. The Butterfly Effect, <http://www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly>

12. Center for Culture and Communication, C³, <http://www.c3.hu>

13. Intermedia Department, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, <http://www.intermedia.c3.hu>

14. C3 Artist residency programme, http://www.c3.hu/collection/index_en.php?t=2

Among the annual exhibitions developed by C³ and presented at Múcsarnok, notable examples included 'Perspective' (1999), an international media art and history exhibition presenting the historical transformations of the image based on the discovery of perspective.¹⁵ The 'Vision' project (2002) focused on the connections between the neurosciences and visual arts. The project was initiated by discussions between neuroscientists and Miklós Peternák, director of C³, and represented a pioneering arts and science project in Hungary. 'Vision' included a discussions platform on the neurobiology of perception and neuronal, behavioural and theoretical approaches to brain research. The symposium ran augmented by a major exhibition at the Múcsarnok.¹⁶

'Kempelen: His Life and Era' (2007) represents the latest exhibition initiated and developed by C³ in collaboration with ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, and the Múcsarnok. The project traced the history of automata in an extensive exhibition of models and originals of historical works, as well as contemporary examples of artworks related to the theme. Documents and portraits of the era provided an excellent contextualisation of Kempelen's life and times.¹⁷

A considerable proportion of C³'s operation consisted of providing in the mid-1990s intensive software and internet-use courses on offer at C³ and mainly for artists who had little or no previous knowledge in these fields. The changing circumstances in Hungary, with the advent of Internet cafes and liberalised Internet access, rendered these public aspects no longer essential. As a result C³ changed its focus from public access to defined art projects for target audiences. The phasing out of these projects narrowed the local visibility of C³. Additionally while the large exhibitions conceptualised and developed at the centre proved popularly successful, much of the credit went to the venues instead of C³.

1999 –

Since 1999, C³ has operated as a non-profit independent Foundation with the aim of developing collaborations between art, science and communications, and educational and cultural programmes such as the international exchange platform. It maintains, *ex-index*, an online cultural journal, a free-mail service (a Hungarian interface for internet users), domain registration and a video archive as well as international connections and special projects.

The flexibility of the mandate and the organisational structure of C³ has often allowed prompt reaction to unexpected events. A good example of this happened in 1999 when at short notice an international meeting was called in response to the bombings in Serbia, which were affecting artists and cultural workers. This meeting was originally planned for Belgrade but due to the difficult circumstances was moved to Budapest. A number of international residencies and exchange projects resulted from this meeting.

Long-term sustainability of media centres (especially in large cities where public funding is spread among many institutions) is fraught with ongoing difficulties and remains a global problem. In the changed Hungarian economic climate, C³'s situation is no exception. The loss of

15. 'Perspective' exhibition, <http://www.c3.hu/events/index.html?99>

16. 'Vision' project, <http://www.c3.hu/events/index.html?2002>

17. 'Kempelen', http://www.kempelen.hu/index_en.html

major funding from the Soros Foundation, the Hungarian Telecom Corporation and the constant need for technical upgrades all contributed to a new definition of aims and mandate. Moreover some artists who were not accepted for residencies, and some of the public, regard the centre as an ivory tower. Considering the precarious situation, one might ask how the founders envisaged ensuring the long-term survival of such a centre.

THE PHASING OUT OF THE SOROS NETWORK

In 1999 and 2000, following the restructuring of the Soros foundations, all Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts gradually became independent and either transformed into organisations under the membership of the new association ICAN (International Contemporary Art Network) based in Amsterdam – or ceased to exist.¹⁸ As a related activity, the Open Society Cultural Link programme¹⁹ promoted arts and culture events involving the participation of artists from countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Mongolia. Its primary goal was to encourage and facilitate artistic collaboration and networking in the region.

Since 1993, Arts Link, an Open Society Institute initiative,²⁰ has supported exchanges between artists and art organisations in the US, Central Europe, Russia and Eurasia. At the beginning of 2000 Cultural Link changed its mission following the introduction of a new programme strategy. Due to the re-structuring of the organisations, keeping track of the former SCCA Centers became a complex task. Although the ICAN network seems to have stopped its official networking activities, most of the centres are active in their local environments, and maintain networks with their geographically and historically ‘natural’ partners within the region and beyond. One may criticise the network for not achieving far more ‘spectacular’ results, such as staging large-scale art events on the international art scene; nevertheless, the established formal and informal connections throughout the region have remained active to this very day.

To give an example the SCCA Center for Contemporary Arts–Ljubljana presents active projects,²¹ circulating a regular update of its activities such as the ‘Laboratorium in the Gallery’ (23–29 June 2007) and LabSUs, an open platform for curators, artists, writers and theoreticians. The Center maintains important segments of the support system for contemporary arts and culture and civic society.

In Chisinau, Moldova: the KSAK – Center for Contemporary Arts organises workshops and theoretical courses in the field of media art,²² and its most recent project has been the Found Footage Workshop for participants from Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia. In Almaty, Kazakhstan, the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts supports local contemporary art and its integration into the world’s artistic processes.²³ As a unique cultural institution in the Central Asian region, SCCA–Almaty is involved with several types of cultural activity. The most recent project is ‘Destination Asia: Non-strict Correspondence’, an exhibition by Indian and Pakistani artists.

18. ICAN (International Contemporary Art Network), <http://www.ican.artnet.org/ican/>

19. Open Society Arts Link, <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/>

20. Artslink, <http://www.cecartslink.org/>

21. SCA Ljubljana Press Release No. 11/2007, Ljubljana, 20 June 2007, LabSUs, <http://www.worldofart.org/current/archives/41>

22. KSAK, Chisinau, Moldova, <http://www.art.md/>

23. Almaty, Kazakhstan, SCCA, <http://www.scca.kz/>

24. Center and Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Prague, <http://fca.fcca.cz/>
25. International Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, Romania, http://www.icca.ro/home_en.htm
26. Center for Contemporary Arts Foundation, Bratislava, Slovakia, <http://www.ncsu.sk/>
27. Kiev, CCA Center for Contemporary Art, <http://www.cca.kiev.ua/newsite/en/>
28. PRO ARTE Institute, St Petersburg, <http://www.proarte.ru/us/about/>
29. The Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA), Riga, <http://www.lcca.lv/>
30. Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art, Bosnia and Herzegovina, <http://www.scca.ba/>
31. Contemporary Art Center Skopje, Macedonia, <http://www.scca.org.mk/>
32. Contemporary Art Information Center (CAIC), Lithuanian Art Museum, <http://www.ldm.lt/>
33. Arts and its Time, Warsaw, Poland, http://www.sztukaiwspolczesnos.c.art.pl/index_e.html
34. Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia, <http://www.scca.hr/>
35. Kitchen Budapest, <http://www.kitchenbudapest.hu/en/>

Some other centres still operate, promoting and supporting contemporary art across the region. They are to be found in the Czech Republic;²⁴ Romania;²⁵ Slovakia;²⁶ the Ukraine;²⁷ Russia;²⁸ Latvia;²⁹ Bosnia and Herzegovina;³⁰ Macedonia;³¹ Lithuania;³² Warsaw, Poland;³³ and Zagreb, Croatia.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Generous support by George Soros has attracted considerable envy, causing local and regional difficulties and drawing undue media attention. In addition some Centers found themselves in a difficult position when defending their funding choices within the Open Society Network. The autonomous structures of SCCA, independent of state bureaucracy, however, allowed for flexibility in addressing topical issues and promoting new initiatives. Nonetheless the original aims of funding and presenting the most up-to-date projects were latterly often restricted by limited budgets.

So although it is difficult to evaluate how efficiently the Centers operated, nevertheless their work provided an initial point of reference to the entire region. This can be said in relation to all forms of contemporary art and especially the emerging media art scene. Media art requires a major investment and without SCCA support there would have been considerable delay in the development of electronic and media art in Central and Eastern Europe. Fortunately, there are new media labs emerging all the time; for example, the recently opened Kitchen Budapest which provides practice-based educational and production facilities for a new generation of Hungarians.³⁵

The initial goal of re-integrating Central and Eastern European artists to the rest of the world had been more or less accomplished by 2000. The next stage in this process is now up to the individual countries, according to George Soros. While there have been numerous political and personal objections expressed against the cultural policies and funding by Soros – conspiracy theories included – the positive results are undeniable and unprecedented. One day, when an unbiased observer comes to review the major contemporary artists from this region, he or she will find numerous references to concepts and artworks supported by the Soros Network.