

The personal is political

Summary by Anna Vidák

The event called “The personal is political” took place on the 11th of October 2017, as a joint event of the OFF-Biennálé group’s political exhibition “Budapest Holiday”, organised by OFF-Biennálé and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

In her opening speech **Eszter Kováts**, the coordinator of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s regional programme called “Gender equality in East-Central Europe” introduced the event’s subject. The slogan of the Anglo-Saxon feminism in the 60’s and 70’s “The personal is political” comes from the recognition that women’s problems occurring in their private lives (e.g. domestic violence) are the consequences of a system disadvantageous for women, therefore the solution was to address it in the public sphere. However nowadays we use this concept differently: It often seems like every action that is considered political by the actor, becomes political. On the other hand, the concept of the personal today is used to make every personal issue a private, therefore unquestionable one, even though its consequences can often be harmful. In some discourses surrogacy is viewed as a question of human rights while the desires of the surrogate users are harmful for the most vulnerable women in the society.

The participants of the panel were **Orsolya Bajusz**, artist featured in the exhibition, **Dr. Emília Barna**, assistant professor of the BME University, department of Sociology and Communication, **Ágnes Básthy**, board member of the Studio of Young Artists and **Dr. György Mészáros**, associate professor of ELTE university, department of Pedagogy and Psychology. The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Tünde Varga**, associate professor of the Hungarian University of Arts.

According to Bajusz Orsolya’s starting argument, today’s contemporary art is originated in the neo-avantgarde canon and art was a response of the problems occurred in that specific age (e.g. the tedious work environment of factory workers), by now the society changed just as the practices of the avant-garde are embedded differently in the society. On that note she emphasised that today’s media art and the art embedded in the social structure and strongly connected to social activism are not as critical as they want to be seen. Artists often use the hegemonic neoliberal logic: for instance when subjectivity becomes essential, their thinking is centred on the individual disconnected from the personal, social structures and processes, and by that the ground of politics and community vanishes from the discourse. They apply the same logic when they compare the Hungarian society to the core countries.

Emília Barna talked about how neoliberal capitalism incorporated and incorporates subcultures and the subcultural aesthetics. What we call creative workplaces today (Google, Prezi) tend to create a work environment as friendly, exciting and “cool” as possible, so that their employees spend more time at their workplaces, and thus “coolness” and trendiness become the means of exploitation. Connecting to that, György Mészáros explained how revolutionary actions frequently embed in the

mainstream society (e.g. rapper style, underpants seen from under the jeans pulled halfway down, later they were sold in H&M as underpants and jeans sewn together).

Ágnes Báthly, continuing Bajusz Orsolya's thought process claimed that as a consequence of the erosion of the political ground culture became the only ground where the political discourse can be introduced. She argued that Hungarian political art does barely introduce a left-wing perspective.

The event took place on the day of the *Coming out day*. Inspired by the topic of coming out, Mészáros connected to Bajusz's remarks, in which she criticised the notion that an individual can make changes in the society merely by giving publicity to their experiences. Mészáros explained that the coming out culture based on that notion does not take the structure into account which is the base of homophobia. In his experience it is difficult to convey the structural mindset to his students, because aligned with the neoliberal thinking they detach the individual from society and its structures. He claimed if we don't think structurally about a phenomenon we strengthen the structures the phenomenon itself comes from.

Emília Barna, referring to the book of Robin James: *Resilience and Melancholy* highlighted a contrast between the female underground punk movement in the 90s (Riot grrrl) and today's so called pop-feminism. The members of the Riot grrrl movement regularly shared their traumas and stories on their meetings, this is how they created their songs' lyrics. These bands' primary goals were female awareness-raising through the sense of community and conscious movement-building. As opposed to that, the trauma-recovery songs, either written in the name of female empowerment (like many of Beyoncé's and Lady Gaga's songs), or in the name of melancholic grief (James mentions Rihanna as an example) were created in line with today's understanding of the "Personal is political" slogan: shout our pain to the world or moan about it, both to make a change – and even though the media views these personal manifestations as feminist ones, change ceases to happen. Tünde Varga completed the thought process by saying that both the female empowerment and the melancholic songs bring profit, thus they serve the needs of the same system that inspired their songs.

Varga summarised the topic of "coolness" and rebelling with stating that rebellion became commodified. This is connected to the erosion of the public sphere by bringing the personal to the public not to raise awareness of how the system works, but solely to share the personal experiences detached from the system.

According to Bajusz the reason why there is less and less space for dialogue is the liberals not having substantive answers, so they make everything about morality: either they claim themselves to be the spokespeople of progress, or they put themselves into a victim role when meeting a counter-argument. The other reason why many feel personally offended is that with the erosion of the middle class, many people can only capitalize one thing they have left, which are their bourgeois habits or their connections, and because accumulation of finances is not possible anymore, the only field to be distinguished, will be recognition.

Mészáros added that the personal narrative is legitimate if it is presented while taking note of the structure in which it is embedded and reflect on it; however, it rarely occurs in the narratives

nowadays. Another phenomena he problematized was that because of the “hysteric” public sphere, in many cases it is difficult to criticize the personal because some see this criticism as bigger ones.

Bajusz emphasised that in today’s left-wing politics where the liberal discourse is overrepresented, the personal is very well protected and every criticism on it is viewed as an attack. This can be repulsive for many, and thus the right becomes more popular.

In Mészáros’s experience the discourse which claims prejudice to be embarrassing and vulnerable, make many people stay silent and not to express their prejudices, and by doing that, it is impossible to reflect on them in a system-critical way, while the tension between people in different positions feeds the system.

As opposed to Mészáros, Varga views the academia and the artists as communities where the members reflect on the system and pay less attention to what is considered to be politically correct and what isn’t.

In Básthy’s opinion it is important to highlight that we have to be reflective on the fact that both the cultural and the political spheres are formed and influenced by the same society. She thinks it is practical that the two spheres are open to one another, and by that, both spheres could gain new tools and art can be more authentic if the artists can elevate self-reflection to a structural level, rather than reproducing the scheme of a western discourse. Bajusz added that there is no art detached from politics, as each artists delivers a message with her piece of art, which inherently has an effect on society. Básthy thinks that several artists view the canon of art history as the only authority, their aim of creating art is dominated by the dialogue with that authority and for them it is of less importance to try to communicate with the society in which they make art. As Barna views it, the more cultural capital a community has in the subcultural sphere the less it is embedded in politics, it becomes institutionalised and therefore recreates the system.

Mészáros claimed it is Hungary’s being a semi-peripheral country that drove its society to view liberalism (as it is a model from the West) the tool to progress and to join forces with the west. The striking liberal-right-wing dichotomy could evolve because the left-wing discourse is highly underrepresented in the Hungarian politics.

To summarise the panel, Varga asked how we can stay out of being embedded in this system. How can we broaden the public sphere? Básthy pointed out that what happens in the future is not deterministic, we have to assess how much agency we have and act accordingly. As Mészáros views it, the first step of our agency is to recognise the embeddedness in the system and then by getting to know it, we have to find all the possible actions that can make a real change.