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Confrontation and Revival  
in the Modern Movement

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# Deconstructing Constructivism in Post-Communist Hungary

## László Rajk and the Na-Ne Gallery

On June 16, 1989, weeks before the official collapse of Communism in Hungary, an extraordinary event took place in Budapest. For the first time since the 1956 revolution its victims were publicly mourned and honored. The thirty-first anniversary of the execution of the then Prime Minister Imre Nagy, his Chief of Staff, József Szilágyi, his government's Minister of Defense, Pál Maléter, and journalist Miklós Gimes, was marked by a public commemoration and a martyrs' reburial in Budapest. Also commemorated was Nagy's Minister of Press, Géza Losonczy, who died in prison in 1957, and an empty sixth coffin was dedicated to the memory of the "unknown 1956 revolutionary." Nagy and members of his government and staff were executed in April 1958, and their remains had been buried at a hidden location until this moment when they could be unearthed for a dignified funeral that would, at least symbolically, set straight the historical facts.

The set designed for this unique, much anticipated historical event, which had been expected to focus on a sad chapter of Hungarian history in a shared memory of national loss and bring together the closure of an era, was surprising. The aesthetic face of this day of national mourning hearkened back to Constructivism and symbolized, instead of the nation's loss, a much broader historical vision: the end of the international working class movement as a chapter of Hungarian history. Through a neo-constructivist language and its ties to art history in Hungary, we can see that the set designed for that event also demonstrated the post-1956 generation's fraught relationship to the legacy of Communism.

The commemoration was held in Budapest's Heroes' Square, in front of the Hall of Arts. Unexpected by the crowd of several hundred thousand strong, who probably had hoped for an overwhelming presence of the Hungarian tricolor, the neo-classicist building was sheathed in a constructivist, black-and-white textile decoration with a speakers' rostrum on the right side of the building reminiscent of El Lissitzky's and Ilya Chashnik's 1920–1924 design for a diagonal metallic "Speaker's Tribune." While black and white are considered solemn colors of mourning, and the simplicity they imposed on the building befitted the occasion, the rostrum was made of rusty iron. Rough-hewn, the construction evoked the working-class people who had fought in the revolution, but it also



Budapest, June 16, 1989. Reburial of 1956 martyrs. Photo András Bánkuti.

signified the social origins of those communist leaders who destroyed that same revolution. Rust, instead of the national colors, represented class-consciousness and the flag, the international banner of the working-class movement. Moreover, the weathered rostrum also stood for the difficult reality that replaced Communism's dreams of a streamlined modern system, a system represented in the dynamic diagonal of this constructivist piece. A metal flag attached to it with a hole in the middle presented a symbol of the 1956 revolutionary banner, but one from which the Stalinist coat of arms had been removed, leaving nothing but an airy emptiness in the middle. Other flags hardly palatable to the new regime were brought by the crowd and also displayed a hole, where the current coat of arms had been removed from amid the national colors.

Bringing the formal language of Russian Constructivism to this national commemoration was not consistent with the received image of 1956. Constructivism was very far from Hungarian national tradition, and was not what most Hungarians who mourned the defeat of the 1956 revolution and its popular government had identified with. It belonged, first of all, to the Soviets, who defeated the revolution. But the memorial foregrounded the fact that the martyrs were also communist, albeit anti-Stalinist, who had been executed by their fellow Communist Party leaders. This went against tradition; previously the 1956 revolution had been thought of as a national uprising more than it had been associated with communist idealism. The decoration clearly and literally referred to dead illusions. It was a courageous decision to make the martyrs' communist commitment so explicit, because formerly they had been respected and commemorated as *victims* of Communism rather than part – even if a reformist part – of that political system.



László Rajk (b. 1949) and Gábor Bachman (b. 1952), Budapest, June 16, 1989. Design for the reburial of 1956 martyrs. Courtesy László Rajk.

To be clear, the mass event of June 16, 1989 was not exactly meant to be the celebration of the victims as communists, but was rather an opportunity for the first national demonstration *against* the four decades of communist dictatorship in Hungary. Therefore, making use of the formal visual language of Neo-Constructivism, or Post-Constructivism, for this historic event was all the more daring because Constructivism was neither widely known nor popular in Hungary. The associations the design raised were vaguely technological and politically left wing, but the only people likely to directly identify it with the pre-Stalinist communist idea represented by Russian and “international constructivists” in 1989 were members of the New Left, particularly by people involved in the 1968 movements, who associated Constructivism with the resurgence of the original idealism of the communist faith.

The location was heavily charged with symbolism. Not only was it the *Heroes’ Square* with statues of the nation’s historical kings; it was only yards away from the site of the former statue of Stalin, violently destroyed as one of the first acts of the 1956 uprising. The remaining stone foundation of the Stalin statue had served as a tribunal for the post-1956 Communist Party secretary János Kádár and other communist leaders to wave to the workers mandated to march there on May Day every year. The site, including the Hall of Arts, was picked for the commemoration by the Committee for Historical Justice, founded just a year earlier. The committee who organized the public reburial chose the *Heroes’ Square* over the cemetery that the still ruling Communist Party would have preferred as a more distant, smaller, and more controllable location.



Budapest, June 16, 1989. Reburial of 1956 martyrs. Photo András Bánkúti.

The appointment of László Rajk Jr. (b. 1949) by the Committee as designer and architect for the event was also symbolic. He is the son of another martyr of the communist system: former Minister of the Interior László Rajk, who was a victim of the first series of show trials in Hungary and was executed in 1949. Co-commissioned with architect Gábor Bachmann (b. 1952), Rajk Jr. was already known for his deconstructivist, neo-constructivist style. Using a professional building crew from the Hungarian Film Studios where he had often worked as set designer, Rajk did not hesitate to confront the crowd and achieved a shocking effect that evoked the original idealism that had led many, including his father, to join the communist movement, which later betrayed and killed them. (By the time Rajk Jr. received the commission, he was already a member of the Association of Free Democrats, a liberal political party of dissident intellectuals, formally founded a year earlier.)

The dramatic setting of the 1989 event in Budapest was embedded in both the renewed cultural awareness of 1920s Constructivism, and the vehement anti-constructivism of 1980s' Postmodernism that was sweeping the world. Having been rediscovered on the international art scene in the 1960s, the unearthing of Russian Constructivism in the West was part of the post-World War II efforts to re-conquer the modernism of the interwar period that had been lost to Nazism, Stalinism, and World War II. Correctly or not, Constructivism has become known as the aesthetic face of the 1917 Russian Revolution during and after Communism, in part because of art works and documents that were in the West, and Camilla Gray's groundbreaking 1962 book *The Russian Experiment in Art*.<sup>1</sup> The social utopia attributed to Communism has proved to be as fascinating as the troubling difference between the idea and its real world incarnation. As an

example of the fascination with Communist ideals in the West, the journal *October*, launched in America in 1976, chose its title “in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique.”<sup>2</sup>

This vision of the October Revolution has been interpreted in the West as faith in a better world, in spite of historians having revealed in its nuts and bolts the dictatorial system the Bolshevik Revolution became. The utopia of a society based on *liberty, equality, and fraternity* has had a strong, stubborn hold on the modern imagination and those familiar with Russian Constructivism invested it with the power of that vision. Perhaps it *did* have that vision. The formal discipline prescribed by modernity and, eminently, Constructivism, has also provoked dissent, first of all among those who had agreed with the fundamental tenets of Constructivism, modernism, and the “International Style,” but found them ripe for a shake-up.

To help explain the neo-constructivist aesthetics of the stage set in Budapest for the June 16, 1989 event, it’s important to note that the international critique of Constructivism, combined with nostalgia for it, came to public awareness at the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition of MoMA in 1988. Curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, it showed works by Coop Himmelb(l)au, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha M. Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Bernard Tschumi. The architects, according to MoMA’s press release, “recognized the imperfectibility of the modern world,” and

obsessed with diagonals, arcs, and warped planes, they intentionally violate the cubes and right angles of modernism. Their projects continue the experimentation with structure initiated by the Russian Constructivists, but the goal of perfection through straight lines and rectangular forms as the 1920s were remembered, is subverted. The traditional constructivist virtues of harmony, unity, and clarity are displaced by disharmony, fracturing, and mystery.<sup>3</sup>

Of course the original Constructivists favored diagonals and arcs, too, thus Constructivism was deliberately and incorrectly presented as the visual language of right angles. However, such distortions are part of its afterlife. Additionally, an introductory section of Constructivist and Suprematist paintings and sculpture drawn from MoMA’s collection was included in the exhibition as well,<sup>4</sup> and the presence of such original, utopia driven works highlighted the distance between the illusions of the 1920s and the concepts and practices of the late 1980s.

The word “Deconstructivism” had as much of a magic ring to it as had “Constructivism,” both concepts being imperative, enticing, programmatic, and potentially all-inclusive. Jacques Derrida’s term “deconstruction” (*déconstruction*), antinomy of “construction,”<sup>5</sup> intended to address hierarchical binary systems in Western philosophy by proposing an analytical, *deconstructive*, system of discourse in philosophy and linguistics, thus purporting to overthrow the *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* trinity of Hegelian and classic modernist thinking. In

architecture, resistance to what Philip Johnson termed “International Style” in architecture, the closest cognate to Constructivism among Western directions, was marked among even leading progressive intellectuals. Such prominent figures as T. W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch admitted their utter dislike of “box houses” in a debate a few years after World War II.<sup>6</sup> Robert Venturi’s 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was a major sign of the sea change forecasting the end of the modernist paradigm.

Antagonism to modernity has been brewing for as long as modernity has existed. With its reductive functionalism, rationalism, discipline, future oriented vision, and political commitment Constructivism was an extreme case of modernity. The full picture of Constructivism is, of course, more complicated than the received notion of it which posterity has inherited. Konstantin Medunetzky and Katarzyna Kobro took irrational factors into consideration in their work and concepts. El Lissitzky, a fellow traveler of the constructivists, did as well, yet Constructivism has been remembered as pure functionalism and rationalism.

By the 1980s in Hungary a local incarnation of postmodernism dethroned all variations of the modernist paradigm in Hungarian art, including Constructivism. The legacy of the Hungarian constructivists was by and large unknown except for a few hundred artists, historians of modernism, and professionals who sought out books and exhibitions on the subject, and the history of Hungarian and International Constructivism was only brought back from oblivion by a few dedicated artists and art historians. The Hungarian iteration of the post-modern was the New Sensibility, or New Subjectivity, the major new trend.<sup>7</sup>

Rajk and Bachmann as architects, and, in Rajk’s case, alternative theater artist and set designer, shared an attitude that rejected functionalist and constructivist architecture. They had made unrealizable deconstructivist designs already during the 1980s, which indicates that the memory of Constructivism was more personal and more direct – I would say, more scathing – for them, not least for Rajk, than for Western artists. “Scathing” is the appropriate word because faith in the ideas that Constructivism represented and the subsequent disillusionment, were, as Rajk’s loss of his father in a show trial had demonstrated, profoundly traumatic. While the New Sensibility was a symbol of cultural renewal, signaling the appearance of a new generation with new ideas, new sensitivity, and new hopes, deconstructivist architectural designs were also *new*: they manifestly abandoned the rules of the profession and assumed a new freedom.

Rajk, Bachmann, along with sculptor, musician, and photographer Tibor Szalai (1958–1998), ceramicist Judit Vida (b. 1951), and fashion designer Tamás Király (1952–2013) founded a new art gallery in Budapest in 1990 that they called *Na-Ne*, meaning “come on!” in the sense of disbelief. The name indicated that they anticipated rejection from a viewing public that would not take their work seriously. Indeed, who, in the wake of Communism’s demise, would have been interested in, let alone pleased by, its fragmented ruins? Not to leave any doubt about their orientation toward deconstructivist ideas, the group parked a clunker in front of the gallery, a rusty Soviet-made Moskvich, a pithy and widely recognizable emblem of a past era.<sup>8</sup>



Rajk's and Bachmann's sculptural works, architectural models, and graphic designs share a similarity to the structures of the 1921 OBMOKHU<sup>9</sup> artists' works in Moscow with the fundamental difference that they, unlike the young OBMOKHU members, were not at the optimistic beginning of an era, but at its bitter end, having experienced the destruction of the communist system. Therefore, in direct opposition to the young Soviet constructivists of the early 1920s, Rajk's and Bachmann's architectural and graphic design works used constructivist formal building blocks not as economic, strictly functional elements but as redundant, ornamental and provocatively dysfunctional parts.

If early Constructivism underwent a "laboratory phase," that is, a period when constructivist structures were *not yet* functional, Na-Ne Gallery's Post-Constructivism questioned their very possibility and relevance. Individual narrative details, for example a chessboard or a human figure rolling dough that takes the shape of a five-pointed red star, all had specific local and satirical meanings. Thus these works pointed back to what appeared to be the absurdity of Constructivism itself, when seen through the lens of national, historical experience of the ideas that had once been representative for the constructivists of a better future.

The artists of the Na-Ne Gallery were investigating what exactly becomes revealed in the process of dissecting these systems, also referring back to the several attempts that had been made to resuscitate the values of early Communism, such as the New Left of Western Marxists and communists who had emerged after the 1956 Hungarian revolution.<sup>10</sup> The activists of the New Left, a significant political and intellectual force peaking in 1968, looked at the pre-Stalin era of the October Revolution as a possible starting point to restore left wing politics<sup>11</sup> and attached short-lived hopes to the Czech experiment to establish a "Communism with human face" in 1968. The artists of the Na-Ne Gallery, some of them personal friends of such leading Central European intellectuals as Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik, and having processed the lessons of not only the overturned ideal, but also the reality of "existing" 1980s Communism, worked with a rich medley of historical experience and artistic heritage. Even while they were determined to take seriously the post-modern stance that kept "every era and culture at the same distance,"<sup>12</sup> they were, emotionally and intellectually, determined to study Constructivism and produce its analysis, critique, afterlife, and parody. What used to be functional became decorative, what used to be politically committed became a blend of nostalgia and satire. They rebelled against the constructivist ethics and aesthetics and, at the same time, against the world that rejected the ethics and aesthetics of Constructivism. This dual rebellion was the basis of what amounted to bitter self-irony and formal parody.

For example, in a provocatively anti-constructivist stance, many of the Na-Ne Gallery's artists' works included deliberately superfluous elements that had formal function only, opposing Constructivism's original principle of the economy of formal elements. Rajk's *Beyond Art* building design for the Collegium Hungaricum in Vienna (1996–1998) was an ordinary building but one that quoted constructivist motifs; his 2009 *Lehel Square Farmers' Market* construction in Budapest featured playful, colorful, structural elements most

of which were not functional.<sup>13</sup> Subverting Constructivism's original rigor and deliberately freeing key elements from pure function, this subversion entailed exploitation of a rich field of associations. The constructivist elements of Rajk's *Farmers' Market* confirm a style that does not particularly belong to farmers or their markets, since Constructivism is more associated with urban design and developing urban architectural technologies. Thus Rajk deliberately misread Constructivism, playing on the idealist concept of creating a uniform environment out of the urban and the rural – the rural in the urban. The colors, the dynamism and the playfulness of the design tend to be inviting and all inclusive, but surprising to vendors and buyers, the actual users of the market.

The Na-Ne Gallery's artists were also interested in the process of the dissolution of Constructivism and dismantled it by scattering their formal elements within their deconstructive constructions. The economy principle of Russian Constructivism demanded that no part of a construction could be removed or displaced, and no part could be added without risking the collapse of the whole, but the Na-Ne Gallery's deconstructivists, by contrast, deliberately hid the strictly functional elements and enveloped them in artistic compositions consisting of stylish, aesthetic, constructivist motifs celebrating machinery, mighty engineering work and the modernist mastery of material. They also reminded viewers that constructivist geometry and streamlined design had already been frivolously fashionable for their new aesthetics during the interwar period.<sup>14</sup> Dissecting structure they returned from utopia to praxis, from idea to object. Ideology was skeptically rejected, or referred to in quotation marks. The original constructivist concept could not be resuscitated, so the end product was an ironic collection of formal elements referencing the historic failure of its momentary beauty and idealism.

Doing justice to the idealism of both Communism's adherents and its victims, the 1989 commemoration aesthetically represented the young generation of Hungarian neo-constructivists, conveying mourning, farewell, respect, critique, and an ironic nostalgia. At the same time, it was a parody. Rajk visualized the end of Communism as a world project, the mirage of internationalism and a collective society. His memorable set fabrication with the rusted flag that stood not only for the 1956 victims of Hungary's forcibly reinstated Communism, but for the entire communist world project soon to collapse in the Soviet Union as well, also envisioned the obsolescence of a model society as a well-oiled, sensible machine.

## Notes

1 Camilla Gray: *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863–1922*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1962.

2 "About October" by the editors, *October*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1976, p. 3.

3 *Deconstructivist Architecture*, MoMA, 1988, press release, n.p.

4 A blurring of the profound difference and conflict between Constructivism and Suprematism has accompanied their Western reception since the first showing of Russian avant-garde art in the Van Diemen Gallery Berlin, October 1922.

5 Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

6 See Frederick Schwartz, "The Disappearing Bauhaus" in Jeffrey Saletnik, Robin Schuldenfrei,



László Rajk (b. 1949), Cover design for Miklós Haraszti: *The Aesthetics of Censorship*, Na-Ne Gallery, 1986–1989. Courtesy László Rajk.



László Rajk (b. 1949), *Letatljak*, 2000. Mixed media, private collection. Courtesy László Rajk.

eds., *Bauhaus Construct*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 61-82.

**7** For detailed discussion, see "Today Is a Beautiful Day. The 'New Sensibility' or 'New Subjectivism' in the Hungarian Post-Avant-garde of the 1980s," pp. 186-202.

**8** The Moskvich (meaning Muscovite) was carefully chosen over, for example, an East German made Trabant, a sort of "Ersatz car" that was also symbolic of communism in Hungary, but more in the sense of the moderate affluence of the middle class that had to put up with it in want of 'real' cars. The Moskvich, with its heavily built body was hardly owned as a private car. Rather, it was used as cab or the officials' vehicle, and it was seen (along with equally Soviet-made Volga) as a tank among cars.

**9** *Obiedinenie Molodikh Khudozhnikov*, or Society of Young Artists, a society of young constructivists, Moscow, 1919-1922.

**10** See Peter Wollen: "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International," in Elisabeth Susmann, ed.: *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: Situationists 1957-1972*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 30.

**11** For detailed discussion, see Éva Forgács: "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," in Cornelia Klinger, ed.: *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit. Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart* (Blindness and clairvoyance. Artists' critique of politics and contemporary society), from Wiener Reihe. Themen der Philosophie (Vienna Series. Topics in Philosophy), Vol. 16, ed. by Herta Nagl-Docekal, Cornelia Klinger, Ludwig Nagl, and Alexander Somek, Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 2014, pp. 61-83.

**12** Hannes Böhringer: "Posztmodernitás. Gondolatfoszlányok a Kotányi Attilával folytatott beszélgetésből" (Post-modernity. Fragments from a dialog with Attila Kotányi), *Hasbeszélő*.



László Rajk (b. 1949), *Farmers' Market*, Budapest, Lehel Square, 2002. Courtesy László Rajk.

*Bölcsészindex* (Ventriloquist, Philological Index), Budapest: ELTE, 1987, n.p.

13 Rajk's *Farmers' Market* was closer to Bernard Tschumi's 1982–1998 *Parc de la Villette* in Paris than Russian Constructivism.

14 *Ermitazh*, No. 13, 1922, p. 3: "Constructivism has become fashionable," quoted by Selim Khan-Magomedov: *Rodchenko. The Complete Work*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986, p. 91.