

*Szűcs O.*

## PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF A TRANSFORMING MUSEUM: A CASE STUDY OF MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS IN BUDAPEST

Szűcs, Olga—Candidate of Science in Philosophy, Associate Professor, the Debrecen University, Hungary, Debrecen, [szucsolga3@gmail.com](mailto:szucsolga3@gmail.com).

In this article we will talk about that concrete experience that the author acquired while being the first in Hungary Marketing Director of a big state museum during the times when cultural institutions were undergoing transformation. This transformation was and still is accompanied by not only drastic changes in the social and economic system but also in the paradigm. The author of this article divides the post-soviet transformation era into two periods, the main point of the first one is the transfer of cultural institutions towards market oriented principles of existence. At the stage of changes the issues of ontological nature regarding the point of culture existence have not emerged yet whereas the second one—which is still happening nowadays—already raises issues representing a more important agenda: will it be possible at all to preserve the institution of a museum together with the other tasks dictated by centuries. In her message the author of this article touches upon the first stage of transformation from the former relations towards the new ones only. Through analyzing her rich experience the author is trying to identify the cause-and-effect- relationships of functioning problems that one of the biggest and most important museums of Europe—the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest—was facing in its everyday life.

**Key words:** cultural marketing, practice, transformation, values.

There is a lot of literature nowadays that talks about the role and the functions of a modern museum, both in the West and in Russia. This phenomenon is determined and ensured by the changes within the society itself which enters a stage of self new-identification. Not only cultural institutions are going through radical changes but also the forms of their self-identification what spurs lots of thoughts, attempts and philosophical contemplation of the very basics of all spheres of culture.

In this article I would like to share with you my experience that I acquired while being the first in Hungary Marketing director for a big state museum in our transformation era—which is still continuing—when not only the social and economic systems but also the world outlook paradigm are changing. This article was inspired by the theme that our scientific discussion was given as well as by lots of unresolved problems that both the Russian and the Hungarian museum communities have been and still are struggling with.

The position of a Marketing director for this museum was first created by the Hungarian Ministry of Culture in 2002; later that year it announced a tender to fill in this vacancy. The requirements to a successful candidate were two-sided: s/he had to have scientific and professional knowledge and experience and also be able to resolve financial and economic problems. That is, given extremely limited financing, s/he had to be at the same time both: a culture specialist and a finance manager. The candidate also had to work out a concept for a museum of a new type which would correspond to the requirements of the market paradigm and fulfill its mission of bringing culture and enlightenment to people. We can say that this is that philosophical problem which the museum community of the world is still trying to resolve.

To solve this problem correlating two opposite paradigms and using the old rules and notions will be, most probably, impossible. We all know the reason for this dichotomy. At that time a new discipline of culture economics started dealing with the theoretical analysis of this problem; the group of researchers who worked at the biggest University of Economics in Hungary created the so-called Open Economic Research Group. The scientists of this group wrote and published a textbook on culture economics for universities and colleges; this textbook is still the only one in its category. As a philosopher and a lecturer at the University of Economics I was one of the founding members of this research group, therefore at the theoretical level I was already familiar with the given problems.

The market and culture correlation problem analysis anticipated two trends in the science of culture economics; both of them first showed up at the beginning of the new century but already at that time they showed a clearly defined proportion in favor of the one of them<sup>1</sup>. Various research activities of the correlation between the market economy and culture were aimed exclusively at the culture analysis as an area that produces a specific but at the same time a market oriented product—the goods—whose sale pursued only one goal: to create profit or at least not to cause too much loss. At various conferences on culture economics that we attended in Western Europe—in England, Germany and Holland—all these described in bright colors using lots of presentation slides the curve of correlation between profits and expenses, investments and profitability of various institutions of cultural and artistic activities.

The conclusions about the viability of separate branches and products of culture were pretty straightforward and depended on where the graph arrow was pointing: up or down. The social value or, for instance, purely cultural value of a given work of art or institution—I can assure you of that—was mentioned only for the sake of verbal harmony in order not to have only figures, national currencies and later on euros. For us, people of Central Europe, it sounded strange but considering the geographic and economic characteristics of these countries everything that was said made perfect sense to us.

Of course in hopeless cases they suggested various ways of solving economic problems, for example looking for sponsors, raising ticket prices, cutting expenses such as fixed salary costs, outsourcing some activities to private contractors and of course coming up with such programs and by-products that could replace the lack of financing. From our Western European colleagues we learned that private culture financing is—alas—a temporary solution and living in the XXI century we should forget the well-known notion of a patron of the arts; instead we should start getting acquainted with the intricate unwritten laws of a completely new notion of sponsorship.

The work group on culture economics at the University of Economics had to solve first of all a principal question: in relation to each other is economics the goal and culture is its means or vice versa—economics should fulfill the function of serving the culture? Naturally our colleagues, the economists, thought this issue was solved, exactly the opposite way than their colleagues who deal with philosophy and culture studies thought<sup>2</sup>. This issue is not just a question of pure interest in our times, as in all spheres of our society up to this day we notice the antagonism between these two completely opposite principles. The polemics become harder and harder as the social inequalities in the society are growing.

<sup>1</sup> Никонова А.А. Когнитивные структуры художественного музея // В поисках музейного образа. СПб., 2007. С. 49–61.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem.* Согласие ученого и неученого // Собор лиц: Сборник статей. СПб., 2006. С. 6–15.

Hungary, just like Russia, entered the era of social system restructuring and although in Hungary the period when the lack of the defining role of economics over culture was much shorter, nevertheless the struggle of the employees of the cultural area with the economic pressure was defined not only by universal perpetual arguments in favor of culture but also by the historical experience of a forty year existence of the socialist regime in Hungary, when the abovementioned problem did not have the dichotomic nature yet.

In order to have a clearer picture of what we will be talking about in this thesis we need to mention that perestroika in Hungary was of a completely different nature compared to Russia. In the social conscience of the Hungarian people the idea of socialism has always been the ideology of foreign enslavement. Hungary had very few community and common traditions. The social and individual conscience was and still is working according to the protestant principle of rational selfishness, where the interests of an individual always stand higher than the interests of the group, whereas the function of the latter, if it can be defined, is only a means of defense or ensuring individual success. When the political crisis in the Soviet Union gave Hungary the freedom to consciously choose its historical path, Hungary took this opportunity as a great victory in the process of regaining its former historical independence.

The general exaltation is still vivid today; the political, social and economic evaluation of the past socialist era is absolutely and unequivocally negative—both in people's opinion and the political elite's one. By law it is prohibited to use any symbols of the socialist era in any area of life. The law enlists two totalitarian regimes as equal, separated by a comma: socialism (which is called communism) and fascism. At the same time the mass media every day beat up on the socialist era while there is not a single word about the atrocities of fascism despite the fact that a vast amount of Hungarians became victims of the Holocaust. While remembering with nostalgia the social benefits of the socialist era the Hungarian people judge the social regime which as opposed to capitalism had the elements of social security and justice. Most probably this contradiction which got into the subconscious is the main reason for the schizophrenic events in the cultural life of the country. While acknowledging the market system as the only correct system for the functioning of the society the population, including cultural workers, with great surprise and indignation observe the lack of practical application of the market principles. The cultural institutions in Hungary function at this social background. Let me give you an example of a certain big institution, so you see for yourselves how it happens from within.

The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest is on many accounts a unique cultural institution. First of all, there are only three Museums of Applied Arts in Europe that were founded with this purpose and got unique architectural ensembles build specifically with the purpose to host collections of this kind, these museums are located in London, Vienna and Budapest. Secondly, as regards the quantity of exhibit items stored there this museum also stands out as it has an impressive figure of 800 000 exhibit items. Thirdly, from the point of view of being the object of our research, the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest due to the specifics of its collection items prompts us to ask philosophical questions regarding the boundaries and functions of art, the boundary between the objects of daily use and works of art, the problem of selecting those items that are worthy of being exhibited in exhibition halls and, of course, defining the extent to which the exhibition items are to be included in various events organized for different groups of visitors<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Бирюкова М.В. Одиночество автора и «смерть автора» в выставочной практике второй половины XX в.: объекты Йозефа Бойса на Документе5 // Феномен одиночества. Актуальные вопросы гигиены культуры: Коллективная монография. СПб., 2014. С. 172–181.

The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest has its specific branches: an estate outside Budapest called «Nagytétény» which exhibits furniture from the XVII–XIX centuries in its historical interior and has a beautifully kept park, the other one is the Museum of Central Asian Arts located opposite the Russian Embassy on Andrassy Avenue. The Museum has a unique library, according to the experts' opinion this is the best library on applied arts in Europe.

Presently the Museum employs 119 people, this number decreased by 25 % during the last 6–7 years. Full-time employees fulfill all basic functions of the museum including its keepers, exclusively pensioners. Security, cleaning and museum education functions are outsourced.

The financing of the museum is a state task which is executed by the Ministry of Culture of Hungary. In practice this financing covers only 70 % of the museum's expenses; this is why the museum has to get the remaining financing itself. The necessity to enter into the market relationship with the Hungarian economy became inevitable. Because of this situation a new position of the Marketing Director was created at the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest.

The Marketing Director's objective was to facilitate working out a balance between the main function of the museum and its profitability at the same time. The dichotomy between the market and the culture had to be turned into a dynamic harmony<sup>4</sup>. What were the concrete tasks that we had to resolve? First of all we had to ensure that the profits of the museum were growing as this problem was to be solved only via monetary means. The following resources served as own sources for financial inflow: revenues from ticket sales to the visitors, renting out properties and museum halls, selling photocopies of museum exhibition items for publications which were requested from the outside sources, support from potential sponsors, organization of paid exhibitions, monopoly right to conduct expertise for items received from private collectors and ordinary people, leasing objects of art. The indirect revenues were represented by various ways of cutting expenses.

The newly created position of a Marketing Director had its difficulties. In order to create a new organizational chart the present Charter of this organization had to be changed and that could be done only after the Ministry of Culture issued corresponding decrees and orders. This necessary act commanded decisiveness and straightforwardness in the practical activities of the bureaucratic machine. Due to the known reasons this process is extremely slow and serves as a pretext for obstructions on the organization's side regarding the activities of the new organizational structure.

The concrete responsibilities of the Marketing Director for the first time since this position was introduced in the museum business in Hungary were defined as follows: facilitating concept definition for the organized exhibitions; providing broad marketing support for the organized exhibitions; organizing complementing programs for children and adults at the exhibition; creating complementary printed materials for the exhibitions; working with the press; creating and implementing designer elements for the looks of the museum; opening a museum souvenir shop; attracting additional means for the museum budget; organizing and supervising events held for profit; working with the sponsors; attracting additional external assets for the functioning of the museum; ensuring sales of photo materials belonging to the museum; organizing and helping to host various events connected with anniversaries and holidays of the country and the museum itself; creating a modern museum website; organizing and ensuring the implementation of digitalization of the museum archives and file cabinet data; planning

<sup>4</sup> Димогло М.В. Дизайн как средство проектирования современной музейной экспозиции // В поисках музейного образа. СПб., 2007. С. 236–242.

annual activities and regularly report on achieved results including the achieved profits expressed in figures<sup>5</sup>.

Each task was regarded as a part of the main marketing functions. The position was filled for five years and had lots of authority which was not legally stipulated.

The appearance of a Marketing Director had dual reaction from the museum personnel: positive expectations were accompanied by a lot of wariness and even some kind of fear. What did these types of expectations mean? The expectations were without any doubt aimed at the function of attracting monetary means for the organization of exhibitions in particular and for the museum itself in general. The wariness was caused by the fear of upcoming serious changes which the museum community was skeptical about. Some fears were caused by the danger that a new economically determined paradigm regarding the functioning of cultural institutions in market economy will get into the museum area. The introduction of the new position of the Marketing Director seemed to be the threshold for the shift in the museum activity, making it correspond to the new—economic—criteria when evaluating the professional activity of the museum.

The most interesting thing for us at the present moment is the analysis of contradictions characteristic of the described era and situation since during the so-called first era of transformation process of the cultural institutions we encountered some unsolved problems, some of them still exist nowadays. Why dividing the transformation process into periods has been so important in the last two decades? First of all we—the Soviet Union and the countries of people's democracies—have gone through the period of political and socio-economic change of two completely opposite paradigms; secondly, at this stage we are going through even more radical changes of all cultural world order which existed during the past times.

Both transformation stages initiated tasks of quality changes in both: the thinking pattern and regarding concrete functioning mechanisms of all social institutions including—of course—the cultural life institutions. Although transferring to market relations and to another type of value system was a painful process it was somehow doable, however to participate in it and to observe how the culturally formed functions of the museum were disappearing required a special type of analysis. The biggest difference between these two mentioned processes is probably the fact that in order to describe the first one we had a working categorical framework whose competence, as it looks, is becoming so limited that events of a qualitatively new type are becoming indescribable.

The main task for social sciences is not the task of getting back to the evaluation categories lost during past years but to seriously think through how we can describe the transformation processes of social institutions that are happening in front of our eyes and what conceptual framework we should use for it<sup>6</sup>. But this might be the issue for our future conferences. As regards stipulating the object of the discussion in the present thesis, it refers exclusively to the first stage of the transformation process of the past two and a half decades and deals first of all with those events in the life of the museum as a cultural institution which were connected with the transfer of the socio-economic nature. And as such it can be analyzed and described with the help of those categories that we are used to and which proved their legitimacy more than once.

While characterizing some of the above-mentioned concrete responsibilities of the first in Hungary Marketing Director I would like to first of all stop at those problematic points which

<sup>5</sup> See: Меликов В.В. Введение в текстологию традиционных культур. М., 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Obrist H.-U. Interview with Harald Szeemann // Artforum. 1996, November. P. 111–135.

in real practice appeared based on the dichotomic nature of the transition period of the first type, that is between the socialistic-state owned and something that is entering into the market relationship. The contradictory situations in Hungary were also exacerbated by the fact that during the forty years of the socialist regime no basic principles of community self-consciousness took root in either social or individual consciousness. This fact in no way impeded the setting of rules and relations in favor of an individual's profit which were based on the main elements of the socialist regime. Half-way joking we can say that at the subconscious level Hungary was leading an experiment of synthesizing two opposite types of the socio-economic regime.

The changes in the old practice of working out a concept for the planned organized exhibitions were primarily shown in recommendations for a better expressed conceptual base of the themes and presentations of certain concrete exhibitions<sup>7</sup>. There was a request to consider possible interest from the public rather than follow some old plans driven by the inner logic of showing exhibition items that are stored in the museum depot. The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest had 800,000 inventory items of museum exhibition objects. Up until 2007, that is during 110 years of the existence of the museum only 10 % of the works of art that the museum has been exhibited for the public.

The reason for such a long stagnation in my opinion was the lack of motivation for the museum curators since it was not necessary for them to mandatorily report on the work they had done so far. Under the system of market relations the external requirements to a museum have radically changed: it became necessary to be efficient and to report on completed work<sup>8</sup>. The efficiency criterion during the first years was the amount of organized exhibitions, later on the market requirements stepped in: first the exhibitions had to be profitable and later it became necessary to determine how profitable each separate event was. Exactly ten years have passed since then. During this period the major problem of the museum—organizing a permanent exhibition—was not solved. From the very beginning the main curators of the museum collections were fighting against the introduction of market relations into the practice of the museum, their struggle was a rather successful one. The main tool of the curators was the same tool that those who supported the market relations used against the curators—those were references to the lack of financing. An obvious contradiction between professionals and the representatives of the market-oriented thinking was clearly seen.

As regards the marketing constituent of the organized exhibitions there were lots of conceptual problems. A whole department was supposed to deal with this process; at that time that department was adhering exclusively to the old understanding of marketing/non/efficiency, the quality of printed materials such as brochures, the places where advertising posters are to be placed in the streets and, of course, on designer make-up of all advertising items. Therefore it often happen that the posters with the museum's logo—which took a long time to design and a lot of coordination between people who were not professional at this type of business—those posters were placed on garbage bins of tram stops. It is important to emphasize that such decisions were taken not due to an attempt to save money but based on an argument: there are always lots of people at tram stops. Conserving the image of the museum and creating its brand, as two major marketing factors, were not considered by the personnel who had been working at the same museum for a few decades. Another big mistake was the practice of choosing the black color for the banners placed on electricity poles alongside the main avenues of Budapest.

<sup>7</sup> See: *Серов Н.В.* Цвет культуры: психология, культурология, физиология. СПб., 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *Szeemann H.* Museum der Obsessionen von/zu/mit Harald Szeemann. Berlin, 1981.

In this connection there were lots of phone calls from people who were inquiring who is the person the museum is mourning. These examples prove the fact that an unprofessional approach can cause inadequate marketing actions. The reason for this in my opinion is in the lack of understanding what marketing for cultural organizations should be, which was directly connected to the fact that the level of teaching the science of marketing at universities and colleges was rather weak whereas such notion as marketing of culture and art did not exist at all. Having worked for twenty years at one of the leading universities of Hungary I got constant reassurance that the newly introduced marketing discipline refers exclusively to consumer goods and by no means to culture; and if the issues of culture marketing were put forward in some cases the whole description of this area was done in economic terms used exclusively for the goods of direct consumption<sup>9</sup>. Very soon it turned out that adapting the science of economy to the area of culture requires a specific approach which depends on how unique the object in question is. The specifics of the transfer to the market-oriented museum were also expressed by the fact that on the one hand there was a requirement to involve as many people as possible from all age groups; however no additional finances were allocated from the funds to these required programs. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that there were no educators within the museum staff. We had to invite the educators from other places and depending on the presence of absence of finances we had to decide whether to organize educating activities or not<sup>10</sup>.

During those difficult times we also had to work out the general image for the designer elements of the museum, often without any professional help because professional help presupposed payment for the rendered services at market prices. Working with the media was complicated by the specific requirements from the media sources which at that time were already fulfilling not just their reporting function but also solving commercial tasks of bringing profits via increased circulation. Writing about exhibitions was not a helpful factor in resolving the task of bringing profits. The prices for placing paid advertisements in printed media were too high for the budget constraints of a separate exhibition. The price for a onetime advertisement in one of the popular magazines was equal to the total marketing budget of a given exhibition.

A few potential sources for attracting more money were to open a museum shop, get money from the sponsors and from leasing the museum premises for various entertaining events organized by companies and commercial organizations.

Due to the lack of specific museum souvenirs the museum shop soon filled up with consumer goods that do not have anything to do with the museum itself. The practice of attracting sponsor money was so versatile and so contradictory that it deserves a separate story. In any case it required gigantic additional efforts which, due to a number of specific reasons, did not bring the desired results.

Leasing museum premises to outside lessees for entertaining events caused constant disagreements between the management of the museum and the professional museum community as the process was not regulated by any legal documents and therefore there was no guarantee that during those entertaining events the artifacts will stay safe. Therefore as a conclusion one can say that the museum has not yet finished its transition to the new work principles as there appeared a totally new task: how is it possible to preserve the museum in the completely new environment which is still forming and whose nature we are still to study.

<sup>9</sup> Сюч О. Проблема исторической памяти с точки зрения науки Гигиены культуры // Рубежи памяти: груз прошлого на весах современности. СПб., 2015. С. 131–138.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.* Актуальные проблемы науки и экономики культуры // Романтизм как вектор развития культуры. Академический и музейный опыт. Воронеж, 2016. С. 84–97.

### Referenses

Birukova M.V. Odinochestvo avtora i «smert' avtora» v vystavochnoj praktike vtoroj poloviny XX v.: ob'ekty Jozefa Boyasa na Dokumente 5 [The author's solitude and «the author's death» in the exhibition practice of the second half of the XX century: The objects of Joseph Beuys at the Documenta 5], in *Fenomen odinochestva. Aktual'nye voprosy gigeny kul'tury*. Saint-Petersburg: RHGA Press, 2014. P. 172–181. (in Rus.).

Dimoglo M.V. Dizajn kak sredstvo proektirovanija sovremennoj muzejnoj jekspozicii [Design as means for projecting a modern museum exposition], in *V poiskah muzejnogo obraza*. Saint-Petersburg: [without name of publisher]. 2007. P. 236–242. (in Rus.).

Melikov V.V. *Vvedenie v tekstologiju tradicionnyh kul'tur* [Introduction to textology of traditional cultures]. Moscow: RGGU Press, 1999. 304 p. (in Rus.).

Nikonova A.A. Kognitivnye struktury hudozhestvennogo muzeja [Cognitive structures of a Museum of Fine Arts], in *V poiskah muzejnogo obraza*. Saint-Petersburg: [without name of publisher]. 2007. P. 49–61. (in Rus.).

Nikonova A.A. Soglasie uchenogo i neuchenogo [The concordance of the learned and the unlearned], in *Sobor lits: Sbornik statei*. Saint-Petersburg: [without name of publisher], 2006. P. 6–15. (in Rus.).

Obrist H.-U. Interview with Harald Szeemann, in *Artforum*. 1996, November. P. 111–135.

Serov N.V. *Cvet kul'tury: psikhologija, kulturologija, fiziologija* [The color of culture: psychology, culturology, physiology]. Saint-Petersburg: Rech' Press, 2004. 672 p. (in Rus.).

Szeemann H. *Museum der Obsessionen von/zu/mit Harald Szeemann*. Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1981. 240 p. (in Germ.).

Szücs O. Aktual'nye problemy nauki i jekonomiki kul'tury [The Important Problems of Science and Economics of Culture], in *Romantizm kak vektor razvitija kul'tury. Akademicheskij i muzejnyj opyt*. Voronezh: Quarta Press, 2016. P. 84–97. (in Rus.).

Szücs O. Problema istoricheskoy pamjati s tochki zrenija nauki Gigeny kul'tury [The historical memory problem as seen by the science of culture hygiene], in *Rubezhi pamjati: gruz proshlogo na vesah sovremennosti*. Saint-Petersburg: PHGA Press, 2015. P. 131–138. (in Rus.).