The Contemporary Art Centres of the Soros Foundation and C³

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George Soros, the successful American investor of Hungarian origins has been an active philanthropist since the seventies. In 1979 he established the Open Society Fund in New York, an organization that supports activities in more than 50 countries worldwide. The aim of this initiative was to promote the "open societies" concept originally proposed by the philosopher Karl Popper. In the following years when the Soros Foundation and the network of the Soros Contemporary Art Centers (SCCA) became a reality, lavish praise as well as harsh criticism was regularly heaped on the organization and the people associated with George Soros.

The unique beginnings and the subsequent operation of the SCCA network including the Center for Culture & Communication (C³) cannot be fully appreciated without considering the regional socio-cultural context. 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 a cultural narrative is presented in the context of documented evidence and personal experience.

In 1984, after lengthy negotiations with the authorities, a compromise was reached to establish the Soros Foundation in close collaboration with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The stated goal was to support fresh contemporary intellectual deliberations and initiatives tied to developing autonomy. From the beginning, the Soros Foundation aimed at bringing a new working moral, new informal style, creativity and most importantly transparency into the socio-political landscape, thus introducing a tool of pluralism unknown in the last forty years. It is essential to record the significant aid provided to many other causes such as health, the oral history program, English language education manager education, student exchange programs, publishing, environmental and ethnic minority causes including the Roma, etc. It is crucial to note that no pre-existing plans or precedence were available at that time.

The list of projects supported by the Soros Foundation is long and complex, including the establishment of the Central European University in 1995.[2] From almost the beginning, the Foundation's activities included major support for the arts, especially for innovative or experimental art projects. This becomes even more significant when one considers that experimental and/or alternative art practice was practically prohibited in the socialist era. From 1985, the newly established Soros resource centre provided information on contemporary Hungarian artists to students, scholars, collectors and dealers from within Hungary and abroad. In 1991, the Documentation Center expanded its activities under the name: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), Budapest, with the aim to better support contemporary Hungarian culture.

The Budapest-based SCCA served as a model for opening similar hubs in other countries The notion of this expansion came from George Soros himself. Between 1992-1999, 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. According to the stated philosophy of Soros, it was expected that after a few years the various centres would gain their own identity. The string of SCCAs organized annual exhibitions of local contemporary art, documented the work of local artists and offered grants programs. A critical constituent of the network's operation was its educational program, including the organization of seminars, conferences and lectures.

The role of the art centres might be considered vital at a stage when interest from the West was focused on the opening societies of the Eastern block, with the art centres providing information on the local art scene, organizing studio visits, exhibitions, and supporting their artists.

All over Central Europe the annual Soros exhibitions provided a much-needed impetus for contemporary artists. From the Budapest based projects the Butterfly Effect, an exhibition of media works and series of events by Hungarian and international artists in 1996, had the most far-reaching outcome.[3] This very first large scale media art event in Hungary — included an historical exhibition of Central and East European technological and experimental inventions, an exhibition of contemporary media art works by Hungarian and international artists, an international retrospective of video, film and animation works, multimedia performances and symposiums on media theories and practice and technological discoveries in the field of media art. The incredible public successes of the Butterfly Effect eventually lead to the establishment of the Center for Culture and Communication (C³) Budapest.[4]

C³ opened in June 1996. One of the primary reasons for establishing this Center was to develop a large-scale facility for Internet access including schools, NGOs and private individuals. In addition to public access, C³ also offered educational tools such as ongoing courses for Internet use — a contentious situation arose in the non-profit motivated environment. Of course C³'s mandate went much further than public Internet access. In the Hungarian history of media art, one of the first steps included the establishment of the Intermedia Department (1990) under the direction of Miklos Peternak at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts.[5] In 1997, Peternak became the director of C³ and he prioritized an educational outreach program at C³ linked to educational institutions.

From the late nineties, C³ maintained an extensive artist residency program[6] and innovative annual exhibitions. Since 1999, C³ operates as a non-profit independent Foundation with the aim to develop collaborations between art, science, communications, and educational and cultural programs 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.

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. In 1999 and 2000, following the restructuring of the Soros foundations, all Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts gradually became independent and ultimately transformed into organizations under the membership of the new association ICAN (International Contemporary Art Network) based in Amsterdam — or ceased to exist.[7]

The initial goal of re-integration of Central and East European artists to the rest of the world has been more or less accomplished by 2000. The next stage in the integration 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 reviews the major contemporary artists from this region, he/she will find numerous references to concepts and realized artworks supported by the Soros Network.

Note: This paper is part of the panel presentation — *From Isolation to Networking. Cyber Homosovieticus in Search of Promised Land.*

1   Open Society Foundation http://www.osi-az.org/faq.shtml

2   Central European University, Budapest, Hungary http://www.ceu.hu/

3   The Butterfly Effect. http://www.C³ .hu/scca/butterfly

4   Center for Culture and Communication C³ http://www.C³ .hu

5   Intermedia Department, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts http://www.intermedia.C³ .hu

6   C3 Artist residency program http://www.c3.hu/collection/index_en.php?t=2

7   ICAN (International Contemporary Art Network) http://www.ican.artnet.org/ican/