

Julianna P. Szucs: **Borocz in Fabula**

(Andras Borocz: “Tul az Operencian” / “Across the Blue Yonder”. Exhibition at Szent Istvan Kiraly Muzeum, Szekesfehervar, Hungary. May 28-September 25, 2011)

--Is it an object?

--Nope.

--Is it alive?

--Nope.

--Is it an idea?

--Nope.

Playing by the rules of the well-known parlor game will not reveal the themes of the Hungarian American visual artist Andras Borocz. Of course it is possible to describe the art objects he makes. If a curator were to catalog the pieces in the exhibition titled *Tul az Operencian* (“Across the Blue Yonder”) at Szekesfehervar, the museum catalog entries would read something like this: 1. Twenty-six pieces of hand-made paper mounted on bread slice-shaped poplar slabs, bearing ink and watercolor images of humanoid forms shaped like loaves of bread performing postural exercises with one another. 2. Nineteen pieces of gilded mirrors, scratched and scored all over with drawn motifs that include paper clips, bicyclists, saws and extension cords, details that torment or pleasure each other in cunningly complex ways. 3. Fifteen hands pointing index fingers carved of wood and extended by means of folding carpenter’s measure mechanisms, each one a *yad*, or Torah-pointer, hung from the ceiling, exposing their irregular structures that point in all directions of the compass. – But these catalog entries would prove worthless since they misinform. Do these works depict objects? Yes, that, too. Living creatures? That, too. Ideas? Yes, that, too. I give up!

It is plain as the day that the bread loaves, paper clips, *yads* mean far more than their physical selves. By being just so they *stand for* something. Just as a man may be referred to as “dude” or “cat” and a woman may be called “babe” or “chick”, Borocz’s works are hieroglyphs expressed in slang. They are messages made illegible by being in an unbreakable code. Full of punch lines to jokes whose narratives remain wrapped in mystery. Fun and games but with the point of the story hidden from us. Impossible to construe by means of a parlor game such as “Twenty Questions”.

“I’m always kidding, as you can see. It’s a defense mechanism,” explains one of Woody Allen’s movie characters. This is the survival trick that Borocz has developed at the time of his debut, as a student of Miklos Erdely in the mid-1980’s, and has continued to employ ever since as a successful artist in New York.

Miklos Erdely? This review isn't the place to do justice to his most far-reaching (and to this day underappreciated) oeuvre in the Hungarian neo-avantgarde. Suffice it to say that Erdely was the founder of the school of "visual liberalism", the genius guru of an art scene that was barely tolerated, often prohibited by the powers that were. He was the creative *joie de vivre* independent of those powers, the most entertaining and provocative challenge to institutional art that pigeonholes everything into predetermined boxes. His aura may be seen to contain the props that made up the arts of 1968, redolent of samizdat publications and terrorized culture czars, free universities and double agents with split personalities, grass and birth control pills.

Miklos Erdely's "children" thus imbibed, as it were in their "father's milk" the contrarian attitudes necessary for opposition. Their conceptualism and amateurism made up a good part of their strategy as freedom fighters, especially since the regular army of approved artists wore the Social-Realist uniform, (at most with an Abstract stripe or two) and displayed blind obedience to professionalism – even if High Command did not always succeed in transmitting the rules of engagement. "If there is no existential necessity for doing away with alienated labor but on the contrary the work needs to be carried on, then the new technologies will all become potential servants of autocratic repression," was how Erdely and his school interpreted Herbert Marcuse's teachings, applying them to the arts.

Therefore the correct path is avoiding from the start the possibilities offered by new technologies. Make art that is inexpensive, has an air of impoverishment, a do-it-yourself feel. Let it be free and therefore impossible to blackmail! "High tech no, arte povera yes!" protests the artist, once a member of the Indigo Group, who nowadays feels at home in New York art galleries. Corks and pencils, bread dough and spatulas, eggs and matchboxes form a good part of Andras Borocz's studio materials both then and now. And, above all, wood, the virtuoso carving of which is for Borocz a matter of honor and work ethic.

This material does not allow the artist to float off even when there is nothing substantial in what a serial work has to say, because the composition is not built upon the mere caprices of thought. This is a material that remains "beautiful" even when the content is "ugly", for its meaning is – to paraphrase Tolstoy – "the only attainable absolute knowledge is: life is not worth anything". Of course with Borocz, juxtaposing the hand-made and *Weltschmerz* regularly results in contradiction, tension, friction and heat. This is why his works seem to be funny, or more accurately, and appropriately: ironic.

The title of the exhibition is already a clue to the game played. The title shared by the three serial works, "*Tul az Operencian*", best rendered in English as "Across the Blue Yonder", may refer to many different things, except the world of musical operettas it comes from. Shall we be happy somewhere "across the blue yonder"? Far from it! Although the Great Fable, and the tribulations of the bread loaf people depicted in the comic strip scenes on twenty-six slices of wooden bread, may be just as illogical as the images of a pre-dawn delirium caused by a stuffed belly tossing on broken mattress springs, let us drop our illusions! No Book of Dreams will ever consider as auspicious the

image of a bread loaf man slicing himself with a saw, or a grandfather clock with a pendulum made of bread dough, or a boxing ring where the bodies not only of the referee and the two fighters, but of a fourth, knocked out and suspiciously cadaverous looking participant, have half-torsos of bread loaf.

Neither do the other fables promise easy dreams. The murky paper clip labyrinths scrawled on gilded mirrors, the bicyclists racing in opposite directions on machines with spokes welded together, the electric wires winding like giant snakes – not to mention the saws, scissors, centaurs shod with horseshoes – are all explicit phantasmagoria of miseries awaiting humans. Small as they are they depict the unbearable lightness of being; the childish charm and surface glitter of the drawings best serve as hokum, in the face of an awareness of death.

It is of course possible to muse about Borocz's use of bread as "object-person-concept" working as an occult iconography for the existential imperative. His metallic jungle shows grating instruments set against each other as the symbol for a world of ever present violence. (Even the "old" Borocz had his insoluble idiosyncratic motifs: he had devoted huge series to melons, to miniature factory smokestacks, and of course everyone's favorite, his world-famous series of pencils with black graphite innards carved in the shape of people.) The more mysterious they were the more abundant and positive was the criticism they received. Indeed, Borocz's motifs are viewer-friendly and invite written comment; they have effectively stimulated the imagination of an entire cultural sphere. They formed an organic part of that Central European mythology that expressed the mood of the years just before and for some years after 1989 with such intellectual brilliance and unbridled zest. By now few artists in Hungary create works pervaded by this mood, for lack of a receptive audience. The age of irony has passed; trenchant criticism and subtle wit no longer go hand in hand at present in this region.

If the truth be told, Borocz himself is in transition. While he keeps on "breeding", "mirroring" and "penciling" and even carrying on with "The Hanged", his interest is increasingly directed toward the Great Theme, the depiction of a Jewish Destiny that is commensurate to its subject. (He had dealt with this earlier, but on another scale.) Here in Hungary it was in 2003 that he first exhibited his *Purim*, an unusually large composition that can be characterized as an Ur-Mobile. Three years later at the exhibition in Pecs, Hungary he approached this task with an amplified range of materials. In 2011 not only in the Szekesfehervar exhibit but also at 2B Gallery in Budapest his visual ideas revolve around the Holocaust. (In the searchlights of Total Annihilation we see the bread loaves and mirrors in a very different light!)

The "defense mechanism" sparkles most brightly within this thematic sphere. In place of the Woody Allen reference mentioned earlier let us think of another cinematic analogy, that of Roberto Benigni, the great Italian clown whose "Life Is Beautiful" with its laughter and tears has upset so many people. Many people considered it sacrilegious to employ the techniques of comedy in treating the subject of the concentration camp and were outraged by the blasphemous methods used to depict total annihilation.

Borocz's work, too, may provoke rejection on this count. Especially with viewers who were only aware of Fritz Cremer's Buchenwald memorial or Agamemnon Makris' Mauthausen memorial, and who, even if they saw it, violently reacted to Zbigniew Libera's concentration camp installation built of Lego parts. The same reaction applied to Borocz's earliest work in this line, his 1987 "Broom", a mini-crematorium sculpted out of soap and pencils. Obviously those who respond so emotionally will react with mixed feelings to the miniature cattle wagon-object created this year out of hand-made paper with ink drawings mounted on folding carpenter's measures, surmounted by *yad*-hands hovering above, to form a tragicomic stage set for a destiny that could be transmuted into hysterical laughter. And given the current state of public awareness in Hungary it is hardly likely that "Transport", the Great Cattle Wagon co-designed by Borocz and the architect Laszlo Rajk as a site-specific installation for the house and empty lot on the corner of Kiraly and Kazinczy Streets, will be erected by the present municipal government of Budapest. (The plans, along with the relevant Borocz drawings, were shown at 2B Gallery). I wish I were wrong in my prediction.

Perhaps the generation of the Indigo Group, born after the Holocaust, no longer has the ability for a pathos-laden, heroic and tragic representation of the Event. It may even be possible that for them the politically laden anti-fascism that informed their fathers' tastes is aesthetically unfeasible. This generation has learned fear only after the fact – if at all. They are able to evoke the experience of "anything can happen" only unconsciously, by means of "defense mechanisms" working alongside the repressed and the sublimated, at a depth where weeping and laughter and indifference, "object" and "subject" and "concept" are inexorably melded together.

English translation by John Batki