Sztuka**w**muzeum

Muzeum. Formy i środki prezentacji III

Sztuka w muzeum

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The self-reflecting museum as a discursive space. Ideas and approaches to change the ontology of a collection

Samorefleksyjne muzeum jako przestrzeń dyskursywna. Pomysły i podejścia dotyczące zmiany ontologii kolekcji

Służąc przede wszystkim jako skarbnice dziedzictwa kulturalnego, tradycyjne muzea sztuki mogą również kształtować opinie współczesnych artystów w ponownym odczytywaniu i nowym definiowaniu różnych relacji w historii sztuki. Celem mojego badania jest zilustrowanie praktyki kuratorskiej realizowanej na Wydziale Sztuki po 1800 roku w Muzeum Sztuk Pięknych w Budapeszcie, aby potwierdzić pomysł autorefleksyjnego muzeum. W przypadku niektórych z ostatnich wystaw zastosowano interwencję, umożliwiającą zwiedzającym interpretację przeszłości z perspektywy teraźniejszości.

During the last seven years I was conducting a comprehensive research on the Hungarian–American visual artist György Kepes, who is considered to be one of the predecessor of curatorial art thanks to his interventions in museum space, first at The Art Institute of Chicago in the mid-1940s.[1] Being a protagonist of *visual culture* or *image studies* as we call it today, he was the among firsts who dedicated a book on modern visual design, titled *Language of Vision*, published in 1944[2] (img 1, img 2). This very book together with Alexander Dorner's conception of the "Living Museum"[3] provided me an approach which helped me to understand how design elements should be integrated in to the museum display in a highly functional, but witty way in order to let visitors playing an integrated part in the process of interactions with the showcased artifacts.

As a curator I am in everyday interaction of works of art. From this position it is not that hard to discover that every display (the way how the pieces are arranged next to each other) represent a certain meta-language. This is a structure which inevitably reflecting back to the history of a museum, including its function as well.

1. Installation view of *The Art of the United Nations*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1944–1945 (Exhibition curated and designed by György Kepes)

2. Installation view of *Close-up of Tintoretto*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1944 (Exhibition curated by Katharine Kuh in the Gallery of Art Interpretation, installation design by György Kepes)
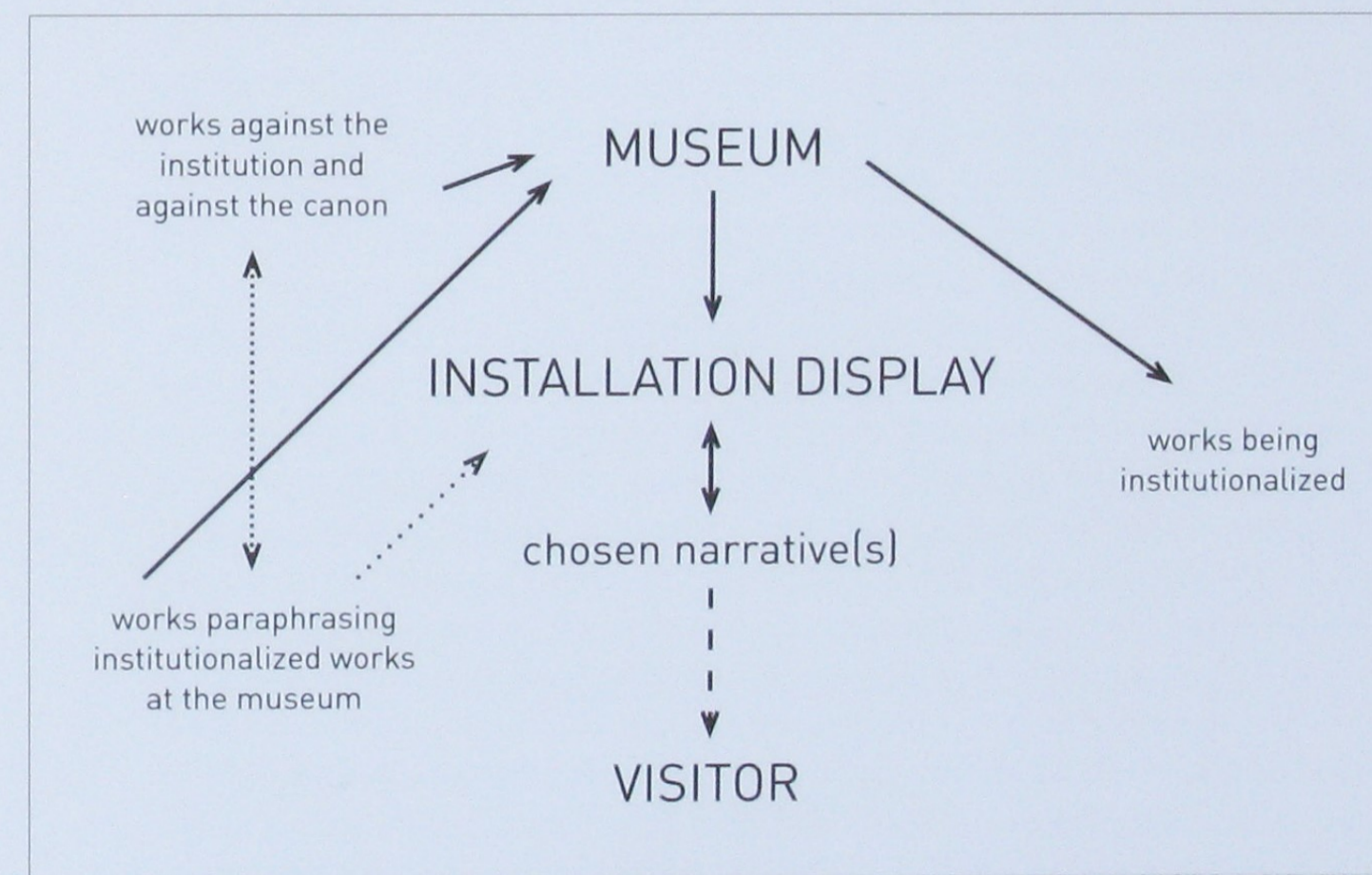
3. The model of a "self-reflective" exhibition at a traditional art museum

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1. *Close-up of Tintoretto*, 1944 and *The Art of the United Nations*, 1944–1945 (Both exhibitions were on display at The Art Institute of Chicago.)
2. Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision*, Chicago, Paul Theobald, 1944.
3. Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond "Art". The Work of Herbert Bayer*, New York: Wittenborn and Schultz, 1947.

4. The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest

5. A the white cube gallery of 20th century and contemporary art exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest (2012–2015) during installation

The main issue I am currently focusing at is how visuality could be interpreted as a cultural, political, religious, scientific and even an economic phenomenon within the museum space and how it could affect the face of a collection, a group of works, which are in constant move and change with the time. My question is how the chosen works which we put on display can be understood as "museum proof" pieces maintaining their subversive character they inherited from the past and how they can be looked as the origins of new, subversive art forms, first born out of the canon, opposing the role of the museum as being a guard of the tradition, but later getting institutionalized and an interesting phenomenon would appear, namely the interpretation of the source (which was either taken over as a paraphrase or completely misused) would be the part of the same collection (img 3).

To translate all these to the language of our discipline, the only example where this scholarship could be validated are the classical art museums. I put to the limelight of my study those institutions which are providing a certain universalist approach, being the ultimate storyteller of art history, which are also manifested in their form as a building designed in an eclectic style, representing the various epochs they are the keeper of. One of these places I am referring to is the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest [img 4], where I am currently working at. It has a 40 years of disadvantage pertaining to the acquisition of trendsetter works produced in the Post-War era, similar to its counterparts in other Post-Socialists countries.[4] In order to cope with this backlog became to exist due to the geopolitical situation of our former Soviet Block countries, where abstraction and other Western tendencies were not accepted by various ideological reasons, we, curators and museum professionals of a new era have to take some alternative narratives into consideration. We should elaborate paradigms and concepts

which could be relevant in regard to surpass the sketchy center-periphery paradigm being skeptically analyzed by Kaufmann and Pilliod,[5] according to which secondary discourses, like Piotr Piotrowski's horizontally scaled, transnationally formulated art historian topography was conceived[6]. The ongoing studies concerning a global art history are, thanks to the research of figures like Jean-Hubert Martin and Hans Belting considered today not just theoretical approaches, but their results are being embedded in the curatorial practice too[7].

Our task as curators of 20th century and contemporary art is to pose questions and provide answers which are all reflecting to the legacy of the auratic spaces of a classical museum in tandem with the intellectual challenges expressed by the Beltingian – if I may – "end of the art history"[8] program. The fragmental character of the exhibition I would like to refer to, not only documents a certain *posthistoire* condition, the absence of big narratives, but also giving an account of the indispensable gaps we, museum professionals from Central-Eastern Europe are constantly facing to and continuously needed to count on with.

T. S. Eliot famous 1919 essay titled "Tradition and the Individual Talent" declared that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past"[9]. What is meant here is that we should read the past from the perspective of the present, since the old not necessarily influence the new. This statement of Eliot was later used and paraphrased by art historians, like Michael Baxandall, Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal and Gottfried Boehm

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4   Ferenc Tóth, "Collecting »Contemporay Art« at the Museum of Fine Arts", in *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 112–113 (2010), pp. 137-152.

5   Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Elizabeth Pilliod (eds.), *Time and place. Essays in the Geohistory of Art*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005.
6   Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, London, Reaktion, 2009.
7   Louis Perrois, Jean-Hubert Martin (eds.), *Magiciens de la Terre*, Exh. cat., Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989; Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel (eds.), *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds*, Exh. cat., Karlsruhe, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2013.
8   Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.
9   T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London, Methuen, 1920, 50.

6. Alan Sonfist in the dossier-exhibiton gallery of the Museum of Fine Arts (In the background his work titled *Gene Bank of the Trees in New York City*, 1974), curated by Márton Orosz, 2014

among others when new strategies were elaborated to the problem how artist can re-read and re-define the tradition being inherited from past centuries[10].

We (I curated the 20th century permanent exhibition together with my colleague Dávid Fehér) came to the conviction that there should be exist some hidden sub-narratives being able to substitute some parts of the main narrative by creating thematic groups as opposed to follow a strict chronological order. Based on our rationale the context of these works, the way how we arrange them should not unavoidably follow the iconographical, textual or other kind of references according to which they were selected, but they should represent an inner syntax with a more complex, associative character. To coin Michel Foucault's terminology, these types of museum spaces could be understood as *heterotopic* spaces,[11] certain interdisciplinary structures, meaning that a network is being generated in an uncommon location, places which are in connection with every other spaces. A set of rooms where works are accumulated from various periods of the past (img 5).
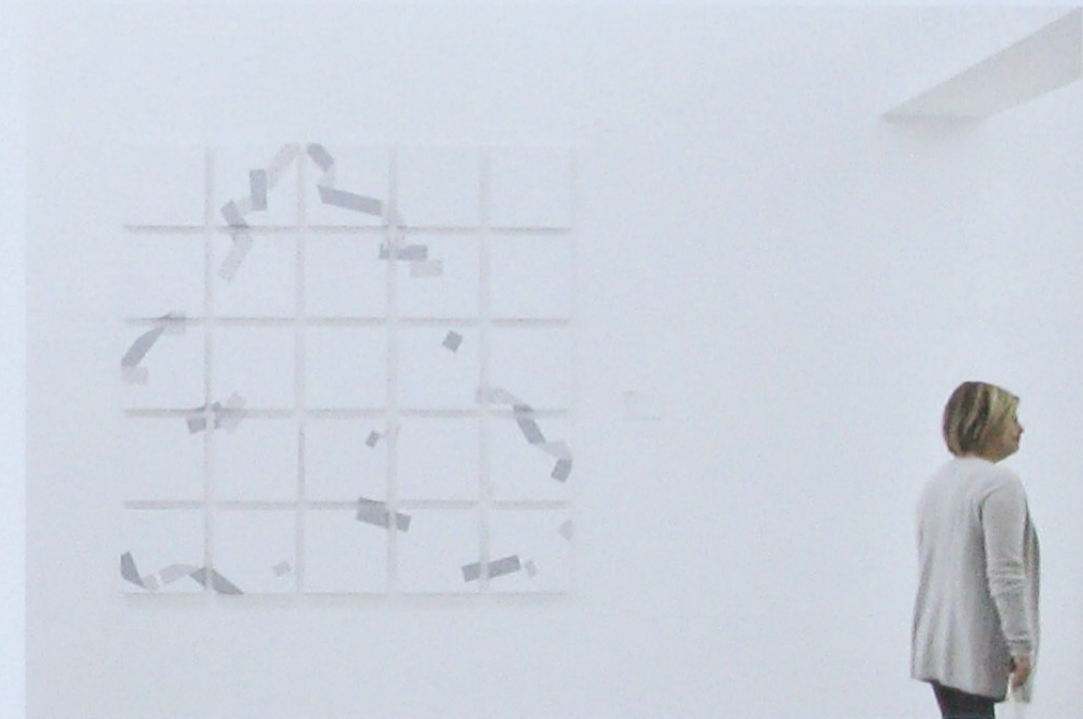
The Department of Art after 1800 at the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts started to realize a dossier exhibition series back in 2009. The location of these shows (two to three exhibition in a year) being held topographically in a symbolic area of the Museum. They are organized in the crossing section in between the Old Master's Gallery and the galleries dedicated to the works of the 19th century collection. This kind of a laboratory environment consists of two ro-

7. Installation view of the exhibition *Cézanne and the Past*, curated by Judit Geskó, 2012–2013

8. Vera Molnár: *Montagne Sainte-Victoire Decomposed to Twenty-Five Squares*, 2004, 2500 x 2500 mm, acril on canvas, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. nr. 2008.3.B.

oms, where we mainly showcase a contemporary artist in relation to the past. The exhibitions are usually monographic in their character, organized by works on loan, but we typically hang one or more pieces from the museum's own collection in relation to them. In this way a conceptual feedback between the artist and the museum has been being established.

End of last year I curated an exhibition in this space for the American artist Alan Sonfist, who did the first land art environment in public space 50 years ago, back in 1965, a precolonial forest he planted to Manhattan in Greenwich Village, New York. We showcased one of the metaphorical source for the artist's childhood drawings, kind of a symbolic piece for any artist of the early land art movement in the 1960s – a canvas by the Barbizon painter Camille Corot, hosted by our collection (img 6).

Reading the history of art from backwards, we tend to feel that chronology would make a U-turn, asking our questions from a completely different, seemingly illogical perspective, like how we see Poussin, Rubens and Chardin through Cézanne and how we can come close to a Cézanne painting by looking at a Picasso piece (img 7)? Our argumentation became reversed as we observe the past from the horizon of the present. The success of these shows depends on how transparent this recursion could be elaborated.

We can continue this re-reading procedure by following our recent exhibitions where we selected works for our contemporary exhibitions deriving from our Old Masters Gallery, like a Sassetta putting to dialogue with a sculpture by György Jovánovics (img 8), a Goya which did go with a László Lakner painting or Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire, which was paraphrased by Vera Molnar (img 9). The list can go up to the promise of Sean Scully producing a canvas reflecting on a piece[12] by Pierre Bonnard, which is acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in 1934.

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10 A salient example to the use of Eliot's approach by Hungarian scholars in the context of museum studies: Judit Geskó, "»...the past should be altered by the present...« The Influence of Michelangelo on 19th-Century French Drawings in the Budapest Collection", in *Ex Fumo Lucem. Baroque Studies in Honour of Klára Garas*, Zsuzsanna Dobos (ed.), Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, 1999, Vol. II, pp. 253-270.
11 Michel Foucault, "Des Espace Autres," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), pp. 46-49.

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12 Pierre Bonnard: *Grandmother with a Child*, 1894, oil on wood, 330 x 420 mm, inv. nr.: 406.B.

Our 20th century permanent exhibition is (or to be precise was, due to the fact that our museum is closed now for a major renovation) a white cube gallery, the only one in the building accentuated by its historic character. In the entrance space, the very first room we wanted to give a methodological introduction to the visitors. We wanted to show the change of the ontological status of the artworks by putting them next to each other. Although in a small scale, these pieces, in this case Michelangelo Pistoletto, Braco Dimitrijević, Joseph Beuys or Endre Tót represent a certain museum interventions, sort of an institutional critic, the re-interpretation of the notion of the ready-made and an approach of re-reading the history of art from a personal point of view (img 10).

One pertinent example is the conceptual painting[13] by the Hungarian artist Endre Tót from 1999, who made a paraphrase of a key-work from our 19th century collection, *Portrait of a Girl* by August Renoir[14] (img 11). Tót did smuggle an invisible composition of a well known painting, hanging it next to the original in order to express his concerns criticizing that museums, and museum displays in general are obstacles for enjoying these types of works, by holding back the cognition of their sensual potentiality by valuing them just because of their labels.

The museum as a self-reflective space in which art works are in a constant dialogue being re- or de-contextualized, has became a common intervention in the last few years by museum professionals as a new curatorial practice. Just to give you some recent examples. A quite apt one was the *Rothko/Giotto* exhibition at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, where Rothko's metaphysical color-space sensitivity was put in dialogue with the sacral and sublime aura defined by Giotto's early renaissance altarpieces (img 12). The same idea was carried out at the Jeff Koons exhibition in Frankfurt at the Schirn Kunsthalle in 2012 (img 13), and became instrumental in the exhibition policy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, in their Francis Bacon and Jan Fabre show (img 14), or even in Ed Ruscha's concept titled *The Ancients Stole all Our*
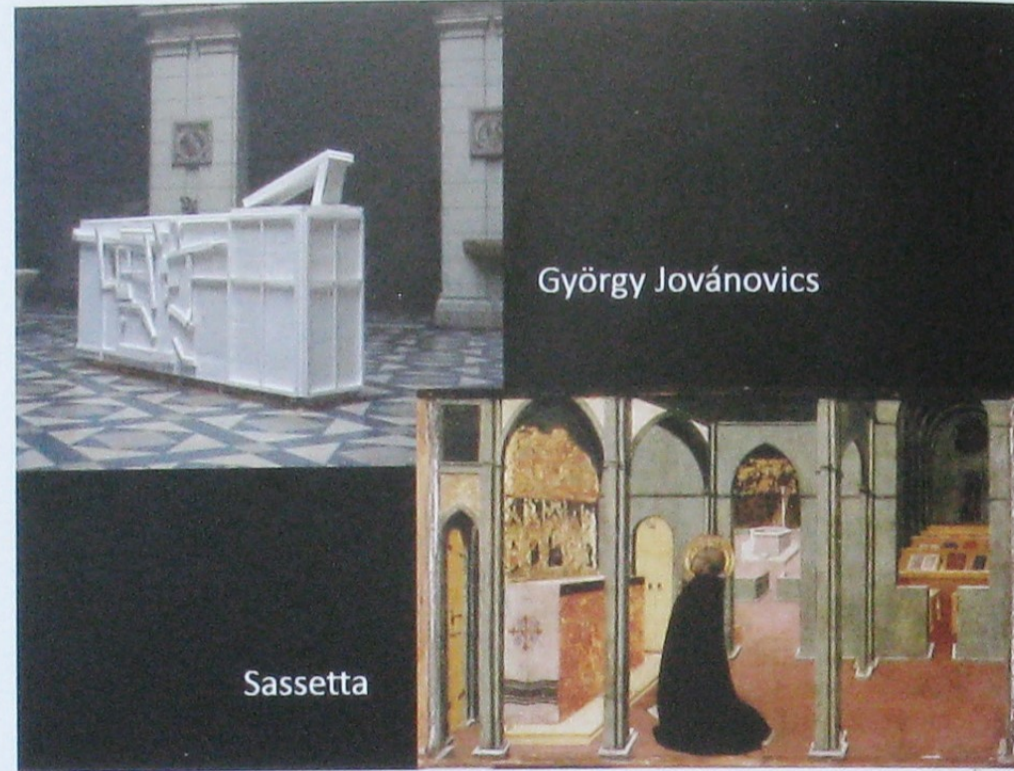
9. Sassetta – Jovánovics. Installation view of the dossier-exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, 2009

10. Installation view of the first room of the 20th century and contemporary art gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest

11. Auguste Renoir: *Portrait of a Girl*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 565 x 470 mm, inv, nr.: 435. B and Endre Tót: *Renoir. Portrait of a Girl*, 1999, acril, varnish on canvas, inv. nr.: 2000.1.B (Both works are part of the collection of Art After 1800 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest)

12. Installation view of the *Rothko / Giotto* exhibition at the SMB–Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, 2009

13. Installation view of the *Jeff Koons* exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main, 2012

14. Installation view of the *Jan Fabre* exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, 2011

15. Installatin view of Hans Haacke's *Viewing Matter* exhibition at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, 1999

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13 Endre Tót: *Renoir. Portrait of a Girl*, 1999, acril, varnish on canvas, inv. nr.: 2000.1.B.
14 Auguste Renoir: *Portrait of a Girl*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 565 x 470 mm, inv, nr.: 435. B.

Great Ideas. Similar to these was Hans Haacke's intervention to redefine the storage as a museum space (a so-called *Wunderkammer*) in order to give an interpretation of economical and political processes for his *Viewing Matters* exhibition in 1999 at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (img 15).

Based on my experience the conceptual references we tried to unveil through the re-reading procedure are in most cases not that self-evident for a generic visitor. This is the reason why my ongoing study is focusing on to find new media tools which can be used to make all these analogies and parallels more and more visible.

The traditional visual aid, which I started to use several years ago was a rhizomatic type of diagram, which was a playful educational tool alluding to the various connections of a certain artist, art movement or just an object which considered to be important for being paired with in the context of the exhibited artifacts. For the occasion of the re-opening of the Kassák Museum in 2010 I designed a flowchart like infographic system showing the Hungarian avant-garde painter, poet and journalist, Lajos Kassák's relationship to other Eu-

17. Michael Badics and Márton Orosz: Software-based interactive application mapping Lajos Kassák's legacy in relationship with the European avant-garde art (Collegium Hungaricum, Berlin, 2011)

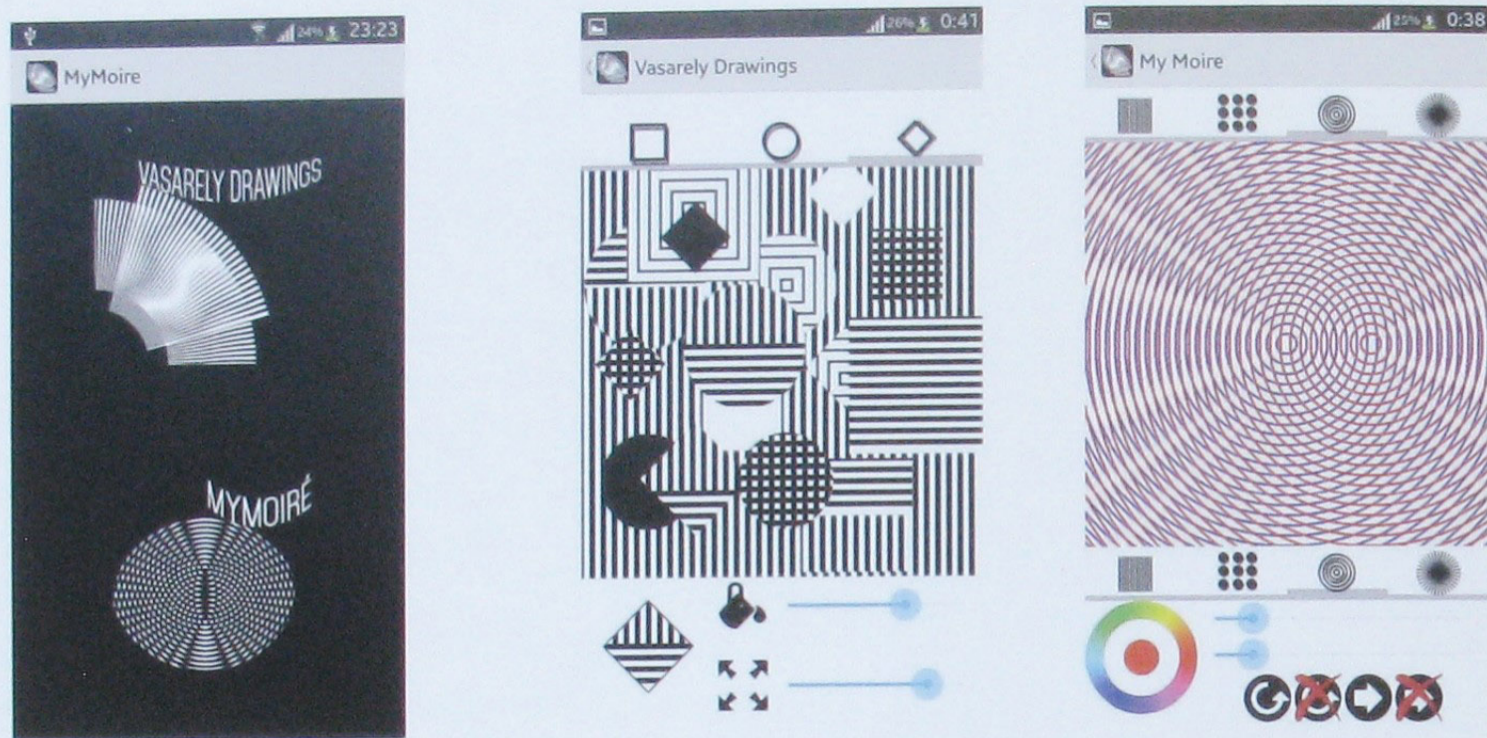ropean – even Asian – constructivist and dadaist groups in the early 20th century represented in a two-dimensional coordination system, where time and location were the two key elements[15] (img 16). The extended and interactive version of this diagram which I came up with was used for a virtual exhibition at the Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin in 2011 produced with the help of a German media artist Michael Badics who is working for the FutureLab at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria. Here, through an interactive interface, visitors were able to play around with the network provided by the same artist in a more clever way to discover virtual connections of his art (img 17).

The place, where I am momentarily working at is the Vasarely Museum in Budapest, affiliated to the Museum of Fine Arts (img 18). It was opened in 1987 based on a donation by the artist himself with the

18. Installation view of the permanent exhibition at the Vasarely Museum in Budapest

15 The very first infographics which was ever used in a context of an exhibition dating back to 1938. It was designed by Otto Neurath for a touring exhibition showcased at various Dutch department stores and focused on the sociological aspect of the art market of Rembrandt's time.

16. Márton Orosz's flowchart diagram illustrating Lajos Kassák's connection to avant-garde art, 2010

19. Application designed by students of the Moholy-Nagy Univesity of Art and Design in collaboration with the Budapest University of Technology and Economics in the framework of the Digital Museum course organized by MoME TechLab, 2014

condition that the character of his bequest shouldn't be altered. Due to the very fact that this collection functions as a closed entity, the only way to change the context of Vasarely's op art works is the re-contextualization of them. This could happen with the help of some recent paradigms, which believed to provide new leads that we can rely on to approach the legacy of the classical modernism and to define the ways how we can connect it to the development of the contemporary and new media art.

In order to comply with these requirements we teamed up a year ago with the TechLab program at the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts and Design organized by Zsófia Ruttkay. It offers a Digital Museum course to their students where they can exchange ideas with their fellows studying programming at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (img 19). Our aim is to collaboratively develop digital applications which promise to help a deep down understanding how the flow of information, the so called "data deluge" can be successfully elaborated. The product of this practice of curating I call "self-reflective exhibition". This was initiated with the aim to give a prosthesis to the hand of the visitors establishing a direct dialogue with the artifacts as well as to re-investigate the function of visuality in the exhibition room as an analogy to the Semantic Web[16]. Although this could only be carried out in a meta level and still lacks of a valid system being able to adapt it to all museum environments, nevertheless it seems to be a possible solution to the growing problem how traditional art museums can comply with the challenges of curating and position themself in the era of global art history in the second decade of the 21th century. As the bottom line though – and this is very important – I should stress out that in case we, museum professionals would like to be able to cope with the proper integration of any information, we still need to generate them by ourselves.

16   Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web. The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web*, New York: Harper Collings, 2000, 177.