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“The aim is for visitors to have the totality of the experience”

Marcell Bajnai

Why is a market hall the most suitable venue to showcase light art installations and what opportunities lay hidden in the “black box” museum concept? We talked with Szabolcs Vida, the director of the Light Art Museum, about their latest exhibition, which has been open since August.

magyarnarancs.hu: The museum is located in what used to be the Hold Street market hall. Why exactly did this building seem the most suitable venue?

Szabolcs Vida: The building hadn't been used in recent years even though it is in a prime location. A peculiar feature of the art science and light art works we present is that they're site-specific, and it's a clear trend that these types of works are usually the easiest to display in places that are no longer in use and not suitable for anything else. So this was a very lucky combination. The market hall is a listed building and with a special character that we were determined not to cover up, and in fact we did our best to emphasise these elements of it, for example with lighting.

magyarnarancs.hu: What kind of conversion work had to or could be done before the opening?

SZV: Because of the building's monument protection status we couldn't make alterations for example, which of course made things more difficult. However, the 'box layout' of the hall's old stands came in handy for us because the displayed objects have such a powerful ambiance that it wouldn't be possible to exhibit them in a large space. Of course, we had to cover the huge number of windows and line the interiors with black textile canvas décor panels. Thus, instead of the usual “white cube” museums, we practically ended up with a “black box”. More and more museums are experimenting with what are known as immersive spaces (*for details on this, see below – editor*) and the exhibition of works like ours because everybody is trying to find a way to tempt back visitors to museums and to bring the contemporary fine arts closer to people.

magyarnarancs.hu: All of these constantly moving objects with light and sounds must have needed a lot more energy than classic “white cube” exhibition spaces. What was your approach to this, especially given that this is a show with so many pieces that deal with ecological issues?

SZV: Obviously, the technical tools consume energy, although I haven't yet seen the electricity bills of big museums. As far as technological standards allow, we also pay attention to our energy consumption. For example, we have Bigert & Bergström's “weather machine” on display, which evokes a prop from a Baroque theatre, but there's a twist here:

high-voltage stage lamps are used to power up the solar panels that move the devices which produce the sound effects. The artists are asking: can it be effective to thematise ecological problems with the tools of the fine arts, and don't such attempts actually make the problem worse? They also point out that it may not be such a successful strategy in the long term to hope that solutions to our problems will come up as technology develops.

magyarnarancs.hu: Shortly after its opening in 2022, you stated that as a privately founded institution, you would like to operate LAM in a sustainable way, on a market basis. After two years, to what extent do you think this has been realised?

SZV: We're optimistic because two hundred thousand people visited our first exhibition in eleven months and just as many in the next nine months. So we think that the new show will attract the same monthly average numbers. It's another matter that we always invest the total proceeds into our upcoming exhibitions to attract bigger and bigger names and display increasingly complex projects. For example, for our third, current show, we managed to loan a work each by Jon Rafman and Ólafur Elíasson, both of whom are absolute world stars and hadn't had their works exhibited in Hungary before. We regard exhibiting such projects as important as the overwhelming majority of our visitors are Hungarian.

magyarnarancs.hu: The word "immersive" often crops up in connection with Light Art Museum exhibitions. These days that word can usually be encountered on the posters of travelling exhibitions of various international productions optimised for entertainment. However, in most cases, these are far removed from the fine arts. It seems as if the word "immersive" itself has been stripped of its meaning and most people associate it with flickering lights and 360-degree projections.

SZV: Actually, it has become a popular buzzword in the entertainment industry but immersion really means much more. The aim is for visitors to enjoy a total experience. When they come to LAM, this is an experience of fine arts, which extends to the entire space at times. It follows from this that it's also important to us that in time our visitors will be able to tell the difference between the two.



Szabolcs Vida

Source: Light Art Museum

magyarnarancs.hu: What place is occupied by light art and art science on the contemporary art scene? What's the situation for Hungarian artists, many of whose works can be seen here in LAM?

SZV: Art science is the study of nature with an interdisciplinary approach. It seeks understanding using a synthesis of the achievements of art and science, and their modes of expression. This blend is typically an inspirational source for works of art that combine visceral experiences with scientific concepts. This branch of industry is flourishing: just think of light festivals and the growing number of other events that use light as a spectacle. The situation in the fine arts is a bit different, and it's very difficult to get recognised internationally.

magyarnarancs.hu: Although the third thematic show can now be seen in the museum, there are permanent pieces, for example the reconstruction of György Kepes' installation *Glowing Columns*, right opposite the entrance. To what extent does the displayed material vary from one exhibition to the next?

SZV: All of our exhibitions are curated, with their own concepts and research. In addition, there are two permanent works in the exhibition space. Besides the György Kepes work, there is a film about a work by László Moholy-Nagy and its paraphrase made by Dávid Szauder. Together, they can be regarded as the museum's ars poetica. It was György Kepes who introduced art science into the realm of academia, while Moholy-Nagy was among the first to deal specifically with light art. Apart from these exhibits, each of our new exhibitions represents a coherent whole, independent of the ones before them.

magyarnarancs.hu: How is the material for a new exhibition compiled, and how do the selected works come to Budapest?

SZV: This is an extremely difficult thing because the works are often site specific. It sometimes happens that the artists come and assemble them here, while structures weighing several tonnes have to be moved in the case of other installations. For example, the huge roots of Thijs Biersteker's *Econtinuum* had to be transported in two lorries, but there are other extremely difficult challenges too. According to the agreement we made, Ólafur's work had to be brought from Spain under armed guard, and on top of that, it strictly had to be taken from one warehouse to the next, so a journey of three days lasted eight. Moreover, we only have five weeks between two exhibitions for dismantling the old works, making repairs and installing the new ones. At these times, there is a bustle of 40-50 people working in the museum space.

magyarnarancs.hu: Art science plays a far more pronounced role in your new show *Phantom Vision*, with some of the works not focusing on light at all. How are these linked to the concept of a light museum?

SZV: It is part of our vision to continuously expand the conceptual framework, and sometimes we cross the boundaries. We think that it's precisely this attitude that can make this branch of art – and therefore the exhibition and the museum itself – more productive.

magyarnarancs.hu: There are detailed descriptions for the exhibits with not only information on the artists and the techniques/technology used but sometimes also

providing complete and complex interpretations. In your experience and that of your colleagues, do people need more background information and additional help to take in light art or art science than, say, panel paintings?

SZV: I honestly believe that the reception threshold at this exhibition is relatively low because most of the works are so spectacular and exude such a powerful ambiance that anyone can easily fall under their spell. This experience alone provides a kind of interpretational framework. Maybe not everybody understands a work on every level, nor can see the entire context of the works, but the core message impacts them. Coming from different backgrounds, sometimes even we, the experts, interpret certain works in different ways. Regardless of this, there are a few exhibits for which a certain level of background knowledge is helpful.

The Light Art Museum's exhibition titled Phantom Vision is open until 30 July 2025.

(Cover page: Jon Rafman: Dream Journal 2016–2019, 2019, Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers. Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest)