

## “We envision an overall immersive museum experience” – the Light Art Museum in Budapest

A new private museum, unique in Hungary and one of its kind internationally, has opened its doors in the heart of Budapest, in the building of the former Hold Street Marketplace.

*The new institution – the Light Art Museum (LAM) – became popular among Budapest residents as well as domestic and foreign tourists alike in a short space of time: its first exhibition drew in over 200 thousand visitors, and the second, current exhibition has attracted even more visitors, in proportion to the length of time it has been open; only blockbuster exhibitions of Budapest's biggest museums attract such numbers. We talked with Szabolcs Vida, the art director of the museum, and Barnabás Bencsik, one of the curators of the current exhibition, about the background of setting up LAM, the challenges related to the special profile of the institution and future plans.*

**Artportal (AP):** Perhaps it will provide us with a context if we talk about how the *Light Art Museum* was set up and the background behind this. How and when did the idea emerge that adding such a special institution to the Hungarian museum palette would be a worthwhile endeavour?

**Szabolcs Vida (Sz.V.):** It was a few years ago, around 2020, that LAM's owners came up with the idea of creating a venue that would basically function as an immersive space for light paintings. From that point we came up with the concept of a light art museum, which we envisioned to deal not only with the creative industry side of this exciting genre but also with its contemporary fine art aspects, accommodating light art works. Of course, the idea didn't come out of the blue. László L. Laki, one of the main people behind the idea, had a company and, already back in the nineties, its main profile was organising parties, an important element of which, of course, was creating the visual environment, so he has a connection to this world going back thirty years. László was also a member of a community that almost continuously did VJ-ing. This world really won a special place in his heart, and he invested a lot of energy into it. But the same is true of another co-owner and founder, György Klinkó. He also took part in promoting VJ culture. He and László jointly organised various supporting, knowledge-sharing events and VJ tournaments. Another thing they have in common is that they are both art collectors.



Szabolcs Vida and Barnabás Bencsik, courtesy of the Light Art Museum

These shared interests were the starting points, from which developed the plan to exhibit object-based works and to later open up to the fine arts. Of course this required a suitable venue. While searching for this, we came across the market hall on Hold Street, which had closed during Covid and didn't reopen. This centrally located building, with its dimensions and its interior structure made up of separate spatial units – the former stands – seemed just right, even if there were strict restrictions since it's a listed building, putting a bit of a break on our soaring imagination. The building is owned by the local government of the district, from which we are renting it. We were able to make the interior of the former market suitable for the purpose of our exhibitions by preserving its architectural values and, I think, by making them even more perceptible than they had been before.

**AP:** *Szabolcs, as artistic director, you have been part of the project almost from the beginning. What road has led to where you are now?*

**Sz.V.:** I've had experience with a lot of things that I can now put to good use. I studied photography at METU (Metropolitan University, Budapest), which helped me become familiar with conceptual art. Then, attending MOME's media design department, I was able to learn about the connections between art and science/technology. I gained experience as a project manager on the board of FKSE (Studio of Young Artists' Association) and as a member of the team that organised the OFF Biennial – but also outside the art sector. Perhaps it was all thanks to this that the founders of LAM offered to work together and did this at a moment when the project was still in the making, allowing me to be part of the creative work.

**AP:** *Light art may not yet be a familiar concept to everyone, and people who think they know it may not understand it as the same thing. What belongs to this category in your interpretation?*

**Barnabás Bencsik (B.B.):** Light-based art, i.e. art using light as a medium, is an extremely exciting area of contemporary fine art somewhere on the borderline between fine art, the creative industry, science and technology, with quite a lot of crossover potential. Its development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place in tandem with the development of technology. Artists who began to turn to light – this time literally – had to automatically turn to technology as well, i.e. as children of their own era, they began to acquire the tools, involving them in their way of thinking and creative processes, the like of which had not been usual in the fine arts before then. Hungarian artists who pursued their careers abroad were closely involved in this area in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and often even played a pioneering role: think of Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, or Schöffer. But the spirit of the age was also apparent in a spectacular way in Vasarely's works, even though, as we know, he was not a light artist; however, it's no coincidence that his art is included in our current exhibition. Late-20<sup>th</sup>-century art drew on the works of these masters, and the whole aesthetic of today's creative industry, our dealings with visuality, the 'spectacle', is also built on their oeuvres.

**What is happening now facilitates a retrospective interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art, and an understanding of what leads from where to where.** It lends even more significance to the work of Hungarian masters and those of Hungarian origin, since it reveals the straight line that connects their philosophy, way of thinking and art with today's artists, who began to transplant their predecessors' vision into mass culture and, as a result of the development of technology, from the nineties onwards produced increasingly visually stunning spectacles implemented at an ever-higher level. It is this organic process and points of connection that the Light Art Museum seeks to present in a permanent, institutionalised form, and I think that what I've just said absolutely justifies Budapest being home to such a museum.



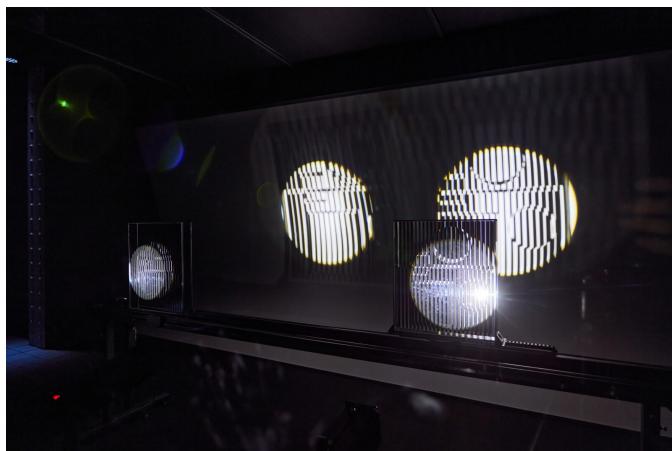
Entrance to the Light Art Museum, photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

But to return to your original question, light art is a very difficult category to define. On the one hand, there's this very strong, spectacular creative industry show business, which belongs to pop culture and mass culture, and as such requires a different approach than an autonomous work of art that just happens to use light. This project was exciting for me because the original intentions basically came from the former direction, but they are heading in the direction where I feel at home, i.e. towards autonomous contemporary art, in which spectacular works placed in the context of 'high art' have also been produced. The real challenge in my work as a curator was to bring together these two areas that run separately but operate with similar tools and ways of thinking, to demonstrate that they have a similar intellectual and aesthetic charge, and to make visible their interaction and the statements they make about our times, the 2020s. During the preparatory work for the exhibition, we often 'hunted down' achievements from subcultures that had been unfamiliar to me as we felt they represent a significant contribution to the contemporary art discourse.

Calling our institution a museum has a strong, symbolic, prestigious message. Positioning LAM is heading in this direction, and the rich Hungarian traditions make it perfectly legitimate. One of our aspirations is that artists whose creativity has yielded them results in pop culture but who feel that they have more potential should be given the opportunity in this new context. On the other hand,

**we would also like to demonstrate what a major influence the technologies thrown up by scientific research, and primarily natural science, have on the way artists think.**

It's interesting to see and present to the public what new works are created by artists inspired by science. These works may be able to make new scientific statements accessible to far more people and in a much more spectacular way than, for example, a dry quantum mechanical formula.



Victor Vasarely: HOLLÓ, 1954-55/1990, multiple, silkscreen on plexiglass,

photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest

**AP:** *How rare is a museum with this profile in the world today?*

**B.B.:** There are quite a few places today where the immersive technology of the entertainment industry is used. In the last four to five years there has been an explosion in this field. Spectacular exhibitions, you could say visual orgies, have been created to present the oeuvres of renowned artists such as Van Gogh or Klimt in novel ways. The perception of space and the whole environment ceases to exist in these exhibitions, while the mind switches to a different state, which has a very stimulating effect on people's imagination. New York, Paris, Tokyo, London and other places already have venues that specialise in this. The latest sensation is the Las Vegas *Sphere*, which 'exploded' in this field in recent months. Market-leader studios producing these exhibitions play a role in our plans too. What is primarily interesting for us is how their activities affect contemporary artistic thinking.

**Sz.V.:** Let me add that our technical expertise allows us to involve these studios, as we can meet their requirements. And indeed, 'filling' our central cigar-shaped inflated balloon space, already featured at our first exhibition, is a technological challenge even for them.

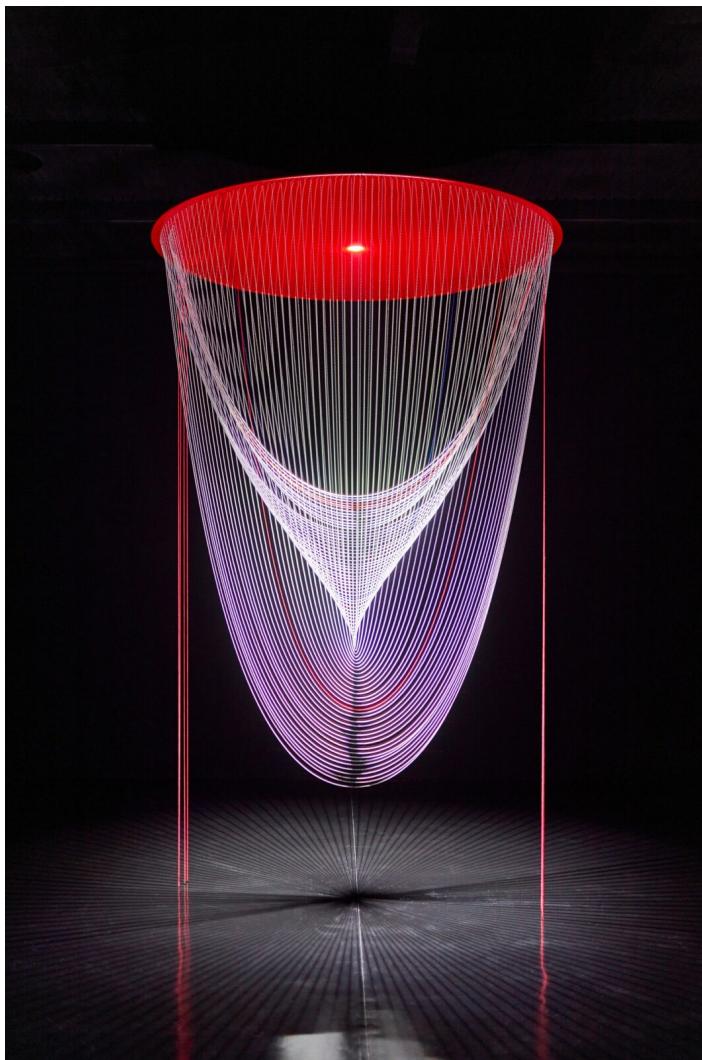
We know of a museum exclusively devoted to light art in Unna, Germany. The [Zentrum für Internationale Lichtkunst \(ZILK\)](#) is more traditional in its approach, but this is also due to the fact that it opened its doors to visitors much earlier, back in 2001.

**AP:** *As you mentioned, LAM is a museum not only in name. The public has so far experienced this at seasonal exhibitions with loaned works, already shown elsewhere or made specifically for this location. However, the concept of a museum presupposes the existence of its own permanent collection, or at least the intention to establish one. Is there any such a plan, or does LAM 'only' function as an exhibition space?*

**SZ.V.:** We can talk about more than just ideas in this regard already since

## **we have completed the first step in creating our own collection.**

We can already claim several works as our own, by such outstanding artists as Lőrinc Borsos, Erik Mátrai and Andrea Sztojánovits. This collection will be expanded mainly linked to our exhibitions. We'll purchase works from the works displayed and available for sale there: those that fit in with the existing pieces of the collection. We are still at the beginning of our journey, but our goal is to build a very serious collection. In the meantime, there is a lot we must learn since the presentation, preservation, storage and occasionally necessary restoration of these works require a completely different know-how than is usually the case for traditional works of art.



Zilvinas Kempinas: Nautilus, 2021, installation, photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest

**AP:** *The preparation that goes into these large-scale exhibitions obviously requires a lot of time and energy, and it's also natural that a museum communicates with its visitors primarily through its exhibitions. Do you also have the capacity to organise other events?*

**SZ.V.:** In addition to the annual 'big' exhibitions, we are planning other events, including some that will involve the participating artists. We'd also like to create a

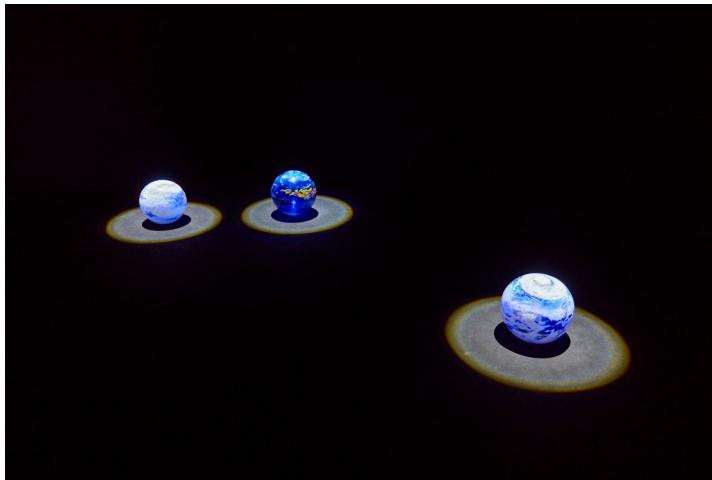
project space where – complementing the 'big' exhibitions – we could provide an opportunity to introduce the young, emerging artists of the Hungarian scene or the region. Of course, we need to think carefully about the available spaces but fortunately there's still room for further expansion, even in the basement. We've been holding guided tours regularly since the outset, and we're also planning events at which visitors can meet the exhibiting artists.

Our plans 'beyond the exhibitions' also have a dimension aimed at the professional circles.

## **In the medium term, we would like to create a knowledge centre based on the museum.**

LAM is continuously accumulating special knowledge that is definitely worthy of being preserved, nurtured and made accessible. We are already playing a part in this as supporters: our exhibitions include quite a few works that were created with our contribution to the production costs. We'd also like to launch masterclasses with the participation of the leading artists, theoreticians and practicing professionals of the international scene, who would share their experiences with young, fledgling artists. This is all the more important because the specific knowledge required for these fields cannot be acquired within the framework of traditional art education programmes, or at least not fully. The background – technology, exhibitions, an ever wider national and international network – that is necessary for the running of such a knowledge centre has been established at LAM and is constantly expanding.

**Comment [K1]: "nálunk": a LAM-ban vagy Magyarországon?**  
Elsőre gondoltam.



Svätopluk Mikyta: On Fragility, 2021, glass spheres,  
photo: Dávid/Biró Light Art Museum Budapest

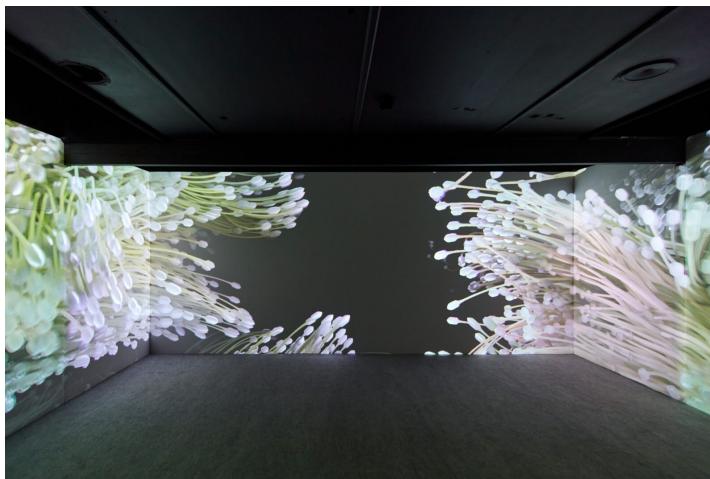
**AP:** Apart from their numbers, what else do you know about your visitors?

**Sz.V.:** Our first exhibition was seen by more than 200 thousand, which was more than we had anticipated or even hoped for. The vast majority of our visitors are Hungarians, and it's a very good sign that our core audience is already starting to form. Many of the people who saw our first exhibition have already seen this second one. We're pleased that there are a lot of young people among our visitors. There are especially large numbers of students of higher education institutions of art that come in groups. We don't have any exact figures on the proportion of regular and occasional museum visitors, but it seems that a great many of the people are not frequent visitors to art museums, i.e. visitors come from as varied 'backgrounds' as the creators of the exhibited works.

You must've noticed that our website and all of the texts that appear at our exhibitions are bilingual, Hungarian and English, which in itself demonstrates our ambition to attract people who visit Budapest, who can then spread the news of our exhibitions all over the world. Of course, every achievement in this area can be further improved, but it's already difficult to walk through the exhibition space without meeting foreign visitors.

**AP:** *Let's not talk about your current exhibition, which will run through May, as we already presented it in detail after it opened in September. But let's talk a bit instead about next year's plans. Seeing your exhibitions, it's quite clear even to a layman that realising them must take a lot longer than usual. This means that you must already be preparing for the next exhibition. What can you tell us about it?*

**SZ.V.:** Yes, we're already planning the next exhibition, which we can implement if the lease agreement with the district's local government can be extended. I believe that we have a good chance of getting the extension as we've established an institution that fills the gap that existed in the field of cultural mediation: our work has made it possible for hundreds of thousands of people to experience this branch of art. In addition, we actively support the Hungarian art community and are putting together a solid educational programme so that art students will have a better chance of entering the international arena. We plan for the long term and believe that value creation and space revitalisation bring benefits for both the district and Budapest.



ZÜNC Studio: Photosystem II, 2022, immersive video installation,  
photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest

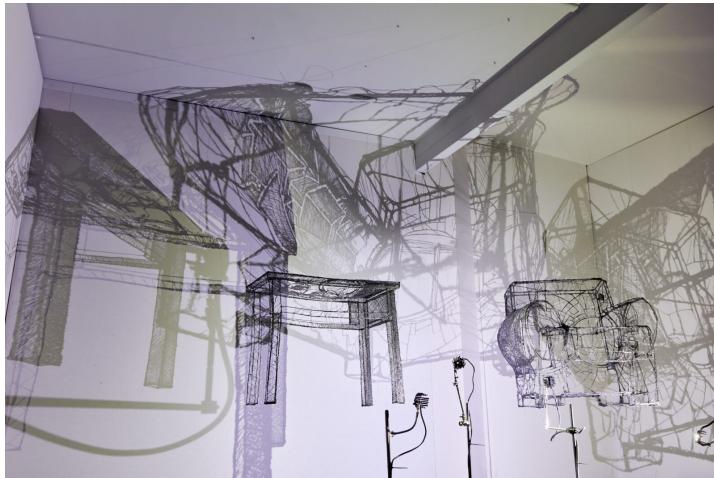
We plan to open the new exhibition at the end of summer or beginning of autumn, and we're working on it at full speed. It looks like LAM will continue with the two curators of the current exhibition, Borbála Szalai and myself, and we were also asked to organise the new exhibition. What we'd like to do is focus on science-based art, the relationship between art and science. Of course, we're once again thinking of an exhibition with an international scope, while using the experience we gained organising the current exhibition. What we see is that the direction we want to focus on, the scientific foundation of art, is well ahead in the Netherlands: "ArtScience" as a new artistic approach is already part of academic training there.

**We'd like to display works that are not only based on traditional aesthetic paradigms but in whose creation scientific approaches play a major role.**

And, of course, an important criterion – which is obvious but I'd like to point it out anyway – is that the works should be visible in the dark. The atmosphere of the LAM exhibition space – the black box, which has replaced the traditional white cube – creates an extremely strong effect, immediately transporting visitors into a completely different dimension, and they enjoy it immensely. When visitors pass through the light isolation doors, they enter another world, where it's much easier to tune into ways of thinking and aspects of reality that differ from everyday experiences, and this is something the exhibited works reveal.

**SZ.V.:** It's really important to experiment with things bravely, to try new ways that promote art appreciation and can reach out to people who are not necessarily regular museum visitors. We'd like to make museum visits into a good experience and a pleasant activity for people who haven't really been consumers of culture so far. We

don't just want to make some of the spaces immersive: we envision the overall museum experience as such.



Gyula Várnai: Material Memories, 2023, light installation, 3D pen drawing (PLA),  
Photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest

**AP:** *What impressions can your exhibitions make on people who can't physically come to the museum?*

**Sz.V.:** There's a catalogue for each of our exhibitions, which can be bought in our shop. The one for the current exhibition has just been published. We also send the catalogues to libraries and universities as we believe it's important that the material of our exhibitions is made available for research. In addition, we make videos with the exhibiting artists, who present their displayed works; about thirty of them can already be viewed on our YouTube channel. We also made a longer introductory video for the current exhibition, in which the two curators, Borbála Szalai and Barnabás Bencsik, give a guided tour. This video is accessible on our website along with another, shorter video about the preparations made for the exhibitions, allowing a peek behind the scenes. The exhibited works can also be found on the LAM website, together with short captions, which can also be read on the exhibition walls. Though it might sound like a cliché, even combined, these cannot substitute the experience of a personal visit, especially when we're talking about exhibitions like ours: dynamic, always in motion and extremely spectacular.

**Cover photo:** Philip Vermeulen: *Whether Weather*, 2020, installation, photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest