

GOETHE-MEDAL 2023

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR THE OFF-BIENNALE BUDAPEST BY SUSANNE PFEFFER

WEIMAR, 28. AUGUST 2023

- Check against delivery -

It was some time ago that the art historian Beat Wyss headlined an article with the demand “*schafft eins, zwei, drei viele Biennalen*” (create one, two, three, lots of biennials), not only evoking an anti-Vietnam war movement slogan, but above all pointing out the emancipatory potential of biennials, which Wyss believed was due to the possibilities for encounters offered in biennial spaces. Today, the Goethe Medal is being awarded to the women’s collective of the OFF-Biennale Budapest, represented here by Hajnalka Somogyi and Nikolett Erőss, thus also honouring a collective that has put facilitating encounters of independent experiences, be they of an aesthetic, political, or practical nature, on its agenda.

In its three iterations to date in 2015, 2017, and 2021, the OFF-Biennale has become one of the largest independent events for contemporary art in Hungary and has also received a great deal of international attention.

So the OFF’s invitation to documenta fifteen 2022 in Kassel was only logical. The bridge that the collective built from recycled materials in Kassel was not just a bridge that you could cross if you wanted to. It was first and foremost the process itself of planning and creating, in which schools, pupils, and other passers-by participated just as enthusiastically as art collectives and architects. And accordingly, the activists of OFF primarily took the experiences of the encounters from documenta into their treasure trove of memories.

Building something together and seeing that it works – that it holds ups and doesn’t collapse straight away – is not exactly an everyday occurrence. The OFF-Biennale collective indicates this when it declares the general political situation, the shift to the right in the political landscape that can be observed not only in Hungary, and the war in Ukraine, to be its formative contemporary experiences. And anyone who has just a little experience dealing with state institutions knows that the real authoritarian influences and restrictions on artistic or even academic freedoms are not exercised via direct orders. The processes are often subtle and they have more to do with money than with direct force. That is why the condition of not accepting money from the government as a prerequisite for participation in the OFF-Biennale cannot be valued and appreciated highly enough. Independence cannot be achieved in

any other way regarding a government that does not shrink from taking the law and the sciences into its service and depriving them of their independence. A civil society worthy of the name, however, relies on the independence of its institutions as well as its sciences and arts. And the fact that money is needed to make symposia, exhibitions, and actions in the art space possible does not contradict the demand for independence. It merely confronts the curators of the OFF-Biennale with problems that are certainly not always easy to overcome. It also leads not only to bringing together experiences, but also to putting resources to a communal or socialised use. The attempt to network all independent Eastern European biennials and to initiate direct cooperation with the Kyiv Biennial, for example, is probably only one example of many.

Another project of the OFF-Biennale that seems particularly noteworthy to me is the Roma-Moma, a project that is not meant to lead to a physical museum for Sinti and Roma forms of artistic expression but is an event format in which Sinti and Roma artists also draw political attention to their difficult to terrible situation in almost all societies.

I would like to thank the curators for their important and tireless work and wish the OFF many more biennials after the first three!