

Ilona Németh

EASTERN SUGAR

Sugarloaf Manufacture and Archive

Project architect: Marián Ravasz

Project photographer: Olja Triaška Stefanović

Eastern Sugar is the umbrella title and also the central ideological basis of the wide-reaching international project initiated by Ilona Németh (born in Dunajská Streda, SK). The artist, who is well established at the European art scene, presented an exhibition with the same title in her home country in *Kunsthalle Bratislava* in 2018 – at that time as the first comprehensive presentation of the results of several years of comprehensive research and artistic activities. The success, international echo and interdisciplinary nature of this project laid the foundation for further exhibitions, research, publication and educational collaborations. In 2019, this international project involving 6 partners was supported as part of the European Commission's *Creative Europe* program, which enabled its development and active international outreach over the next two years.

This solo show by the artist designed for the German *Schafhof – European Center for Art* is, from among all other activities of the project, perhaps the closest to the original exhibition held in 2018. It is an extended version and adaptation of key works, whose transfer and (re)installation were possible due to the spacious premises of the gallery. The selected works as the bearing segments of artistic research and its presentation have eventually become the bearer of the title, which is factual, objective, as well as semantically charged. Under the umbrella brand of the project, Németh's exhibition is connected to the parallel collective project *Crossing Borders* situated on the ground floor, with which it interferes and ideologically correlates and communicates. Their common factor is the changing boundaries - (geo)political, economic and social, which, after all, stand in the background of Németh's art and reflection as a guiding axis.

While in the upstairs premises the artist presents herself independently in full width and strength, her presence in the parallel team functions primarily as a kind of "intro". She intervenes in it with two videos (conceived in post-production as oral history), which unfold the central theme - transformation of the sugar industry in Slovakia and the broader context of Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain – in a highly informative, and yet visually attractive way. The artist subversively and critically elucidates the gradual demise of sugar factories and the decline of the entire sugar industry, which had more than a 50-year history, shortly after the change of regime as a *pars pro toto* example - as the devastating consequences of wrong decisions with a fatal impact on the economic, industrial, and social foundation of society.

The *interview with Dušan Janiček* - director of the sugar factory in Sereď - one of the last two sugar factories operated in Slovakia today, is particularly informative. The former ten sugar factories operated in the country were, shortly after the change of regime in 1989, transformed, first from national to state-owned enterprises, resulting in the elimination of

stable state support and the introduction of tough market rules. New principles of capitalism and later also the privatization processes under Mečiar's cabinet (*note: Vladimír Mečiar was Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic in 1990-1991, 1991-1992 and 1994-1998*) triggered unprecedented interest by foreign investors in the food industry. Today, looking back at events, we can say that the Western market has gradually absorbed the Eastern production with the aim of strengthening its position, investing and expanding, and ultimately and literally "playing the first violin". And the East, due to its own decision, allowed them to buy and expropriate it.

However, the real events soon changed greatly. While Dušan Janiček's viewpoint represents the domestic context and, so to speak, the view from the inside, *narration of Christian Laur* in the second video reveals the view from the outside - from the perspective of *Eastern Sugar*, a pervasive and ambitious Anglo-French company, of which Laur was a Board Member at the time of privatization. Two stories, two types of thinking, two paths of interests. In addition to the different positions presented by the actors of these transformation processes, we can also observe a certain degree of (dis)interest and comfortable interpretation of the final responsibility – vastly impersonal, melted in the processes of privatization and the onset of capitalism and, ultimately, also in the regulations adopted by the long-dreamed of and coveted European Union. Extinction and loss find no culprit here – "that's life" - as Christian Laur says.

The artist created the videos carrying the unique weight of the pronounced memory as an authentic imprint of the past in collaboration with Martina Slováková (Cukru production) and editor Dóra Rudas. The opportunity to present the *Eastern Sugar for Schafhof* exhibition was also an incentive for deepening the scope of research and creation of a new collection of video documentaries presented here for the first time. They include e. g. a suggestive parallel to the demise of a major sugar factory that was the main employer in the Hungarian town of Kaba (*interview with Mayor Emma Szegi and former CFO of Eastern Sugar István Papp*), which points out a much broader correlation of processes within the former East Bloc. The political and economic background of the process of liquidation is illuminated in the significant *interview with Eduard Šebo*, one of the most significant "privatizers" of the Slovak sugar industry after 1989.

The new series also includes an *interview with Štefánia Janíčková*, whose memories are, contrary to other video documents, highly emotional and personal. She was the Head of the Syrup Production in the sugar factory in Sládkovičovo and now - several years later - she goes back to the factory, instigated by the artist, so that she can reconstruct the memories of the past in her art. Németh extended some selected videos during post-production into video-essays, where she visually "comments" on the memories and narrations of the actors with suggestive drone shots of the desolate premises and dilapidated and deteriorating buildings of the former sugar plants. In the background of Eduard Šebo's narration we can see the absurd ruins of privatization and wild capitalism in the cities of Trnava, Šurany and Sládkovičovo. The interview with Christian Laur visualizes an unprecedented and paradoxically poetic case of the sugar factory in Dunajská Streda.

Nevertheless, the fate of the sugar factory in the artist's hometown Dunajská Streda carries a specific visual message on privatization processes and the accession of the country to the European Union. Under the pressure of EU quotas and market regulations, this sugar factory was completely, in fact literally erased from the map of the town. Apart from the closed and empty entrance hall, which is, even after many years, still dominated by the corroding logo of the *Eastern Sugar* company, there was nothing left but a desolate plain. This unprecedented example of the devastation of industry and human work as the source of economic, social and cultural values, was the artist's initial inspiration for broad-scale research and several years of artistic reflection.

In Németh's artwork, interest in public matters represents a long-term program - a lasting value of commitment with the aim of serious social and cultural self-reflection. Virtually, in the full width of her visual production she critically mirrors the current socio-cultural and socio-political phenomena reflecting upon the value-status of society and, hand in hand with it, also upon contemporary individuality. Her artworks, exhibitions and projects usually carry an appealing message of who we are, what we were like, what we could become, what shapes us, how we shape our environment and reflect our history. She does not present general theses to us, although her works and exhibitions imply them. Her starting point is often concrete, local, and personal. However, she visualizes personal space and history in a civic sense as a part or basis of public territory. In her thinking and art, these spheres are interconnected.

The *Eastern Sugar* project has also been based on her own experience, observation, and knowledge, which resonates sharply as an echo of our common situation - the "sell-out" of our own values. She elaborates a strong, but somehow less visible story of sugar factories in Slovakia and Central Europe, originally national and prosperous factories, later state-owned, gradually privatized, and "tunnelled" (e.g. fraudulently transferred) and, now irretrievably destroyed. *Eastern Sugar* was the company name, to which *Juhocukor* - the largest sugar factory in Slovakia based in Dunajská Streda was renamed after the entry of the majority foreign shareholder in 2002. The redesign of the company that promised investment, revitalization, international participation and general expansion of sugar production in Slovakia lasted only until 2007, when its final closure, cessation of production and the pronounced need to compensate for demand by imports was announced.

The factual and, in a sense, laconic "borrowing" of the name of a privatized company with an obvious end functions here as a placeholder - the short-lived fate of the sugar factory in Dunajská Streda after privatization was just one of many. Not only does it refer to the local privatization processes under Mečiar's cabinet in the 1990s and the beginning of the Millennium, but also to a certain form of expropriation of state against its citizens and society. The borders between East and West have been re-structured here based upon market and power systems. From the social point of view, the result was *de facto* a harsh confiscation of labour, background, relationships and the related values in the name of financial profit of the

so-called investors. Maybe it speaks for itself that the sugar factory in Dunajská Streda was built in the 1960s, while many others in the region were built before World War II.

Apart from the new video collection, the artist devoted the separate upstairs space of the gallery to two works of key-importance – to large-scale installations, which were parameterized for the original exhibition at the *Kunsthalle Bratislava* and which, after all, represent the typical means of expression of her oeuvre. She captures and expresses the present time and current state of sugar factories in the form of an interactive sliding *Archive* in the manner of a museum or depository. It's layers can be symbolically “pulled out of memory” and contain current photographic “portraits” of almost all factories (in fact their remains) across Slovakia. This segment of the exhibition Németh developed in collaboration with a Slovak artist of Serbian origin Olja Triaška Stefanović, whom she engaged in the research of the sites as a photographer of architecture.

The view through the layers of sliding panels of the *Archive* shows the viewers a paradoxical way of restoring the lost past in the present. The artist reconstructs the memory through a fundamental human activity, which is, in this case, labour. The participatory installation of the *Sugarloaf Manufacture* revives the factory site itself in a plain design of food production. The installation, however, is not only intended for real manual work, but also for mental participation (layers of remembrance, empathy, identification, etc.). The artist not only engages ordinary visitors, but also persons having a personal story or experience working in a sugar factory, in the “open workshop”, where they can make a sugarloaf on their own and, take it away as a souvenir or a kind of “memory object” from the exhibition. Both installations were created in collaboration with architect Marián Ravasz.

Németh's artistic focus on the past and present of sugar factories thus becomes extremely humane and socially engaged, it takes on an almost sociological character. The *Sugarloaf Manufacture* symbolically recalls the past, revives the production and jobs lost by thousands of employees of the closed factories. And the interactive *Archive*, in turn, encodes the current face of factories as devastated ruins in the paradoxical form of a picture depository as we know it from the memory institutions such as a museum or gallery. The core of the exhibition thus activates the history through temporary work and participation; the present and the sad state of sugar factories today become the subject of research and archiving, ergo unexpectedly a method of recognizing and preserving memories. The tables have been turned in the reference to the artist's reconstruction or rebuilding of reality in time.

The exhibition offers a comprehensive, layered view of the fate of a specific segment of the food industry dissipated in the broader context of Europe's recent history. The story of sugar factories is essentially connected to the phenomenon of work and values which we have lost, or literally sold out. It is a critique of the social attitude to the issue and a reference to the consequences of our decisions, which are suggestively present in the torsos of factories as absurd relics of the wild times of the onset of capitalism and privatization in the spirit of the empty motto of “*that's life*”. At the same time, Németh's ambition is to offer authentic and

critical knowledge, which alone can lead to a reassessment and learning from the mistakes we have made.

Nina Vrbanová

Curator of the Exhibition