

The Budapest Cow Parade: Cultural Competence in a Global World

Lajos Császi and Mary Gluck

The creative affinities between the late-modern city and new forms of cultural consumption and global citizenship have attracted increasing attention from cultural theorists and urban sociologists. Henry Jenkins has labeled the phenomenon *pop cosmopolitanism*, by which he meant “new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency” that are fostered by “a taste for international food, dance, music, art, or literature,” as well as by the “consumption of Japanese anime and manga, Bollywood films and bhangra, and Hong Kong action movies.” (Jenkins 2004:117)

Our aim in this paper is to explore the implications of this new cultural trend by looking at a local example of a global urban festival, the Budapest cow parade of the summer of 2006. Since their appearance in the late 1990s, cow parades have been staged in most major cities and, according to their organizers, have become among the largest and most popular public events of the summer. Frequently featured in the daily press and on television, cow parades, however, have received almost no serious analysis. Indeed, we found only one article in English that has dealt with them in a scholarly fashion. (Decker 2002) The author, an art historian, maintained that “Themed community public art projects re-enact the more avant-garde notion of modern art as participatory event before, during and after the installation. Cows on Parade, the Big Pig Gig, etc. , may be

viewed, then, as an art trend that combines the iconicity of the multiple with the participatory engagement of a happening that may be coming to a street near you.”

(Decker 2002:122)

Significantly, however, Decker himself was dissatisfied with this formulation, which focused exclusively on the artistic characteristics of the installations. He later modified his position by adding that the real question was not whether exhibitions like the cow parade could be considered as art or not; but rather, what constituted the “artistic qualities” of such works in the eyes of the creators, the organizers, critics and audiences. He considered the raising of such “extra-artistic” questions all the more legitimate, since the aesthetic aspects of the cow parade were inseparable from its financial and touristic implications. As is well known, at the end of the summer exhibition, the cows were auctioned off for large sums of money, which were donated to charitable foundations. In Chicago, for instance, the individual cows fetched as much as \$23,000 in auction and the exhibition itself generated an income of 200 million dollars in tourist revenues for the city. The artists themselves, however, were generally satisfied if they received from \$500 to \$1,000 for their creative efforts. (Decker, 2002) The case of Chicago is also instructive in that the popular cow parade was embraced by a city whose public places boasted permanent statues by Picasso, Duchamp, Matisse, Miro and other great artists.

In approaching these public art installations, we will primarily be interested in their cultural meanings, rather than in their aesthetic features. In place of Decker’s exclusively art historical perspective, we propose to emphasize the festivals’ global context, which constituted an indispensable part of their impact. We argue, in other words, that in order to appreciate the novelty to the cow festivals, it is not sufficient to

see them as an example of avant-garde art installations. In the final analysis, the cows were not replays of previous avant-garde movements, but rather embodiments of a new, global phenomenon, in which art, tourism and everyday urban life converged in creative synthesis.

The cow parade exemplifies the problems of cultural diversity and a new kind of cosmopolitan outlook in a globalized world. In contrast to older forms of cosmopolitanism, which devalued the local, the popular and the national and focused on an elite, transnational culture; the new cosmopolitanism rejects such easy dualisms. The new cosmopolite, knows how to judge unfamiliar cultural occurrences both critically and constructively; whether encountered at home or abroad, whether in the form of canonical art or popular culture. (Chaney 2002) We propose to examine the emergence of this new cosmopolitan cultural competence in Hungarian society by exploring the impact of the Budapest cow parade. How did popular cosmopolitanism link up with a new kind of urban politics based on the tourist industry? How did intellectual public opinion and urban participants try to come to terms with the global transformation of public exhibitions in Hungary?

The Cow Parade as a Global Phenomenon

Some preliminary background is in order at this point. The fashion for urban cow parades started in Zurich in 1998. Since then over thirty large cities throughout the world have organized festivals that featured cow installations. Each city purchased the original Zurich license and followed its specifications from beginning to end. Creators of public

art have experimented with other animal figures in past years. Often adopting the symbolic animal of a particular city, they have used buffaloes in Buffalo, bears in Berlin, whales in Boston, pigs in Cincinnati, and even the guitar form to represent rock and roll music in Cleveland. The advantage of these thematic figures lay in the fact that they were embedded in the city's own history. Nevertheless, it is a highly significant fact meriting further study that the most popular public installations turned out to be, not those embodying local themes, but rather, the globalized cow statues from Switzerland.

Competition for the design of the cows was open to artists and amateurs alike, who were all asked to present a detailed plan of their projected cow. In Budapest, close to nine hundred entries were submitted to a committee made up of "the elite of design professionals" selected by the organizers of the festival. By the end of January, roughly one hundred entries were accepted. (Among the applicants in Budapest were artists, but also a biochemist, a dentist and a housewife. In Manchester, schoolchildren also sent in designs.) Of the selected designs, only sixty were ultimately commissioned because of a lack of sufficient financial support. It is noteworthy that the fiberglass cow that provided the raw material for each of the projected statues cost one and a half million forints, (that time around 2500 dollar) which were to be paid for by corporate sponsors. Not every cow, however, found a sponsor. In a few cases, the city defrayed the cost of the fiberglass cow, thus making possible a handful of non-sponsored creation. Compared to the cow parade of Zurich, which had 800 cows; or of Chicago, which had 300; the Budapest exhibition was one of the smallest among metropolitan centers, a clear sign of the lack of corporate interest in the festival. Individual cows were auctioned off for two hundred thousand forints, (that time around 1000 dollar) with the highest price of 1.7

million forints (that time around 8000 dollar) being paid for Tibor Zábó's "Cow Symbolism." The auction held at the conclusion of the festival brought in a sum total of roughly twenty million forints, (that time around 100000 dollar) half of which was donated to the children's charities, Mosolyország and Bátor Tábor.¹

The official ideology of the Budapest cow parade, "Art, Differently, For Everyone," advertised the cow festival as an alternative public art event, which simultaneously fostered tourism and supported charity. At the opening of the festival, Gábor Demszky, the mayor of Budapest, emphasized the artistic aspect of the exhibition when he pointed out that the cows represented contemporary art taken out to the streets, where everyone could encounter it. The politician's speech did not significantly diverge from that of Mayor Richard Haley's opening remarks at the Chicago cow parade, where he claimed that "Cows on Parade demonstrates that art does not have to be either 'serious' or 'hands-off' for it to be effective and moving." (Decker 2002:119)

The question at the heart of our inquiry is: to what extent was Hungarian society receptive to the city politicians' global cultural aspirations? In order to try to answer this question, we will begin by introducing the actual objects of our inquiry, some of the Budapest cows themselves. Next, we will consider newspaper reactions to the cow parade, focusing on the political and cultural background of the more salient characterizations. Since the voices of ordinary people are invariably absent in most accounts of the cow parade, we felt it incumbent on us to also provide an analysis of the reception of the cow parade among the urban population. Finally, we will outline a few theoretical concepts that will allow us to place the cow parade within a broader social context and to point to its inner affinities with tourism and global cultural citizenship.

¹ http://www.caboodle.hu/nc/news/news_archive/single_page/article/11/ (inactive)

Our goal with this multifaceted approach is to return to the classical traditions of anthropology, “in which ethnography, theory and public culture are in held in productive tension.” (Ortner 2006:82)

The Budapest Cow Parade

The Budapest cow parade opened on June 30th 2006 and closed on September 10th 2006. The cow installations, which were scattered throughout the center of the city and along the more important tourist routes, clearly reflected the intentions of the organizers. A Norwegian tourist to Budapest, Frank Paul Silye (alias frankps), who photographed the cows and later placed the images along with his comments on the internet, gave the following detailed description of the placement of the cows: “ Most of the cows in Budapest are exhibited downtown at the following places: Liszt Ferenc tér, Művészetek palotája (Palace of Arts), Deák tér, Budai Vár, Gellért tér, Déak tér, Mozskvá tér, Vörösmarty tér, Oktogon, Fővám tér, Szabadság tér, Kodály körönd, Bazilika, Andrassy-Bajcsy corner, Andrassy-Nagymező corner, MOM park, Széna tér, Corvin köz, Hősök tere, Erzsébet tér, Astoria, Kálvin tér. Running around in the centre of Budapest, just trying to find one more cow, turned out to be the perfect way to get to know the city better.”² In the course of the two months of the exhibit, the unexpected impact to the cows was intensified by the “migration” of the statues to different parts of the city. What is more, in August the organizers drove a virtual herd of twenty or twenty-five cows over to the Millenium Park. But perhaps the most spectacular “migration” was accomplished by the so-called “Blue Cow”, which became the occasion of a political

² <http://www.frankps.net/?p=160>

scandal. Since public opinion probably associated the cow parade most closely with this event, it is worth recounting it, even if in our opinion it tended to cover over, rather than expose, the novel cultural problematic of this global exhibition.



“The Blue Cow” (Do not lick)

The affair was provoked by the decision of the festival organizers to place a particular cow in front of the Basilica, a central Roman Catholic shrine in Budapest. The cow in question was entitled “Don’t lick” and depicted a melting ice cream cone with a stick protruding from its rump. Some sections of right-wing public opinion viewed the very placement of the aesthetically objectionable statue sacrilegious; others went further and also considered it an explicit anti-clerical provocation. After a series of passionate newspaper articles and protesting television reports,³ a group of right-wing political activists took things in hand and, under cover of night, dragged the controversial statue to the left-liberal Free Democrats’ cultural headquarters on the Károly boulevard, with the explanation that “they simply brought it back to the place where it belonged.” Following a few days of uncertainty and consultation, the cow was taken to the Vörösmarty square, a tourist center that remained its home till the end of the exhibition.

³ <http://www.gondola.hu/cikk.php?szal=49206&part=1> (inactive)

The Budapest cows, created by diverse individuals and displayed in different sections of the city, cannot in any sense of the word be considered homogeneous. They differed from each other not only in theme, but also in originality, level of craftsmanship and degree of popularity. What they had in common was their ability to draw attention to themselves, to create surprise and an unaccepted disruption in the habitual tempo of urban life. The creators metaphorically reconfigured the figure of the cow and humorously used it as a sculpture's raw material or a painter's blank canvas for their whimsical images. Their methods resembled Freud's theory of jokes, which also involved the juxtaposition of incongruous elements with the goal of destabilizing reality and recreating it within new frames. We can easily discover the same technique in the creation of the cow installations. The image of cows as harmless, milk-giving animals was shattered with the superimposition of new images that questioned and reformulated the original, common-sense assumptions. Though the actual presence of life-size cows in the midst of urban traffic may have been astonishing, it is useful to keep in mind that the social function of these installations was not new. They had a long history reaching back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the distinctive forms of modern metropolitan life first emerged. The cows were descendants of urban caricatures, advertising pillars, postcards, window displays and posters; which had provided visual interpretations of the urban spectacle for city dwellers unaccustomed to of the new environment. In this context, the cows can be seen as examples of "urban texts", which represented in stylized form the familiar experiences and observations of urban life. Their ability to engage the attention of their audience depended on their wit and originality.

It is no easy task, even in the case of such a relatively small exhibition as the Budapest cow parade, to give an adequate sense of the themes and images evoked by its creators. Rejecting a random sampling of individualized cows, we have chosen to classify them according to their formal qualities and explicit content. The first criterion has prompted us to ask: to what extent did the artists retain the cow form in their final products and to what extent did they transform it into something entirely different. In most cases, the figurative image of the cow was maintained, with illustrations or verbal messages painted on to the animals. These types of statues made up the vast majority of the exhibition, whose variety depended on the surface colors and visual motifs of the statues. There were some statues, however, which slightly modified the figure of the cow, even though they did not entirely abandoned the cow form. Finally, there were a few unconventional installations, which abandoned all realistic representation of cows, using only indirect methods to refer to the theme of the festival. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this approach. The first, entitled the “Gulyás Cow”, replaced the original form of the cow with a large red cooking pot, whose half-open lid revealed the intact head of the cow. The second, entitled “Rubicow”, playfully evoked one of Hungary’s internationally known products, Ernő Rubik’s Magic Puzzle, by transforming

the figure of the cow into a geometric cube with a cow's head on top.



“Goulash in a Can”



“Rubi-cow”

Shifting to a thematic, rather than a formalistic classification, we find an unlimited range of subjects depicted by individual cows. The “Golden Calf,” for example, which was covered with gold-tinted one-forint coins, ironically linked the Biblical image of idol worship with the realities of capitalism. The “Tesco Cow,” incorporating a supermarket shopping cart within its organic form, satirized the consumer society, while the chocolate colored “Cacao Cow,” with a straw sticking out of its back, made a similar point.

Possibly the most common theme among the cow statues were ironic, self-reflexive commentaries about their own status as works for art. One cow, for example, was transformed into a sampler with the traditional folk motif, “Milk, life and health” embroidered on its side. Another displayed the satirical slogan, “I love culture,” to point to the kitschy characteristics of the festival. A third proclaimed its own self-evaluation, along with the master code for interpreting the festival itself, in the pithy commentary: “This is not important.” Dismissing all attempts to endow the cows with a distinctive

aesthetic or ideological significance, the creator of “This is not important” ironically accepted, but at the same time satirically deflected, all artistic criticism based on traditional criteria of taste.

Another cow, entitled, “Forever,” had several hundreds of locks attached to its sides and invited couples to carve their names into the individual locks. The gesture was reminiscent of the traditions of avant-garde public art, which had attempted to erase the barriers between artists and consumers by transforming passive walkers into active participants and artistic collaborators.

Of the few explicitly politically oriented statues, the cow entitled “Left and Right” deserves specific mention. As the title makes unambiguously clear, the chain saw that symmetrically divided the length of the cow into two equal parts represented the political rift of contemporary Hungarian society.

These images inscribed onto the cow installations presented the hidden history of urban experience. The city has always represented for its teeming populations a place of excitement and danger, since its multiplicity covered over inscrutable mysterious and secrets. The “urban texts” of illustrated journals, humor magazines and advertising pillars helped solve the meaning of urban experiences and public events; they made the city transparent and understandable to its inhabitants. When they addressed people, they abolished the indifference and impersonality of the city. The cows can be regarded not only as the contemporary extensions of traditional “urban texts”, but also as the perfect incarnations of the experiences of the new global city. The cows connect the many big cities of the world, they give expression to the realities of tourism and the kind of global culture in which most modern people live. At the same time, far from abolishing the

local character of different cities, they also provided opportunities for the expression of indigenous culture. This dual or “glocal” nature of the festival was clearly reflected in its official name, which was consistently referred to as the “Budapest cow parade”, rather than the more Hungarian-sounding “cow festival.” (Tehén-fesztivál). The same dualism was reflected in the inscriptions of the statues, which were invariably labeled both in English and Hungarian. The obvious intention of these bilingual titles was to make the statues accessible to both local populations and to foreign visitors.

The complex nature of this “glocal” phenomenon is well-illustrated in the ways the Budapest cows used the cosmopolitan allegory of the global cow parade to give ironic definition to some of the emblematic experiences of contemporary Hungarian society. At the core of this cultural phenomenon is a new kind of cosmopolitan outlook, which is able to enjoy differences, while discovering identity in a range of cow installations. This identity in difference can be observed in almost all global cow parade, be it the Boston cow patterned on the Mayflower transporting Puritan ancestors; the Prague cow recreating a T-54 Soviet tank which had occupied the city in 1968; the Florentine cow mimicking an Italian Renaissance cathedral; or the Budapest cow signaling the birth place of the Rubik cube.

Newspaper Reactions to the Budapest Cow Parade

Media reactions to the cow parade were determined by political orientation and relationship to the cultural canon. In the final analysis, the majority of the media was

either ambivalent or openly hostile. Positive accounts or neutral analysis were almost impossible to find on the subject.

The right-wing daily, *Magyar Nemzet*, attacked the very concept of the cow parade in a long article that was published before the event itself.⁴ Repudiating the argument that the cow parade would benefit tourism, the writer of the article argued that Hungary's national reputation was at stake in the Budapest festival. Rather than presenting Hungary to visitors as a modern industrial nation with high cultural achievements, the cow parade suggested the image of a backward agrarian country or that of a cheap consumer bazaar. Evidently, the writer of the article did not consider it relevant to mention that the cow festival had originated in Switzerland and had made its appearance in most of the large industrial centers of the globe. The writing was simply an occasion to publicize the right-wing political and ideological position on the subject of the exhibition. The polemical tone of the article is well illustrated in the following excerpt:

The happening referred to as the Cow Parade has been described by one of its organizers as "a good idea, because it will help bring culture to people." It is hard to know whether the predominant feature of this statement is stupidity or cynicism. On the one hand, such a remark justifiably offends the self-esteem of Budapesters. For I suspect that there are not a few among them, who do not feel the need to have culture brought closer to them, considering themselves already close enough to it (even though the city politicians conjure up around them an increasingly unlivable Budapest lacking in culture). On the other hand, the examples available of the festival do not remind most people of culture, and for this they are hardly to be blamed. Personally, the word that comes to mind is: fraudulence.

This long quotation is telling, because it makes apparent the many-faceted affront that the cow parade presented to right wing opinion. The cosmopolitanism of the cow parade

⁴ Tóth Szabolcs Töhötöm, "Csordaszellem," [Herd Mentality] *Magyar Nemzet*, (May 27, 2006)

threatened the validity of national values and boundaries, while its populism challenged the dominance of canonical high culture. This perspective obviously could not accept the characteristic of cultural globalization that an English sociologist characterized in the following manner: “*The heterogeneity of cosmopolitan taste suggests that it is possible to transcend one’s native culture.*” (Chaney 2002:158) The political right did not want to accept the fact that, even though it had considerable political and cultural influence within the national boundaries, it had no power over the global popular culture.

The left-wing daily *Népszabadság* originally entitled an article about the upcoming cow parade as “Appealing and Clever Nonsense” and wished it success.⁵ Once the cows were in place, however, a later article limited approval to the cow parade’s positive impact on tourism, dismissing the exhibit itself as trivial popular entertainment. The shift in attitude was clearly reflected in the titles of the two articles, which changed from “Appealing and Clever Nonsense” to “The Dumping of Cows on Budapest.”⁶ The obvious political explanation for this less than enthusiastic reception was that the cow parade enjoyed the support of the liberal mayor of Budapest and the socialists used this fact to register their cultural disagreement with their liberal political allies. In our view, however, there is a more profound reason for this reaction. Socialist intellectuals simply lacked the cultural codes for appreciating the cosmopolitan cow parade, which diverged markedly from their traditional ideas about public art. Naturally, the problem was not with the issue of cosmopolitanism, since the international orientation of the left was open to this notion. What was in danger was the socialist intellectuals’ previously assumed cultural mission toward the urban masses. In the vocabulary of the old left, public culture

⁵ Schwartzberger István, *Népszabadság*, (Feb. 2, 2006)

⁶ Munkatársunktól, *Népszabadság*, (July 1, 2006)

was traditionally viewed as the means for educating the masses and decreasing class and cultural inequalities. The cow parade represented a new type of public exhibition, which did not require any kind of prior knowledge, nor did it promise entry into a higher realm of experience. The cow statues offered light-hearted opportunities for amusement and engagement, and they left the question of cultural judgment to the interpretation of the individual observer. For old-left intellectuals, this transformation of the cultural public sphere, in which public art was linked with tourism, appeared, if not openly threatening, certainly alien. The source of the conflict was that socialist intellectuals, like their nationalist counterparts, were accustomed to the privilege of determining what constituted and what did not constitute culture. This privilege was brought into question by the very existence of the cow parade, which used the vocabulary of popular, rather than high culture.

If any doubt was left that the cow parade ultimately represented a challenge to the self-esteem of intellectuals, it was dispelled by an article published in the politically independent internet newspaper, the *Index*, which sharply repudiated the cow parade in the name of genuine avant-garde values. Referring to its origins in Zurich eight years ago, the article saw the Budapest cow parade as merely a tired copy on of an avant-garde experiment. This was a good joke eight years ago, the journalist pointed out, but the same joke, retold in the wake of all the other cow parades that have been organized in the world since, was no longer funny. “It has lost not only its novelty but its revolutionary impetus as well...In the best of circumstances, this cow business has become artistic franchise which promises as much freedom of thought as the opening of a McDonalds.”⁷

⁷ Földes András, “Elkopott viccek Budapest utcáin,” [Tired jokes on the streets of Budapest] *Index*, (July 5, 2006)

It is, of course, not surprising that the Budapest cow parade diverged from the Zurich original. The critics' task was not to problematize this discrepancy, but rather, to try to understand the reasons for the popularization and globalization of the original idea. By applying avant-garde aesthetic standards to this case he was actually betraying his ignorance about the characteristic features of popular culture. For, in contrast with the avant-garde, the popular logic of the cow parade did set out to challenge or explode the codes of elite culture. Rather, it attempted to create new connections between spaces, people and ideas by eliminating the differences between them. Economic, social, political and aesthetic differences were brought into alignment through the homogenizing allegory of the cow.

Perhaps nothing betrays more clearly the global, touristic orientation of the cow parade than the fact that the most positive analysis of the exhibition were to be found, not in the political papers, but in the economic-oriented HVG (Hungarian initials for Weekly World Economy): "This is not the first attempt to bring the cow parade to Hungary," explained an enthusiastic article in the HVG on January 3, 2006. "There had been two consecutive experiments in 2002 and 2003, but these projects failed because of the lack of professional support and an unmistakable opposition from established artists and the curatorial establishment. These obstacles have now disappeared and the preconditions for the cow parade appear to be more adequately prepared than earlier."⁸ The article provided a detailed description of the Cow Parade as a global cultural event and stressed the economic advantages that the country was to derive from it. It placed particular emphasis on the professional panel of judges who would ensure the highest artistic

⁸ "Cow parade. Tehéninvázio várható Budapesten" [The cow parade: An invasion of cows is expected in Budapest] HVG, January 3, 2006

standards for the festival. A second article published on the occasion of the opening of the cow parade once again provided a detailed overview of the festival.⁹ What made this article noteworthy and unique among reviews was the inclusion of the names of the creators of the statues and a brief description of a few of what the author considered striking examples. “The joint creation of Veronika Kóczyán and Andrea Dobos,” wrote the review, “is called the ‘Rubicow’, which refers to the world famous square created by Ernő Rubik. The cow is depicted in a wrung-out pose and gives the appearance of having been entangled in a gigantic square.”¹⁰

The quotation clearly illustrates that the HVG did not rely exclusively on economic arguments to characterize the cows, but also used traditional aesthetic criteria to explain their artistic significance. Nevertheless, it failed to touch upon the true innovation of the festival, which lay in the cosmopolitanism of popular culture. In other words, it made no particular effort to understand the cow parade’s transformative impact on public art, nor did it question why, if the cows could be described in traditional aesthetic categories, they nevertheless provoked such hostility not only from avant-garde critics, but also from political opinion both on the left and the right. As we will show in the following part of our paper, it was to be not intellectuals, but ordinary urban observers in Budapest, who would expand on these traditional interpretative frames and develop a new cultural sensitivity to the cow parade that took into account the act of consumption ordinarily excluded from discussions of the public sphere. According to Chaney this late-modern cultural phenomenon creates the possibility of learning new

⁹ “A tehének bejöttek Budapestre” [The cows have arrived in Budapest] HVG (June 30, 2006)

¹⁰ Ibid

cultural vocabularies in an age when earlier forms of legitimation and representation had been lost. (Chaney 2002)

The Reception of the Cow Parade by the Budapest Population

Using the methods of “passing ethnography” (Couldry 2003), we read through internet forums and approached passers-by in the streets in order to find out ordinary people’s reactions to the cow installations. We discovered that most people approached the cows as cognitive problems, rather than as ideological, aesthetic or economic challenges. In other words, they simply did not understand why the cows were there and what they meant. The examples of traditional public statues and film and aesthetic festivals taking place parallel with the cow parade failed to provide keys to the meaning of the event. When we asked an elderly neighbor of ours in Budapest for her opinion of the cows, she burst out, “Let someone explain to me what their meaning is supposed to be.” Essentially the same feeling was articulated by an Australian student we interviewed in front of one of the cows on a Budapest street corner. She mentioned that she had seen a similar cow parade in Sydney and she was no more certain then than now, “how she was supposed to view them.” The interpretation of the global festival provoked a global uncertainty; most people failed to understand what they saw and awaited explanations from others. As “Styx”, a participant on the official web-page of the Budapest cow parade put it: “Give me persuasive arguments that these disgusting colorful cows have some kind of meaning. What are they trying to say? What is their function?”

How do they contribute to culture? How will I be better by looking at them?”¹¹ The greatest difficulty in coming to terms with the cows was their lack of stable, unambiguous references or meanings. They did not carry overtly ideological messages; yet, they were also public statues that were to be found on city streets and squares, not playgrounds or amusement parks. They were cultural artifacts, but they were located outside the walls of museums, not within them.



Standing in close proximity to the cows and observing people’s gestures and expressions, we tried to find an answer to the question: how do people react to the unexpected experience of encountering cow installations on the streets of downtown Budapest? We found the majority of people did not even look at the cows, some even turned their faces away, signaling that they did not want to acknowledge their existence. Some only glanced at them in passing. There were others, however, who smiled on passing the cows, observing them carefully, and gave every sign of appreciating the humor and the whimsy of the statues. Their reactions were of interest to us, because they suggested that for some people the cows had a message that could be decoded. An

¹¹ The internet forum of the Budapest cow parade can be found at the following address: <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

analysis of their reactions suggests that there were many ways of relating to the cows and different meanings could be read from them. In an attempt to typify these reactions, we have organized our empirical findings into five groups: children, tourists, fun-seekers, collectors and flaneurs. Admittedly these categories frequently overlapped, but we nevertheless found it useful to analytically distinguish between the different types, since such distinction helped us articulate the inner differences within a group that often looks homogenous when viewed from the outside.

Children provided the most conspicuous audience for the cows. Those under twelve invariably stopped by them, went up to them, stroked them, climbed on them, and treated them as toys. When asked what they thought of the cows, their answer was that they were “strange,” and “out of the ordinary.” The fact that children related so easily to the cows indicates that, instead of regarding them through the aesthetic criteria of traditional cultural norms, they simply saw them as unusual forms of toys. They did not have to deal with deeper explanations, they simply needed to walk around the cows, touch them, try to find out what to do with them. In other words, they improvised a kind of spontaneous and practical response to the challenge of the cows.

Comparable to the behavior of children were the activities of tourists and casual strollers, who viewed the cows as integral parts of the cityscape and welcomed them as harbingers of fun and humor to the city. They frequently photographed the cows or simply smiled at them when they unexpectedly encountered them in their daily activities. Many of these strollers had already met with cow parades in other cities and thus greeted them as old friends. On the internet forum we examined, they enthusiastically cited Chicago, Manchester, Monaco, Prague, Lisbon, Tel Aviv, as some of the places where

they had experienced similar festivals. Repudiating critics of animal statues, who accused them of being “pathetic” and “scandalous,” a typical fan, writing under the name “Lego”, elaborated the parallels with the recent Brussels exhibition: “I did not find the horse statues in Brussels either pathetic or scandalous. It was instructive to see the different means and perspectives that could be used to create and decorate such a simple ‘statue’ as the horse and we found a great many amusing creations among them. In our group of roughly fifty young people, everyone liked them.”¹² “Lego’s” explanation reinforces the observation of John Urry, who saw tourism as the originator of cultural change. According to him, the massification of tourism brought about global cosmopolitanism, which separates the new taste, custom and value communities from the national context. (Urry 2000) What is at stake here is an everyday experience that creates ideological openness among people who have stepped out of their accustomed national traditions and encountered other cultures. The Budapest cow parade made it possible for both the Hungarian strollers and foreign tourists to compare Budapest with other world cities.

An even more self-conscious and single-minded reaction to the cow parade could be found among the fun-seekers, who systematically sought out the cows as a form of recreation. Playfully referring to themselves as “moo-cow hunters,” they were not satisfied with accidentally running into a few cows on their errands in the city. Instead, they organized bicycle tours or walking excursions with their children and partners in search of the cows scattered throughout the city. “Grendel”, one of the fans of the cow parade, described her outing in the following way: “Aside from the fact that the cows are amusing splashes of color in the city and also contribute to charity after they are

¹² <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

auctioned off, I gained from them because they interrupted my busy schedule and brought me closer to my family and children... With or without cows, we spent a wonderful day.”¹³ The importance of the bicycle is worth highlighting in this account, since it made it possible to cover the huge distances where the cows were scattered. At the same time, the connections between “cow hunting” and bicycling also indicated an alternative form of urban pastime that rebuilt people’s relationships with the city and their family.

An even more specific and systematic form of these cow enthusiasts were the collectors, who, armed with maps, visited each and every cow in the city, photographed them, and then shared their photos on internet forums. These collectors constituted the major contributors to the internet forums that we visited. They discussed where to find which cows and they competed with each other in collecting the most cows and the best photographs of them. Acknowledging the help of a fellow “moo-cow hunger”, one of these collectors wrote: “Many thanks for the published list, it was of great help. I have been ‘searching’ for two days and have already found thirty-four items. Where did you find the list at the end of your photos? Greetings, Tubatabu.”¹⁴ These collectors attempted to transform their spontaneous experiences of the cows into a kind of layman’s professionalism and in this they resembled the experts of Japanese popup culture, the otakus.

In contrast with these essentially spontaneous reactions, there was a final type of relationship to the cow parade that we described as that of the flaneur. Following the usage of Baudelaire and Benjamin, we associated the flaneur with the humanistic intellectual’s heroism, who attempted to discover a constructive relationship to everyday

¹³ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

¹⁴ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

life in the city. (Baudelaire 1964) (Benjamin 1980) The flaneurs, in our view, constituted a distinct group not because they reacted to the cows in essentially different ways from children, tourists, amusement-seekers or collectors. Indeed, all these reactions were to be discovered in the flaneurs as well. The uniqueness of the flaneurs lay in the fact that they attempted to provide sophisticated and reflexive interpretations of the cows within the frames of everyday experience and perspective. They differed from those who identified with the cows and celebrated their presence in the city; but also from those who criticized the cows and imposed external ideological and aesthetic judgments on them. The flaneurs constituted a minority, but they were nevertheless the most reliable voices of the global cultural change that the cow parade embodied.

It is worth noting that the internet forums carried a number of alternative aesthetic interpretations of the cow statues that were equal in sophistication to that of the flaneurs. But these explanations were frequently repudiated by the readers, partly because of their overly abstract nature, partly because of their condescending tone, which were deemed inappropriate within the democratic ethos of the internet forums. The following exchange clearly illustrates the difference between the outlook of the traditional art connoisseur and the urban flaneur. The undoubtedly well-informed “Chasseur”, for example, provided the following explication of the cow parade: “What constitute art and, generally, who has the right to define art is an open question in our age. One could even say that since Andy Warhol the very problem has become a non-issue...In my view, the purpose of the cow parade is to cause the man of the street to stop and think. It is to remind him that there exist contemporary works of art and their producers and that

neither the artists nor their ideas are to be found solely in the museum.”¹⁵ Some appreciated “Chasseur’s” expert train of thought on the aesthetic qualities of the cow parade, but others rudely rejected its reliance on traditional interpretive frames and deference to established authorities. “Mozibuzi” struck such a negative note when he reacted to “Chasseur” in the following way: “You are just shooting off your mouth...do you think that using literary language to defend a few ‘artistic’ cows they will be worth more? Do you think you are superior, or have greater understanding?...the cows don’t represent anything...you only imagine things about it.”¹⁶

In contrast to the connoisseur tone of people like “Chasseur’s”, the flaneur’s distinctive approach was characterized by an egalitarian quality that evoked everyday experiences when talking about the cows. One flaneur, who identified himself as “Cry,” wrote, for example: “If you want to see a work of art, go the museum!!! These [cows] exist to provide amusement, not art and whoever has a sense of humor and fantasy is able to laugh at them. Finally, they will be put up for auction and the money donated to charity.”¹⁷ Another flaneur countered in a similar tone and spirit when he rejected the accusation that the cow parade was just a political ploy to distract people’s attention from the economic constrictions of the dominant socialist Gyurcsány government. “Do you think,” “Grendel” rebuked the conspiracy theorists that “they decided to organize cow parades in cities like Chicago, Athens, Denver, Lisbon, Boston, Paris, Berlin, etc. just to deceive people about some left or right-wing policy?” In another remark, he criticized those who placed too much emphasis on the artistic features of the cow parade. “As far as I am concerned,” concluded “Grendel”, “the cow parade is not really art, nor is it

¹⁵ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

¹⁶ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

¹⁷ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

politics; it is closer to an amusing advertisement, like a Pepsi ad.”¹⁸ Interestingly, this quotidian reasoning, which linked the cow parade with a Pepsi ad was acceptable to even the most contentious contributors who usually strongly attacked the “defenders of the cows.” “Styx,” for example, who had originally been in determined opposition, went through a virtual conversion experience. “The truth is,’ he confessed, “I did not mean to put down the cows. What interested me is what people thought about their function...what was their meaning...what was good about them, perhaps their artistic merit...something I couldn’t see in them. But up till now, only Grendel has been able to provide a convincing answer to these questions and I am willing to accept his arguments.”¹⁹

In our view, Grendel and the other flaneurs were successful in defining the meaning of the Budapest cow parade because they were able to perceive it as an amusing advertisement for the Hungarian capital. Through examples taken from everyday life and consumer practices, they articulated the cultural ideals of a new cosmopolitan middle class. They emphasized that the new public culture inextricably blended the local and the global, the artistic and the commercial, the elite and the popular; and that it was precisely through its hybrid nature that it could be enjoyed. With this choice, they also made it explicit that, in opposition to the inequalities of creativity and prestige associated with the old cultural canon, this global middle class gave priority to a new taste sensibility based on cultural openness and heterogeneity.

Grass Roots Global Convergence

¹⁸ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

¹⁹ <http://www.cowparade.hu/>. (inactive)

By way of conclusion, we would like to place the transformation of public culture represented by the cow parade within a broader social-theoretical context. Previously, the reference point for public art had been politics and high culture and it is the vocabulary of these established forms that provided acceptable interpretations to broad layers of society. As we saw, however, the cow parade was not compatible with traditional explanations of public art. This new kind of urban festival did not conceptualize power in political forms nor did it approach culture through canonized art.

The cow festivals that appeared toward the end of the nineteen-nineties were reacting to a new global challenge in which public art had to fulfill social and economic, rather than legitimating and representative, functions. Culture became a dynamic growth industry in urban development as economic growth became inseparable from the fostering of tourism and the creation of an infrastructure for cultural consumption (conferences, festivals, sport arenas, restaurants, shopping centers). Cities used cow parades as one element in their cultural battle for regional dominance and metropolitan status and there was no world capital from New York to Sydney, from Paris to Buenos Aires that did not have a cow parade. The economic stakes in the symbolic competition between cities were real. The cow statues were primarily uniquely conceived posters or advertising columns that used colorful and humorous means to publicize the revitalization of cities. This explains why mayors throughout the world were so fond of cow parades, which they associated with the vitality of the city and which they were willing to purchase for large sums from the Swiss license firm.

While the macroeconomic significance of the cow parade is unquestionable, our primary question in this study has been how to evaluate the cultural convergences that appeared in the case of the cow parades from the perspective of urban citizens. According to Jenkins, it is possible to distinguish two main elements within global convergence. Corporate convergence represents the flow between markets in which economic values predominate, while grassroots convergence refers to the realm where individual citizens attempt to transform the global economic trends in their own image and for their own needs. In not every case is the process of corporate convergence humanized and accompanied by grassroots convergence from below. Yet, the two kinds of convergences do not exclude each other. In fact, economic developments potentially expand the range of cultural democracy, since they weaken traditional national and cultural boundaries. Our case study provides evidence of the contradictory impact of global convergence in the Hungarian case. While the media stressed national values or elite artistic criteria in its approach to the cow parade, a creative minority of urban spectators used the codes of popular culture to come to terms with the new public statues. This activity was part of a broader trend that Jenkins characterized in the following way:

“Global convergence is giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism.....Here, I will be using the term pop cosmopolitanism to refer to the ways that the transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency.”
(Jenkins, 2004:117)

In the case of the Budapest cow parade, we explored the development of this grassroots global convergence. We were interested in finding out how people attempted to create meaningful dialogue with the alternative values embodied in the cow parade.

The conclusion we drew from this study is that the basis of cosmopolitan cultural competence does not lie in some kind of specific aesthetic expertise or political commitment, but rather, in a kind of sensitivity to the everyday life of contemporary Hungarian society, which open-minded people have acquired in the process of international travel and cultural consumption. The Budapest cow parade contained in inextricable fusion the traces of other metropolitan centers, but also the characteristic features of Budapest. It brought into juxtaposition nature and the city, charity and advertisement, private entertainment and public discourse, playfulness and seriousness, economic profit and esthetic creativity, expert analysis and spontaneous enjoyment.

References:

- Baudelaire, Charles: *Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Trans Jonathan Mayne. London. Phaidon. 1863/1995.
- Benjamin, Walter: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocke, 1969. 155-200
- Chaney, David. "Cosmopolitan Art and Cultural Citizenship." *Theory, Culture & Society*. 2002.19 (1-2) pp. 157-174
- Couldry, Nick. "Passing ethnographies." *Global Media Studies*. Ed: Patrick Murphy and Marwan Kraidy..London, Routledge. 2003. 40-56
- Decker, Juilee. "Moo!Oink!Neigh!Twanngg!! Themed Public Sculpture Invades American Streets." *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*. 2002. 25. (1-2) 119-123.

- Jenkins, Henry. "Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence". *Globalization*. Ed. Marcelo Suárez-Orosco and Desirée Baolian Qin-Hilliard. Los Angeles, UP. of Los Angeles. 2004. 114-140.
- Ortner, Sheryl. *Anthropology and Social Theory*. Durham. Duke UP. 2006.
- Urry, John. *Sociology beyond Societies*. London. Routledge. 2000.