

### **Intervention Anna Orbán**

Welcome to everybody, hello to you ! My name is Anna Orbán and I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to share with you our experiences in Hungary regarding how art can be a tool for homeless people to gain back their skills and self confidence, by helping them to do something themselves to improve their life/existential situation and „climb” back to the level of normal human life.

The name of the Hungarian Homeless Artists Self-help Association is „WE EXIST”. My humble person is a co-founder and member of the board of this group. Before giving some information how it was established, let me explain something. The Hungarian word „Vagyunk” can be translated into English in two ways : either “we are” or „we exist”

If you say „we are” you have to add WHAT we are. Nice, young, attractive, old, ugly, desperate, - so we are like everybody else: good and sometimes bad in a way; talented in one or more things and hopeless in others. So, human beings like anyone else, just under rather disadvantageous existential circumstances, - hopefully temporarily only. This „rather disadvantageous” phrase covers the lack of the most essential aspects of a person's life: home, family, proper work, disappearance of former circle of friends and sometimes even a partner.

One small remark still to our name: in this case please understand the word „artist” in a wider and broader meaning. Approximately one tenth of our members were “real” artists beforehand in the strict meaning of the word, meaning painter, writer, translator, poet, or at least teacher of drawing, etc. The majority has begun to try to express their feelings, plans and targets, dreams, memories using the different paths of art as a tool only after having become homeless.

Now, back to the beginning: the whole thing started with the street paper called „Fedél Nélkül” - Without Shelter - which was founded in 1993 by homeless people. At the beginning it was printed in A/4 size, photocopied on A/3 sheets, in as many copies as the exact need of demands. The first issues mainly dealt with the developing homeless service system, the decrees of the latest social act, as well as including messages, poems and drawings. Then, in due time, our paper has begun to publish more and more the works of homeless authors.

Even the art works was a sort of cry for help. The aim was to provide a platform for homeless people to make everyone aware of our existence. On the other hand, it was an attempt to alleviate their serious everyday bread-and-butter worries and ask for an urgent relief from the whole society. As more and more authors presented their works, there came the time when the increasing quantity enabled the paper to publish works of a higher standard.

In the 250th issue of the paper they conducted a continuously open artistic competition for homeless people in three categories: poetry, prose (short stories) and visual arts (paintings, drawings). The competition was and has been since then organized in every month. In each category there are three prizes: 1st, 2nd and 3rd. It means that altogether nine authors get a nice certificate (SHOW ONE) and some money. The first prize is somewhat round the 1/10th of the minimal salary... It might sound like peanuts, but I am the best witness that sometimes even this means a lot. There were months in my 6-year homelessness when this was the only income what I got for a short story of mine.

A group emerged from the regular and standard contributors who decided to establish a self-help association to represent their interests and organize exhibitions. Our first attempt was to found HAA – Homeless Amateur Artists Corporation, but unfortunately it failed due to financial difficulties and personal differences. Finally, on December 6, 2006, the WE EXIST Homeless Amateur Artists Self-Help Association was created with the support of three service providers BMSZKI – Budapest Methodological Social Center, MENHELY Foundation and FSZKA (Public Social Foundation of Budapest) - within the framework of an EQUAL program.

So far , we altogether we could organize 9 exhibitions for the visual art pieces. The first three were hosted by service providers (among others: in BMSZKI, on the occasion of the closing conference of the EQUAL project, with the participation of representatives of service providers from Spain, Great Britain and France, partners in the project. Then we succeeded in opening an exhibition in the Community Center one of the districts of Budapest.

Without emphasizing my role, I would like to mention that the following exhibition could be opened because I was then staying in the Women's Hostel of the Salvation Army in the 17th district of Budapest and having a half-time work as a „Madchen for Alles“ (officially a cultural organizer) in the Cultural and Community House of the neighborhood. This is at the fringe of the capital, which used to be a wealthy village for a long-long time and although now annexed to Budapest, they still have the strong social and communal/civic feeling and devotion I could never ever before trace in any other part of my beloved city. You know what I mean: when somebody asks you how you are, he or she is really interested to hear your answer. And if the old lady next door is unable to clean her windows before Christmas, there is always someone in the neighbourhood to offer help.

So, in a nice, real art gallery this community house gave us the opportunity to exhibit our works. We could use their media-connections and got a real big publicity. Journalists from several newspapers came to the opening ceremony and the local TV also made some propaganda to the event, therefore this show could be taken as a milestone in our history

This is where an employee of the Parliamentary Commissioners' Office of Hungary saw the exhibition and invited us to show the same works in their building. It was practically a waiting room for the visitors of the Office, so many people could see our works while waiting before session or public audiences.

Our seventh exhibition was hosted in the Cultural Delegation of Hungary in Bratislava, Slovakia on the occasion of the consultation of the experts of the "Visegrad Four" (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary held on homelessness. Just to say in brackets: although the international media is full with information on the political misunderstanding and discrepancies Slovakia and Hungary is having these days. Although this is true but let me mention that in the recent days there was a successful common exhibition in Slovakia attended by 100 artists of the visual field, fifty Slovakian and fifty Hungarian. It was a success and there was not even the faintest signs of any enemy-like feeling amongst the authors, they could enjoy each other's works and successes as well. Therefore I take the liberty of saying: that art brings people together being not only a tool, but a strong peaceful weapon to eliminate differences, as what is nice and give a pleasant feeling when reading, looking at or listening to, so the real values for an art piece is appreciated, no matter whether in Anchorage, Curacao, Osaka, Cape Town or Belgrade.

Furthermore, we had an exhibition in an Art Cellar, attended mainly by young people, mostly university students. It was astonishing enough to see how these „progressive“ young people showed their interest and sympathy to us, and this is very promising for the future.

In the summer of 2007, the association was invited to the Ten Feet Away Festival to London, where 2 members represented our group. With fliers and small artworks (mainly crafts works like this – SHOW SOME) we were present e.g. on a reggae-festival in the countryside in Hungary this summer and on some other civic events.

I like to show you an exemplar of FN street paper with the photo of a very good poet whose short poem I intend to read to you now , as an example. This poem is also included in the book I have taken some copies to distribute. It is in English, translated by true, official translators.  
(by the way: professionalism is present in the jury as well who judge the monthly competition: they are authorized critics both in visual arts and literature).

József Leé: Untitled

I've got no door,  
No place to invite a friend to. Nor  
Any windows looking onto the street,  
Against which drops of rain would beat  
On quiet Sunday afternoons.

My existence is an open space.  
The rain flows down my back.  
A box of pills to help me out  
When crazy fears attack.

Here is the room of my unwalled life.  
Anyone can stroll right through  
Without knocking or thinking twice.

I know: this people do not care  
About my pride, or the load I bear.

Forget, for good: that's all I want to do.  
I need a place to shelter 'til it's through.  
To escape it. What? I cannot say.  
I go into the church. I pray.

Before going further and speak about the written works, and the two books we published, let me show you a short DVD on the opening ceremony of the exhibition in Rákoscsaba.

Unfortunately, it is only in Hungarian but I will explain that first we try to act a short story written by Csilla Horvath,. The story is about an old couple on the street. The old lady is trying to get her husband speak with all the possible arguments, but the body lying next to her is already died, better to say frozen to death. The lady is crying and remembering all the good and bad things they had together for a half century. Then came the crisis car and a social worker (or service provider) takes the lady to a shelter.(DVD-PRESENTATION).

As far as the written works are concerned we succeeded in publishing two anthologies.

The first was the Twilight Zone- in 2004. The second is From Dusk till Dawn - this was published for the Christmas Fair last year, both by the Barrus Publishing Company.

So, the most important achievement so far is our success in convincing a wider audience through the street paper, exhibitions and books, that there are really talented and gifted people to be found amongst those living in the most difficult circumstances. Someone who is capable to create something which can cause joy to others as artistic buzz, can not be worthless in the eyes of society. And, what is sometimes even more difficult, to their own environment, old friends and family.

We are proud that our association has become known. We are also happy that some works could be sold as well from the pictures as well. Unfortunately, there are still a number of people who think buying a painting from a homeless author is a sort of charity.

So sometimes they offer a price that even does not cover the costs of the paint and brushes.

We still have to do a lot to make known that an art piece is not a tool for begging.

We also have to do our utmost to ensure that the organizing and administrative work of the association go smoothly and continuously, and try to get people together to discuss different issues. (Sometimes they – we are not reachable, as some of us are staying in the street deliberately and not always on the same spot, or some of us have no money to use their handy, I mean mobile phone). Our main idea is to have a small place of our own where people could work in quiet circumstances, and we are trying to prepare applications to be able to buy e.g. raw materials for our artists. Another problem or better to say task ahead of us is the following: for the time being everybody is working in the association as volunteers , in our free time, having no money. And we are also in steady struggle to find a job and if we find one, we are not any more available at any time, of course. So, the solution could be to hire at least a half-time paid person, who does all the administrative, organizing work and could duly follow e.g. the competitions or tenders opened and convey this message to the authors and also go to different galleries, possible exhibiting premises to arrange further exhibitions.

All in all: active, creative work and appreciation (even the smallest inspiring, reassuring glance, that „ Hey, this is not too bad, buddy”), and that somebody belongs to a group of people sharing the successes and the appreciation of the other „normal” members of society can only give back the self-confidence to a homeless, making them able to express what they want, to stand for themselves, as well as appear on the labour-market with a real hope to get a job they are qualified for and which is normally paid. Everything else will build on this base.

On the latest prize-giving session I asked my mates to give me some proof how art had helped them. A young lady – who was always so silent and wordless, only her drawings showed some hints about what she had thought or done beforehand – told, that she and her steady partner (also a member of us, and a teacher of drawing) saved the money they had won by participating in the award scheme through the years, and putting same to their savings from other sources , I mean salary , they successfully applied for social housing where they happily live now. Others gave similar reflections. To gain back dignity helps in going further in all paths of life, believe me, my dear audience.

I was asked to say to you whether there are any negative effects of being a member of the „WE EXIST,, We discussed this issue with my mates. We are not jealous to each other's successes, even not in a way it is present in the world of the professional artists. Of course, sometimes I feel that I wrote the poem of the century and the jury does not appreciate it even not with a single praising word , - of course I have some four-letter-words in my mind, but just for a few seconds.

The only thing I could mention that in the eyes of the non-creative homeless sometimes we are taken as the „homeless-aristocrats,, (like in the early capitalism the so-called workers-aristocrats). To give you a simple example: several times I got the remark from the girl next door , that „ Our social worker deals you , speak with you more as a friend, as somebody being equal to her, and with me just as one of her clients,, It might sound a bit childish, but it can be bloody serious in a hostel of more than hundred tenants.

Allow me to say something personal. When training of social workers was only a plan in Hungary, the Ministry of Culture gathered information from countries where it had already been working successfully, a.o. from The Netherlands, too. That was the time when I returned from The Hague after a five-year work at the Commercial Section of our Embassy, so I got the work to translate the text of the Dutch educational system. Even that time I disliked the word „social worker,,. And later, when I became homeless social workers educated partly upon this system helped me to keep my head above the water surface, then I was called „client,,. As far as I am concerned – but I am not alone with this - I can only congratulate that by now service providers give helping hand to the service users, who – in most of the cases know what they want and need help from the providers regarding HOW can these targets be achieved, what forum do they have, where to turn to . Hopefully, not only the names have changed but this is a sign of a closer partnership now on.

Closing my words let me cite just some lines of my favourite poem by Kipling, from „IF,,

„If you can  
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with wornout tools;  
....  
If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breath a word about your loss;  
...  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

I wish to everybody a lot of WORTHY SECONDS!

P.S. right before leaving for Copenhagen, two neighbours of mine asked me to convey their poems to the competition. Both for the first time ! And another one who sent her poem for the latest monthly competition stopped me on the corridor,asked me to go into her small room and showed me the diploma she got for the participation, although this time it was not awarded, she had a big smile and shining eyes when she put the diploma back to the wall with pins.

So, this is all what I wished to share with you now, and let me draw your kind attention that a film of the stage of Hungarian homeless, AHA can also be seen in.....

Thank you for your attention and hjertelig tak !