

An Artist in Budapest: Building a Docent Program and Connecting Museums, Galleries, Artists, and Viewers

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Abstract

As a Fulbright Grantee, I helped build the Ludwig Museum Docent Program by strengthening volunteer recruitment, retention, development, and management. Through my experiences managing the Living Classics Series, I realized the benefit of connecting the docent program with local museums, galleries, artists, and viewers in order to increase its visibility and effectiveness. Although this young volunteer program faces many challenges, the organization continues to grow as it experiments with possible solutions to overcome these obstacles. In addition to my contributions in the museum, I continued to pursue my painting studies at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, and my newest works were exhibited in Budapest and Szolnok.

1. Introduction

My journey to Budapest started in 2005 in Seville, Spain, where I shared my international research of museum volunteer programs at the World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM) Twelfth International Congress. There I met Linda Kondor, who was at that time the Docent Program Manager at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (Szépművészeti Múzeum). She would later be asked to start the docent program at the Ludwig Museum and has been my advisor this year. In addition to making contact with Linda, I also was captivated by one of the resounding themes of the conference, the lack of museum volunteer programs in Central and Eastern Europe and the lack of information on how to build them.

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) 2006 Manifesto for Volunteering in Europe echoed the concern voiced at the WFFM Congress and states that “We call on the institutions of the EU to put a specific focus on the development of volunteering in the Central and Eastern European States, both in new Member States and candidate countries to support their work to consolidate their newfound democracies” (Manifesto CEV 9). As a new Member State of the European Union, Hungary was the ideal place for me to help this development and contribute to the formation of the young Ludwig Museum Docent Program.

The first segment of this paper will describe the growth of the docent program and evaluate its present status.

In order to understand my approach to building a volunteer program, I have included my previous research results in section 2. In section 3.1, I describe the docent program history and operational procedures. Section 3.2 discusses the Living Classics Series which I both initiated and managed. Section 3.3 illuminates the multiple challenges facing the creation of a docent program in Hungary, and section 3.4 presents possible solutions to these challenges.

It was my love of art that led to my interest in museum volunteerism. I have been developing my skills in the visual arts and developing my painting practice intensively for more than ten years. Balancing my time between the museum and studio, I continued to create new works during my tenure in Budapest. Section 4.1 discusses the primary artistic influences during the past year and section 4.2 relates my experience sharing these new works with the community. My paintings attempt to harmoniously connect many diverse visual elements in a single composition. I have applied this philosophy to my Fulbright experience and have tried to bring together the many different niches of the art scene in Budapest as much as possible.

2. Previous Research and Experience

During my time at the Ludwig Museum, my previous museum volunteerism research influenced my approach to building the new docent program. It

is necessary, therefore, to give a brief overview of this research and discuss the results, including pertinent conclusions and best practices. In the fall of 2002, I began volunteering as a student docent at the Arizona State University Art Museum. This experience led me to question how similar programs were conducted around the world. In the summer of 2004, under the auspices of the Circumnavigators Club Foundation, I visited eleven museum volunteer programs in Sydney, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, Graz, The Hague, London, New York, and Ottawa.

Four main areas of volunteer programs were investigated: volunteer recruitment, retention, development, and general management. Recruitment focused on the methods used to attract new volunteers. Retention investigated how the museum keeps the volunteers loyal to and active in the institution. Development looked into the means used to develop the skill level of the volunteers to serve the museum most effectively. General management examined the overall integration of volunteers into the structure and activities of the museum. Analyzing these four main variables of volunteer programs allowed me to evaluate each museum and comprehensively compare their cross-cultural similarities and differences.

Four methods of data collection were used in this study. First, a survey questionnaire was distributed to museum volunteers. The questions related to volunteer recruitment, retention, development, and management, as well as demographic data. Six art museum volunteer programs

participated, and a total of 159 surveys were completed. Second, thirty-four semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with volunteer directors, volunteers, and other museum staff from the eleven organizations that participated in the study. The third method was direct observation of volunteer activities. While visiting these organizations I attended training sessions, followed guided tours, and observed planning and board meetings. Finally, archival data were collected on all of the eleven organizations. These data included written histories and origins of the volunteer programs, as well as a variety of other documents such as newsletters, volunteer handbooks, museum organizational charts, and recruitment publications.

Based on the analysis of data, four sets of promising practices in the management of museum volunteers were identified. The first set reveals the benefits of offering varied volunteer positions. The second set focuses on building a sense of community among volunteers. The third set of practices relates to enhancing the learning experiences of volunteers through training and continuing education. The fourth set aims at establishing ways for volunteers to become involved in their own self-management.

When recruiting volunteers it is advantageous to offer a wide range of volunteer activities. For example, some volunteers may feel more comfortable helping in the office rather than giving tours to the public. Volunteers have many

varied skill sets, and allowing flexibility in the ways to contribute opens the door to a larger volunteer group.

Creating a strong community and friendship between volunteers can play an integral role in their recruitment and retention. Of the 159 volunteers surveyed, 60% joined to become part of a volunteer community, and 41% said that this community was the main reason for their continued involvement. The volunteer experience should provide a rewarding altruistic and social experience.

The importance of initial training and continued education was well reflected in the design and implementation of the volunteer programs that were studied. Offering continuing education as part of volunteer training serves the dual purpose of both improving volunteers' skills and enriching their overall experience. In fact, when asked their reasons for joining the volunteer program, there were twice as many responses for "to learn about art" than for "altruism (to help others)." Continuing education is also a major incentive in retention. Of the volunteers who reported receiving regular additional training or advisement, 59% (72 of 122) said this was a very important factor in their continued involvement and 37% (45 of 122) said it was important. Some 2% reported this as being a neutral factor, and another 2% indicated that it was not important.

Volunteer self-management is beneficial both to volunteers and to the museum. For volunteers, self-management is an empowering practice that increases their

understanding of and commitment to the museum by allowing them to take control of their personal volunteer experience. Although perhaps overseen by other departments or museum directors, these programs maintain the autonomy necessary for the volunteers to have a sense of ownership in the program's success.

Drawing on these four concepts of creating successful museum volunteerism programs would help me build the Ludwig Museum Docent Program.

3.1 Ludwig Museum Docent Program History and Current Status

The Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest (LUMÚ) was founded in 1989 by the Hungarian cultural government with a generous donation from German collectors Irene and Peter Ludwig. In 1991 the couple gifted an additional 91 pieces of work to their initial 70 piece donation and the museum's first exhibition was held in the Royal Palace. In 2005, the LUMÚ moved from the Royal Palace to its current location in the Palace of Arts. The LUMÚ exhibits both its extensive permanent collection which includes such influential artists as Picasso, Lichtenstein, and Haring and also rotates temporary exhibitions of international contemporary art (LUMÚ).

The LUMÚ Docent Program was conceived in the fall of 2006 as a subsidiary program of the Friends of the Ludwig Museum, and all docents are required to

become Friends members. The program's primary goal is to provide services for the international visitor and increase foreign attendance. For this reason, the program is operated in English.

To accomplish the goal of providing English language guided tours, docent volunteers complete an intensive training program. For four months, the new docents attend workshops on public speaking, touring techniques, elements and principles of design, and other necessary presentation skills. Docents also attend weekly lectures on contemporary art which highlight artwork in the museum's permanent collection. These weekly lectures also serve as continuing education for docents who have already completed the initial training semester and are open to the general public as well.

Recently celebrating its one year anniversary in 2008, two semester classes of docents have been trained and another class began training in February. Beginning in February of 2008, the docent program began offering weekly tours. This has been an important step for volunteers to make the jump from training to touring. Young docents first give a number of group tours before moving on to offer solo tours to museum visitors.

In addition to giving tours, docents also help with other aspects of museum activities while utilizing their English language skills. Docents translate printed educational materials and also help with simultaneous translation of museum talks.

In attempts to reach out to the international community, the docent program has been successful in publicizing the Ludwig Museum and its program events to the English language press, electronic media and organizations of foreign residents.

3.2 Living Classics Series

Initiating and managing the Living Classics Series was one of my major contributions to the growth of the LUMÚ Docent Program. "Living Classics" refers to contemporary Hungarian artists who helped write the history of Hungarian art and are actively shaping its future. The Living Classics Series is comprised of museum and gallery visits that take a different view of the lives and works of these artists, many of whom are featured within the museum collection. These visits feature the unique opportunity to hear the artists speak first hand about their artwork and creative process.

I developed the Living Classics Series with the multi-faceted goal of connecting four main components of the art world—the museum, the gallery, the artist, and the viewer. With the help of the name recognition of the Ludwig Museum, I was able to approach both galleries and museums to set up five Living Classics events. These were hosted by the Várfok Gallery, Memoart Gallery, Museum Kiscell, MODEM- Museum of Modern Art Debrecen, and OCTOGONart Gallery. These venues exhibited the works of István Nádler, Loránt Méhes (Zuzu),

Csaba Nemes, Imre Bukta, and Sándor Pinczehelyi. All of the artists presented their works personally with the exception of István Nádler, in which case Róna Kopeckzy, Ludwig Museum curator, and Viktória Villányi, gallery assistant and art historian, discussed his paintings and conceptual processes.

I attribute the success of the Living Classics Series to the fact that it benefited all parties involved. The docent program offered the unique opportunity to learn more about artwork from the artists themselves while simultaneously increasing its visibility to other galleries and museums. On the other hand, the galleries and museums welcomed the large audiences of art enthusiasts, which averaged more than twenty visitors per event. And the artists appreciated the chance to speak with Ludwig Museum Friends members as well as docent volunteers who share their artwork with the public.

In addition to connecting these four components of the art world, I structured the Living Classics Series according to my previous research in order to maximize the benefit to the docent program. In terms of recruitment, I invited docents who were not yet comfortable giving tours to help with simultaneous translation and photographing of the events. The series also sought to build the community of volunteers. This can be best observed in the day trip to the MODEM in Debrecen to meet Imre Bukta and view his retrospective exhibition. The twelve-hour trip featured lunch at a local

restaurant and offered ample time for volunteers to forge stronger friendships and connections with one another. The continuing educational opportunity to have access to contemporary artists and engage in discussions with them is one of a kind. These insights gained can be directly translated into more exciting and in depth presentations of the artists' works in the museum. Finally, self-management was initiated by me as a volunteer. I intend to pass this program on to other docent volunteers when my stay in Budapest is completed.

3.3 Challenges

Upon arrival in Budapest, I quickly understood why the Central European volunteer programs represented at the WFFM Conference requested help. They face many challenges that are unique to this region. The first major challenge to starting a docent program in Hungary is the current economic situation. When potential volunteers must choose between unpaid volunteer work and a paid position, many are forced to forego the volunteer opportunity to work a full time job. This accounts for attrition of the docent program. Volunteers commonly join the program when they are looking for a job or are in between jobs, and when a full-time position becomes available, they are forced to quit the program. This economic situation also explains the high number of student docents. Students are more likely to have available time to commit to the program without facing some of the financial pressures that arise after their studies are completed.

Another challenge regarding finances is the funding of the docent program. The program was initially established to be self-supporting. Despite attempts to raise money from fees for attending the public lectures and docent membership, the program is nowhere near this goal.

Another challenge to starting a volunteer program is the lack of historical precedence of a volunteerism sector. In other western countries such as the United States and Great Britain, volunteerism has a long history and is manifested in almost all areas of society such as medicine, education, and the arts. Alexis de Tocqueville observed this propensity of Americans to help one another in his influential work, *Democracy in America* over 160 years ago. He stated, "when an American asks for the co-operation of his fellow-citizens it is seldom refused, and I have often seen it afforded spontaneously and with great good will" (185). There is also a marked difference in the concept of volunteerism in democratic and socialist societies, as noted by Shelley in 1995.

In democratic societies, volunteerism is a desired goal. It is an individual giving directly and willingly to the community. In socialist states, individuals were forced to volunteer. There was a suspicion of actions that were not within state control and regulation (Shelley 200).

This assertion in no way concludes that Hungarians have not helped their fellow citizens in the past, or that volunteerism did not exist. The roots of Hungary's volunteerism tradition may not be as deep as some older democracies. However,

Hungary is quickly developing a volunteerism sector that will continue to grow with the relatively newly formed democracy.

A universal challenge which also faces the LUMÚ Docent Program is increasing recruitment and publicity. As in the infancy of almost any new volunteer organization, recruiting new members and publicizing the program remains a difficulty. The location of the Palace of the Arts increases this challenge. Unlike the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest which enjoys the central location of Hero's Square, the Palace of Arts' southern location off the beaten tourist path has translated into low museum attendance. A related problem is to create an audience for the docents' weekly tour. There is the fear that without a constant audience, the rewarding experience of helping others appreciate the museum's collection will disappear, and with it the docents.

3.4 Possible Solutions

Confronting the multiple challenges facing a docent program in its infancy offers the possibility of creative solutions. The following possible solutions may work both in the LUMÚ Docent Program and in other newly formed volunteer organizations facing similar difficulties.

In a society where financial pressure prohibits many willing participants from contributing to the volunteer effort, it is imperative to emphasize the potential career benefits of completing the docent program. The European Volunteer

Center recently held a conference to discuss volunteering as a route to employment, where a report from neighboring Croatia recommended that this approach “could ‘sell’ volunteering better and [...] can lead to the recognition that skills and competences are learned” (Volunteering CEV 51). In the docent program, active participants gain many professional skills that may positively influence their jobs. For example, docents sharpen their English skills by constantly interacting with native speakers and completing written and oral tasks in English. Docent training also features public speaking workshops as well as the experience of giving tours to the public. In addition to both English and public speaking skills, which can be applied to many professions, docents also acquire an introduction to the museum which can translate into future career opportunities in this sector. At the Museum of Fine Arts, docent volunteers went on to hold paid management positions at the museum such as docent program manager and paid tour guide. Docent programs should publicize their training components that provide many valuable skills necessary in the workplace. Therefore, time committed to volunteering serves the many purposes of increasing one’s skill set, learning about contemporary art, and sharing the joy of art with the public.

In addition to publicizing the docent program’s professional benefits, opening lines of communication between volunteers and management plays an important role in both alleviating financial tensions and receiving

constructive criticism. During the fall semester, I completed the docent training course. Although I had already completed docent training in the United States and have experience giving tours, I wanted to see the program from the volunteers’ perspective while forming a strong relationship with the new class. This proved very effective as Linda often asked me the sentiments of the group so as to better evaluate the program’s success. Docents also came to me to express their concerns. For example, when the price of the Living Classics trip to Debrecen was too expensive for the student volunteers, they voiced their inability to pay the full cost, and a new student rate was offered.

The docent program has tried various initiatives in an attempt to bring the program to a level of financial self-sufficiency. One plan includes the courting of corporate sponsors to contribute funds to the program in return for sponsorship publicity. The Friends organization has been successful in this regard, and in 2007 received 19 million HUF in corporate sponsorship. However, almost all of this money was immediately donated to the museum to support programs earmarked by the contributions. The docent program did receive in-kind sponsorship from Önkéntes Központ Alapítvány – ÖKA (National Volunteer Centre), the International Women’s Club Association, Move One/ Fine Art Shipping, and Hudson Global Resources.

Another possible solution to raise funds is to increase the attendance of the public

lectures. These weekly lectures given by art historians, curators, or gallery owners cost 1500 HUF for the public who are not members of the Friends organization or docent program. Unfortunately, the attendance has been insufficient to cover the cost of paying the lecturers. Hopefully the popularity of these lectures will increase through print and digital advertising as well as word of mouth recommendations.

The docent program hopes to capitalize on a special exhibition in September 2008, to increase program visibility and recruitment. The Ludwig Museum will present a major Keith Haring exhibition, the first of its size in Hungary. One plan to increase visitor turnout includes shuttle boats which double as museum stores to carry visitors from the Chain Bridge to the museum. One of my docent program responsibilities is to prepare a team of docents to give special tours of this exhibition. I have already begun this process by giving a lecture about Haring’s life, and will organize special training sessions to teach docents how to tour the upcoming exhibition.

A final possible answer for increasing docent program recruitment is to establish bi-lateral relationships with institutes of higher learning. There are already plans to welcome interns from Yale University in the summer of 2008. The docent program should look at domestic relationships with universities in Budapest. Possible partnerships may include school credit for completion of

the docent program. This service learning model has been successful at Arizona State University and many other schools in the United States, and it would be interesting to see how this system would work in Hungary.

4.1 Art Education and Influences

When not working at the Ludwig Museum, I continue to develop my personal painting practice which I have been dedicated to for the past decade. Looking back at my time in Hungary, I can cite three main educational influences that served as a catalyst for my new works. These were the Tihany International Postgraduate Program, the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, and the Venice Biennale.

In September of 2007, I attended the Tihany International Postgraduate Program (TIPP), a contemporary art course co-sponsored by Goldsmiths College and the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. As one of only sixteen international artists chosen to attend, I explored the creative diversity of contemporary art while interacting with practicing artists from around the world. The two week course was divided into two daily sessions. In the mornings, the program participants shared their work and engaged in a group critique. In the afternoons, visiting artists presented their art practice and tutorials were held with the instructors. Two elements of the program greatly influenced my work. First, the one-on-one tutorials with

accomplished Hungarian artists, such as Janos Sugar and Beata Veszely, gave me new ideas about possible directions I could explore. Secondly, I benefited from the large contingent of graduate students from the Royal Academy. By witnessing their advanced knowledge of art theory and contemporary art, I quickly realized I had a lot to learn in these areas. Upon returning to Budapest, I created a small library on art theory and art history to begin increasing my knowledge of the broad subject.

Another primary artistic influence in Hungary has been my experience at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem). I have been fortunate to experience three systems of art education at the university level in the United States, Germany, and Hungary. Although I was unable to take theoretical courses because they were taught exclusively in Hungarian, I completed studio work in the class of András Hálasz. After reviewing my portfolio during our first meeting, András told me that I already knew how to paint, and that he wouldn't get in my way with any assignments. After the intensive assignment-based undergraduate program at Arizona State University, I welcomed the change to a more flexible and independent painting practice. I also learned from viewing the works of my Hungarian peers.

My third major artistic influence was a trip to the Queen of the Adriatic to attend the Venice Biennale. Together with fellow Fulbright grantee Craig Webster, we spent three full days scouring the exhibition spaces and trying to digest the

expansive amount of work. Directed by American curator Robert Storr, the 52nd International Art Exhibition reaffirmed the fact that painting is far from dead and revealed the profound influence of military conflict on international arts. Seeing the works of some of my favorite artists such as Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke as well as newer emerging artists inspired me to return home and begin a new body of paintings.

4.2 Exhibitions

As a foreigner with limited Hungarian language ability, there have been many instances when I wanted to share something about myself with my fellow Budapestians but have simply not found the words to do so. Exhibiting my artwork has in some small way helped close this communication gap. My paintings are closely linked to my identity, and the only way to communicate this part of myself is by showing my work to the world. Exhibitions are important to any artist, however, since my first international exhibition as a high school exchange student in Germany, I have felt that exhibiting within a different culture carries additional importance and opportunity for intercultural interaction.

In 2008, I realized my goal of exhibiting in Hungary, and my first show was held in the Kert Galéria at the Artists Colony in Szolnok. I exhibited with two other artists, Julia Schwarzwaldner from Germany and Janos Jakucs from Hungary. Although the

participating artists came from around the world, we were united by our educations. We have all studied at the State Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Stuttgart as well as the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. The exhibition also produced another new experience in my artistic career. Before the gallery opening, I was interviewed by Szolnok TV, and was broadcast regionally.

In April 2008, I held my second Hungarian exhibition in the Art Factory Gallery. This show was much larger than Szolnok both in terms of the number of paintings presented and the amount of preparatory work completed. I was fortunate to have the help of my friend and fellow artist Benjamin Thaler, who collaborated in this dual exhibition. Together we designed the invitation cards, distributed the invitations across Budapest, prepared and translated artist statements, and installed the paintings.

The Art Factory Gallery vernissage was one of my most rewarding and memorable experiences as a Fulbright Scholar. Looking out at the crowd of over 60 people who attended, it was hard to imagine that only eight months before I would have not known a single one of them. Surrounded by supporters from the Ludwig Museum, the Fulbright Commission, the U.S. Embassy, the University of Fine Arts, as well as many others reaffirmed the friendships built during my time here. Of course, there was a strong contingent of fellow Fulbright Scholars who helped with everything

from carrying wine glasses to preparing gourmet stuffed mushrooms for the guests. The event was a great success and a fitting way to conclude my Fulbright experience.

5. Conclusion

My experience working with the Ludwig Museum Docent Program has enabled me to put many aspects of my previous volunteer research into practical use. With the implementation of the Living Classics Series, I aimed to strengthen volunteer recruitment, retention, development, and management. This goal was achieved by fostering the sense of community between the volunteers, providing unique continuing education opportunities, and promoting self-management. Through observation of docent program activities, I was able to identify major challenges it currently faces. These included financial pressures, both on the volunteers and the organization, as well as issues of advertisement, recruitment, and tour attendance. Possible solutions were proposed, such as emphasizing the career benefits of docent training. It is my hope that such suggestions would be beneficial to other volunteer programs facing similar challenges.

My work at the Ludwig Museum falls into my larger philosophy of the arts. I cannot see myself as an isolated painter, tucked away in the studio, laboring on canvases; that life never appealed to me. I love to make art, but I also enjoy using art to communicate across cultures and languages, and I share the art of others with the public by helping build the museum volunteerism programs necessary to increase the scope of museum activities throughout the world. I was able to balance these passions by creating and exhibiting new paintings in Szolnok and Budapest in addition to my work at the Ludwig Museum.

During my stay in Budapest, I have realized that the art community in Hungary is relatively small. Therefore, creating connections with other major institutions within this community is both attainable and beneficial to a museum volunteer program and an American artist as well.

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An Investigation into the Recent Relationship Between the Theatre Cultures of Hungary and the United States

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In this critical analysis I discuss the rich, recent history of contact and collaboration between the theatrical communities of the United States and Hungary. I evaluate a variety of specific examples of three general working models used to facilitate these collaborations, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each. These working models include: institution to institution, institution to artist, and artist to artist interactions with the Fulbright Program serving as a hybrid model. During my travels to Budapest, Hungary between 2005 and 2007 and my time living in Budapest as a Fulbright grantee for the 2007-08 grant period, I conducted personal interviews, immersed myself in Hungarian theatre culture by developing personal relationships with Hungarian theatre professionals, attended countless numbers of Hungarian theatre and dance performances and read numerous publications on the past and present highlights of Hungarian theatre in order to gain insight into each of these working models. This paper draws on these experiences to shed light on the nature of recent contact and collaboration between Hungarian and US theatre artists, questioning how best to build on these relationships in order to increase cultural understanding between these two countries.