

Interview with Marcell Esterházy

*Edit Molnár: Why butterflies, of all things? Isn't this image, this proposition, mawkish? It is poetic, but is it not somewhat naïve to try and smuggle a situation of daydreaming on the bosom of nature into the cold exhibition room?*

Marcell Esterházy: With butterflies, you can fairly accurately model certain human qualities. These insects, like many other animals, use the moon to orient themselves. By the simple act of turning on a light, we upset their system, and their life takes a sudden turn. When you enter that partitioned-off space within the exhibition space, you enter a very relaxing, and what you call natural, state, but sooner or later you realize that these butterflies, lost in orbit around the lamp, are in fact dying.

*E.M.: Did you want to offer a space for meditation?*

M.E.: It is, to a certain extent, a space for meditation, and it certainly requires the kind of concentration at the beginning, as you are inside an exhibition space, where a number of other things also demand your attention. So when you enter the dark space, you need some time to adapt to the quiet tempo, which is necessary if you want to continue the contemplation when you go back into the brightly lit space.

This is a “resting place” of a kind within the exhibition, where I hope visitors get more than a 10-minute nap.

*E.M.: What sort of a recipient appears in your mind when you think about the finished installation? One who is brave in their use of the space, and is ready even to nod off? How do your other works relate to the classic exhibition space?*

M.E.: For some time now, I have been expecting the viewer to be active. For the past six months I have been working on an installation (*m.d.m. v 2.5*), in which visitors are encouraged to rearrange concrete models of quarters of a city. These works always have a playful, somewhat humorous aspect, which may make them more digestible. So none of your “Please don't touch” signs here.

They easily adopt to new spaces – whether a traditional exhibition hall, public or private space –, where, if their meaning doesn't change completely, they certainly acquire new perspectives.

In some cases, when the viewer refuses to take the opportunity I offer, the work remains unfinished, as in the case of the *Gossip Machine*. The *Gossip Machine* is also special because it is a “medium,” both in the concrete and the figurative

sense. It can establish a relationship between two persons who may not even know each other, not to mention gossip itself, which is an effective and flexible strategy for sharing information.

(“Like gossip itself, Esterházy’s *Gossip Machine* presupposes at least two conversing parties, two accomplices, and intimacy. What looks like a mere sculpture when out of use becomes responsible for creating the intimate atmosphere necessary for gossiping, and does that in a public space, the café of Trafó; when functioning, it uses the same air to transmit sound waves and exchange information that the unsuspecting others are breathing in... You understand the work, gather information, not with your eyes, but with your ears. If the eyes are the means of learning the truth – as it is in the oculocentric Western tradition –, then gossip is the medium of hiding the truth, of confabulating. What could a *Gossip Machine* be other than a giant ear that requires the conversers to stand back to back, to avoid eye contact? What gossip is about is not truth, the eyes and what comes into sight, but secret, the ear, whispering behind each other’s back.” – Ágnes Berecz)

M. E.: To a certain extent, *Butterfly Effect* functions similarly, in that it relies on the attitude of the visitor. Thanks to its nature, however, this installation offers contact not with others, but with oneself; it encourages introspection.

The space itself in which this state (may) come about is very simple: I use insulation and very dim lighting to filter out as much interference as possible, so you can lie down comfortably and concentrate on only what is inside. The bed itself is neither too small, nor too large, as I didn’t want to create a social space, but wanted to make it as comfortable as possible.

*E. M.: In the light of this all, can we call this a service?*

M. E.: You can consider it a service to a degree, but not in the sense it appeared in contemporary art from the nineties on, or as it was represented in Múcsarnok’s 2001 exhibition, *Service*. What Gábor Kerekes, Krisztián Kristóf, Csaba Szentesi and I created for *Service*, the *Attendometer*, was monitoring what viewers looked at, and how much time they devoted to a work of art. If not entirely accurate, the popularity figures, which we made public on displays, did offer a service by informing visitors on which works were especially worth seeing, and providing the artists with a sort of feedback.

(“The exhibition space already had motion detectors, as part of the security system. The creators of the *Attendometer* used these sensors to monitor and record the visitors’ movement, with the help of a computer. They collected data, in other words, on a certain aspect of the viewers’ behaviour, i.e. how much time they spend before a given work. They converted the seconds, with what must have been a simple formula, into scores, which were then scrolled continuously on an electronic message board like at a stock exchange. The running red figures indicated the current worth of each artist.” – Anikó Illés)

*E.M.: The organizers of exhibitions dealing with art as a service have often found you, and you always made the possible positions of the recipient your subject...*

M. E.: *KVÍZIÓ* (Trafó, 2002.), for instance, indeed worked as a service, because the invited artists started to work with a knowledge of answers given to a questionnaire on contemporary art. It was specifically for this exhibition that I made *Artist to Serve, Audience to Return*, which focused on the different role of the viewer you mentioned.

(“Esterházy went to play squash with one of the respondents, documented the match, and then exhibited it. Asking the question and initiating dialogue in this particular manner was of course a provocative and ironic approach to the autonomy of art and the problem of art as service. The situation generating the dialogue was meant to produce another situation. The work in this case is probably not the documentation but the match itself, the creation of a particular situation. The viewer’s role shifts from that of the passive visitor to that of an interlocutor, partner, playmate.” – Edit Molnár)

M. E.: In the case of the *Butterfly Effect*, the installation itself is more of a prop, an appliance to help appreciate the video projected onto the ceiling. Then again, if the outcome is ideal, that is to say, you spend enough time in there to assume a different state of perception, and you go on to see the rest of the exhibition in a different mood, thanks to the video, then it might be considered a service of sorts.