

Home → Online Weekly → "Put it down, mama, put it down, put your sorrow down" A few aspects of OFF-Biennale, Budapest, 2025.



The opening performance of the 5th edition of [OFF-Biennale →](#), Budapest, by Dorottya Szonja Koltay, with the recurring lines, „Put it down, mama, put it down, put your sorrow down”, was both liberating and concerning. In its joyful, free spirit, in its trans-generational character, the performance was a symbolic unloading, releasing burdens in a makeshift construction site, a “grief cemetery”. But cemeteries are not easy places. Despite the playfully presented rhymes of a violent reality, can we really unload our burdens?

[Share](#) [Twitter](#) [Instagram](#) [Facebook](#)

Posted on:
17/06/2025

Categories:
Articles, Events, Exhibitions

Tags:
2025, Alice Maher, Anita Horváth, art event, Border Emergency Collective, Budapest, Dorottya Szonja Koltay, Gideon Horváth, Karolina Breguła, OFF-Biennale, Rachel Fallon, Robert Gabris



⇒
Kincsó Bede – The Art of Pista Grandchildren, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and OFF-Biennale

“Wall” with its multiple implications is a central, loaded metaphor of the 5th edition of OFF- Biennale, closely connected to the notion of security or how the understanding of security is manipulated by authoritarian political regimes. In 1989, when the [Berlin] Wall came down, isolation ended, while now new walls are being erected not to protect us but to separate and exclude us again. As previously happened in 2019 when an earlier curatorial concept of OFF-Biennale, “Inhale”, taken from Hungarian poet Attila József, took a new connotation and a new meaning with Covid, now the central curatorial concept, “Security”, is sadly enriched by actual, ongoing wars and new threats.

This major contemporary art event is itself in opposition. It deals with issues that are considered alien or condemned as threatening by official politics.

In 2025, OFF-Biennial is radically political. It's enough to look at the gallery map containing the exhibition and event locations to see that these venues are in districts where the local mayor is in opposition, or belongs to the Budapest municipality led by the opposition, like the refurbished Theatre Merlin. Other alternative venues, spaces like the Bakáts Bunker, a war shelter turned into an underground cultural space, or a tiny Pharmacy Museum in district 8, make us locals rediscover our own town.



Rachel Fallon and Alice Maher, *The Map, these walls are not defend us*, 2025, photocredit: David Biró, copyright: OFF-Biennale Budapest Archive

This major contemporary art event is itself in opposition. It deals with issues that are considered alien or condemned as threatening by official politics. These aspects are precisely those that Hungarian official politics push into the background, silence, or oppose, declaring them dangerous to society. Such issues are connected to minorities, foreigners, marginalised people, LGBTQ+, Roma, women, sex workers, or to issues like border zones, environment, war. Security and fear go hand in hand.

Although the curatorial team prefers to consider the series of exhibitions and events as horizontal and thus non-hierarchical, the exhibition in Theatre Merlin functions as a *de facto* central venue. The curatorial cooperation created an intellectual context where artworks connect and strengthen one another, while older works gain new meanings among their new neighbours. The inclusion of older works also demonstrates that not everything should always be begun from scratch.

While there is no escape from the severe reality of wars or authoritarianism, there is a poetic thread running across the exhibitions of OFF-Biennale, which is especially present in the works of artists who themselves belong to systemically discriminated groups. The title of the biennial itself, *Poems of Unrest* is taken from **Robert Gabris** →, a queer, Roma artist. The exhibition in Merlin takes its motto-like title, *These walls are not here to protect us*, from Hungarian poet Rebeka Kupinhár.



Hanna RULLMANN & Faiza AHMAD KHAN, *Habitat 2190*, 2019, still from video, Courtesy of the artists and OFF-Biennale

Robert Gabris, in his installation, invites people to join his imagination, his unclassifiable beings who braid together, creating a new sense of collectivity. Humans open up towards insects and other forms of life, or as the artist suggests, let's exchange organs of the body and breathe together. *The Most Dangerous Person* is another complex research-based work by **Gideon Horváth** →. He interviewed sexually marginalised people living outside of Budapest, in

small communities that are especially threatening for them. Fear, stigma, and survival strategies appear in their experiences, which remain mostly invisible even for their fellow travellers in cities. The interviews are printed in single-copy editions that visitors can read in the exhibition only. In the middle of the installation, there is a circle of porcelain figurines, as if they had come out of the vitrines of village homes and now were united and connected in a circle of dance, as they had presented themselves freely. As Gideon Horváth quotes one of his interviewees, the survival strategies of discriminated people serve to convince themselves that „it is not against me, personally, I still must suffer from it”. Here, the well-known feminist slogan, *the personal is political*, returns.

Feminist strategies are widely used, and women have a strong presence in the OFF-Biennale. Anna Daucikova's, *The Grammar of the Gaze* is a poetic and radical queer exhibition. The Derry Film & Video Collective's film about strip-searching and women's prison conditions in Ireland, or the Mother Ireland concept, is from the 1980s, but the issues they touch on are not only of the past. [Rachel Fallon →](#) and [Alice Maher's →](#) monumental textile sculpture, *The Map*, is a topography of the so-called Magdalene institutions where promiscuous women, unmarried mothers, female "sinners" were placed. Mary Magdalene returns in the work of Hungarian artist [Anita Horváth →](#), who evokes the saint as a stigmatised woman, an analogy to how Roma women are often viewed and treated, but it is also a hope for the possibility of purification. The topics of a collateral exhibition of female artists' works, *Everything will change the day after tomorrow*, about sex workers, domestic violence, and questions of ageing are presented in an apartment in district 8, a neighbourhood where Roma live and where prostitution is rampant. It offers a special kind of exhibition experience thanks to its location and the raw, unpolished presentation of the sensitive materials.



→
Anna Daucikova, *Uprising by touch*, 1976-2020, installation shot, these walls are not defend us, 2025, photo credit: David Biró, copyright: OFF-Biennale Budapest Archive.

Contemporary Hungarian Roma artists also use the feminist strategy of inversion of stigmatising images or designations as a means of resistance, criticism, and self-assertion. The artist group *Gypsy Criminals* ironically use slogans of official media, where words like war, peace, protection are already twisted. Taking these ideas with another twist and applying them in a liberating, ironic way is akin to feminist laughter. Just one example, a title of a painting by the Gypsy Criminals is, "We protect the pro-war defenders from the pro-peace attackers".

Marginalised people are searching for personal security, and fear is a familiar feeling for them. In the exhibition, *Security / Borders* BW-lab (from earlier Biennale Warszawa) approaches security from another point of view. It focuses mostly from above, from a Google Map perspective, in the ways that political systems, and especially authoritarian regimes, handle people stripped of their individuality, as bare lives *en masse*. Here walls are shown as barriers, as uncrossable border control. Filip Wesolowski's *Anatomy of a border* shows satellite images. The structural, systematic violence of people who escape different dangers is not even visible in satellite images. In a sober voice, a

narrator informs us about how human rights are violated. **Border Emergency Collective** → made a shocking video about the crisis at the Polish Belarusian border, a hardly known or publicised death zone in 2022. BW-lab shows the world in a polycrisis.



→
Karolina Bregula, *The Storm*, 2025, photocredit: David Biró, Courtesy of OFF-Biennale

Fear is also connected to environmental crises, ecological crises, and war. **Karolina Bregula's** → installation in Vintage Gallery, *The Storm*, shows six people who are saying the same sentences, who are afraid of the coming storm. In this poetic work, language creates tension. The same feelings, the same sentences uttered by lonely persons, seem to create tensions among neighbours instead of community, as fear separates them and turns them to each other. In the exhibition, *Traces of Life*, the work of Forensic Architecture highlights the connection of war and natural catastrophes, but hope is given by another work, the *Seeds of life*, a seed archive for the future.

OFF-Biennial is an art event, first of all, a show of a female curatorial team, but the point of view is broader as the political environment radicalised them, forcing the curatorial team to be more political than ever before.

It is refreshing and goes against the grain that a kind of trans-generational perspective also appears in the exhibitions. A granddaughter tries to find a way to her late grandfather and wants to connect to him, forgive him, through his ghostly art objects when she herself became an artist (Kincső Bede, *The Art of Pista*). Another artist photographs her father as a fashion model (Dóra Galyas Denerák, *Hello father?*). A daughter and mother perform together a dance piece (Erzsébet Gyarmati and Eszter Salamon, *Monument 0.7: Mothers*). Exhibiting predecessors, like the sculptor Maria Berhidi, acknowledges and creates a discursive continuity.

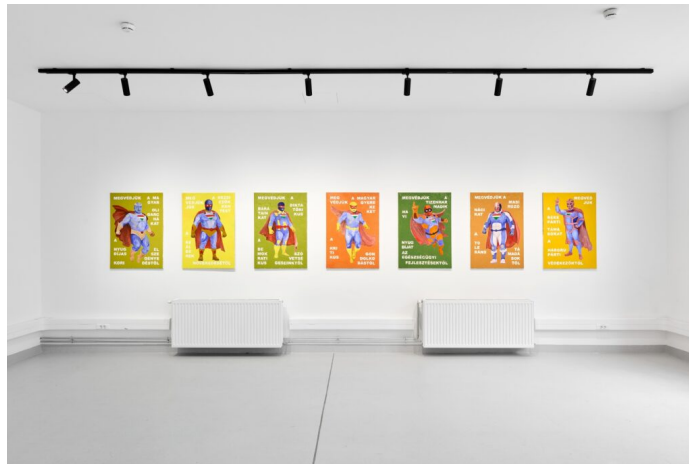


→
Derry Film and Video Collective, installation shot, these walls are not defend us, 2025, photocredit: David Bíró, copyright: OFF-Biennale Budapest Archive

Thematic tours and workshops have been added to the exhibitions, and OFF works together with civil society organisations. Recetas Urbanas, with whom OFF had a successful collaboration in documenta 15, has a special site and series of collaborative exercises with locals; there are visits to the local Chinese market; special experts are invited, Háttér Társaság and feminist organisations among them. OFF-Biennial is an art event, first of all, a show of a female curatorial team, but the point of view is broader as the political environment radicalised them, forcing the curatorial team to be more political than ever before.

OFF-Biennale 2025 took place between May 8 and June 15 in Budapest.

More information about the next edition: <https://offbiennale.hu/en/> →



→
Gypscriminals, these walls are not defend us, 2025, photocredit: David Bíró, copyright: OFF-Biennale Budapest Archive

Written by Hedvig Turai

About the author:

**Hedvig
Turai**

Hedvig Turai is an independent art historian and art writer; she lives in Budapest. She taught at the International Business School Budapest, worked in the Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest–Contemporary Art Museum, as a researcher and curator, taught in the Education Abroad

Program Budapest run by the University of California, was a senior editor in Corvina Publishing House and a museologist in the Hungarian National Gallery. She holds a PhD in art history from Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (2000). Her publications include a monograph on the Hungarian painter Margit Anna (2002), co-edited books, Exposed Memories: Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory (2010, with Zsófia Bán), Art in Hungary 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond (2018, with Edit Sasvári and Sándor Hornyik). Her main interests are art between the two world wars, art and politics, contemporary art, gender studies, Holocaust in contemporary art.

This might interest you

REVIEW



A celebration of visual storytelling. Meet the 4 winners of the Taylor Wessing Photo Portrait Prize 2024.

Nazar Atamaniuk • JAN 08, 2025

REVIEW



Shapeshifters At The Approach Gallery: The Power Of Womanhood

Maria Markiewicz • FEB 09, 2019

INTERVIEW



A Man Who Became a Phenomenon. “The Phenomenal Zdzisław Beksiński” Exhibition in Wrocław.

Kuba Żary • MAY 13, 2025

INTERVIEW



Interview with Diana Marincu — curator and artistic director of the Art Encounters Foundation in Timișoara.

Alex Mirutziu • NOV 18, 2024



Contemporary Lynx is an international and independent publication for art, design, collecting and photography on visual culture. With specially commissioned artwork, bespoke cover and a specific theme, it includes interviews with key figures in the art world and a range of insightful essays that debate current trends in arts.

© 2015-2025 Contemporary Lynx.

All images are copyrighted by the authors. Made by E0 + 8080.

[Online Weekly](#)

[Our Story](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[@Lynx_art](#)

[Team](#)

[News](#)

Stay up to date

[@ContemporaryLynx](#)

[Partners](#)

[Advertise](#)

Curated art & culture insights—free, monthly, and just for you!

[@ContemporaryLynx](#)

Email*

[@ContemporaryLynx](#)

I agree to receive emails with the understanding that I may easily opt-out of these communications at any time after signing up.

[Sign up](#)

[Event Calendar](#)

[Open Calls](#)

By signing up you agree to our [Terms Of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

[Contact](#)

[Foundation](#)