

Katitzi – A Literary Character Rooted in Reality

Gallery8, H-1027 Budapest, Mátyás tér 13.

October 9 – December 5, 2013.

Opening: October 9, 2013. 5pm

Opening speech: Maria Lind (S), curator, director of Stockholm Tensta Konsthall; Angelica Ström (S), teacher for children with special needs. Participants: Erno Kallai violinist and the children choir of Lakatos Menyhért Primary School.

Literary workshop: October 9, 2013, 2pm – 4pm:

‘How can children’s literature and activism get along with each other?’ Literary workshop with invited guests organized by Nordic House Foundation and Gallery8. Participating experts: Lawen Mohtadi writer and author of the first biography on Katarina Taikon, Angelica Ström teacher for children with special needs, Zsófia Domsa lecturer ELTE Faculty of Humanities Scandinavian Studies, László Arató literature teacher ELTE Radnóti Miklós School, Hungarian Teachers Association.

‘What are you calling me? Gipsy! What? What is that?’ This is how Katitzi, the nine-year-old main character of Katarina Taikon’s book, faces her origin in the world of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in pre-war Sweden. And this is how she will continue to search for her place, her home, in the ‘western welfare state’ during her entire life.

Katarina Taikon Swedish writer of Roma origin had raised attention with her first book ‘Zigenerska’ (gypsy woman) in 1963. Later on she continued to shake the Swedish public with her literary and political activism, fighting for Roma’s rights together with her sister, Rosa Taikon. On the pages of her biographical children’s book series ‘Katitzi’ the ‘splendid’ democracy, the Swedish ‘welfare’ society, is depicted as a society infused with discrimination – a particularly surprising and dark read for the Central-Eastern-European reader. Through the narration of an innocent and curious child, the book challenges our notion of Western European ‘developed’ democracies and its myth of ‘equality and well-being’ societies.

Katitzi, along with the internationally well-known figures like Nils Holgersson or Pippi Longstocking, has been one of the most significant characters of the Swedish children's literature. Hundreds of thousands of children and adults have read the book in Sweden. In 1980, for instance, the book was borrowed 432.000 times from the library. The story, not long after its coming out, appeared as a comic book as well as a magazine, the TV series based on 'Katitzi' became popular and came out on dvd. Recently, the Folkteatern in Gothenburg has done a family show based on the Katitzi books and the Nationalteatern in Stockholm has adopted it for the post-modern times with hiphop elements. This latter piece has already reached thousands of primary school children.

The book series 'Katitzi' has not only been a fascinating read for many generations, but was also a significant example of the new type of realistic children's literature emerging in the 1960s. It also provides the reader with an insight to a Swedish society dragged by ethnic and social tensions and to the destiny of Roma living in Sweden.

What reasons can we find for the success and popularity of Taikon's story, especially among non Roma readers? Is it the mixture of fairy tale and novel, together with the ancient motif of wandering that makes us go through this story of searching for home with such deep empathy? Maybe it is the unimaginable adventures of Roma life that maintain the actual attention of the readers? Or is it perhaps the destiny of a gipsy girl growing up amongst racism in a 20th (21st) century Europe that attracts us? And if the latter is the case – then why is it affecting us *only* in the form of literature? Is it a book that will open our eyes to social injustice and racism within society?

Literature is none other than the coalition of humanism and politics, as Thomas Mann's Settembrini declares. Do we have/ Why don't we have a Katarina Taikon? Why don't we have our own Katitzi? What can a child or a children's book tell us about the nature of racism? Would it be important for us to have our own Katitzi? How much can a children's book contribute to the education of tolerance and how can we protect our children from racist writings nowadays?

In our upcoming exhibition 'Katitzi – A literary character rooted in reality' we will search for the answers to these questions. International experts such as Maria Lind (curator), Lawen

Mohtadi (writer) and the daughter of Katarina Taikon, Angelica Ström (teacher) will contribute to our project.

Gallery8's booktalk on October 9th, and the exhibition opening that follows, will present the literary and political work of Katarina Taikon. It will also attempt to reveal the 'success story' of the children's book 'Katitzi' and interpret the 'Katitzi-phenomena' so that we can use it to reflect on Hungarian literacy and political actualities. During the time, and in the space of the exhibition, we will organize museum pedagogy workshops for primary school classes, which are supposed to make Katitzi's story and message reach those that the author intended to: Roma and non Roma children, families and teachers.

In 2001 the first Katitzi book was translated to Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian with the support of the Swedish Embassy and Apáczai Kiadó. In 2003 the Ministry of Education initiated a complex pedagogy program based on the book, sent 3.000 copies to primary schools (among them countryside schools) and provided teachers with a pedagogy (methodology) book for Katitzi. However, the project remained unfinished, unsuccessful and forgotten. Today a very few of the books are accessible.

The subject of the exhibition is Katarina Taikon's (1932-1995) autobiographical figure Katitzi, who is the main character in thirteen books and eight comic albums published between 1969 and 1982. The exhibition presents first editions of the Katitzi books, comic albums, illustrations by Björn Hedlund. It also unfolds the history of the book's reception. The items exhibited – articles, reviews, films, TV programs, photographs and other materials, will help the visitor live through and understand the particular popularity of the character called Katitzi.

The curator of the Hungarian adoption of the exhibition and the related programs:

Veronika Vaspál, literary historian

Consultants: Tímea Junghaus, Viktória Nagy, Anna Szász

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The project adopts the exhibition *Katitzi- A Literary Figure Rooted in Reality*, Tensta Konsthall October 2012 – January 2013.

The concept of the museum pedagogy workshops is based on the professional support of Pressley Ridge Foundation.

The transportation of the exhibition materials is supported by the Swedish Embassy in Budapest.

The exhibition is part of the program series of Gallery8, to be realized between September 2013 and September 2014, supported by the EEA Grants/Norway Grants, the ÖKOTÁRS Foundation and the Autonómia Foundation.