

Hungary

### III. Motifs for Collecting Contemporary Art

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*Hungarian Private Collectors Turn International. A Case Study of Private Engagement in Contemporary Art in East Central Europe.*

So far we have associated a few motifs with various trends in collecting. Historically, under Communism, asserting civic identity as a form of non-violent resistance to brainwashing by the Party was one of the key drives for acquiring progressive modern and contemporary works. This factor appears irrelevant today, yet we can glimpse at it in a new robe. Instead of ideological monotony, today often the overpower of capitalism and its material values rule everyday life, against which a few buyers of art look for a safe, intellectual haven in the realm of art.

Second we mentioned investment, and this aspect has strengthened. New groups of society had come to wealth within a short period of time from the late-1980s, and while these groups have often changed, most of them consider art as a possible investment in their portfolio. Especially in recent years, as the real estate and the stock exchange boom had stopped, many turned to contemporary art for short-term or long-term investment. Quite a few of these buyers prefer direct contact to artists, making bulk purchases at heavy discounts in the studio. Aware of the risks of siding with contemporary art, they diversify their selections, and acquire groups of works that are difficult to bring on common denominator within a harmonious collection, yet guarantee a balanced future. Some of the works will prove a failure, others will earn high profit; the point for the owner is that the holding shall be successful overall. Strictly speaking these acquisitions make up no collections (if the latter is understood as a coherent entity), yet may become one by slimming down. We have to take into account that first-generation collectors have gone through phases of learning.

As a third motif we have referred to the desire for discovery. Just as plein-air painting was a field of old-new insights two decades ago, contemporary art has been a fascinating terrain for visual exploration recently. The oeuvre of dozens of talented artists of the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, unable to make a career due to earlier political control or the lack of an efficient gallery system, came to light. Other buyers strike new paths in collecting sculpture, plastic works and objects, most of which have traditionally been less preferred by local collectors. Video, inter-media and other experimental forms have their own advocates, who like this kind of art as much as the feeling of being among the first to do so in Hungary.

Next to this fever of discovery we find the intent of visual education. Buyers of art tend to begin reading about what they acquire, and set about putting together a library of catalogues and art books. Whilst this may only be natural for a Western audience, let us not forget that public visual education is still very mediocre in Hungary (and elsewhere in our region). Although Communism is gone, the school system has still barely incorporated attention to fine art, let alone its contemporary trends. For many professionals, even well-educated people, going to exhibitions, leafing through catalogues, having modern and contemporary art albums on the shelf at home can not be seen as self-evident, but rather must be learned to take as part of ordinary life. Exploring the terrain of vision, conditioning their eye to values in contemporary art: this is a challenge, a programme for many collectors. They educate themselves, their children, often their colleagues (e.g. by taking works into offices space) and friends, being pleased to pass on this passion.

Part of this visual experience is the decoration of home and workplace. While today's managers grew up often among poor-quality posters, they are now getting used to living with art, and elevating the rank of their office by works hung there. Having contemporary artworks around has come en vogue, it emanates a certain feel for intellectual finesse and up-to-date social trends. Call it status, if you like. Art collecting has become a status symbol, standing for the (alleged) intellectual and financial ammunition of the person or company showing it. While most art critics look down on this, dropping whimsical hints to this "new habit" in their essays, their irony misses a useful consequence of this new fashion. Trends always call for followers, and attention to art spreads very much by way of such examples, models, and the behaviour of reference groups. If we yearn for wider (moral and material) support for contemporary art, then its status function needs encouraging.

The social aspect of art applies to many collectors with regard to the artists, rather than the followers. Lawyers and brokers, media figures and top managers seem to share a strong penchant for getting to know the person whose works they collect and for establishing a contact they often deem "friendly". In my experience the artists share this "friendship" less enthusiastically, yet play the role happily for obvious reasons. At any rate, collecting is a means of communication for large segments of the buyers. They build up a network of artist acquaintances parallel to their private and business relations, and often spend increasing amounts of time in this new niche of their life. Collecting in this role is a medicine for the thirst of new human relations, often (seemingly) less rational than the world of business, and less conventional than the family circle. Without stretching the point, one may say that quite a few actors of the scene collect friends rather than art.

Collecting can be a goal in itself, too. The adrenaline boost of locating the work desired, making the bargain with the artist or with the gallery, and then taking the trophy home, must not be underestimated. Hunting, rivalry, championing over others – all this is part of the psychological record of collectors. Especially in a highly competitive society like the Hungarian, where the harsh laws of a capitalist survival of the fittest rule, engagement in art is seen by many in the same way as their career path. If successful in their

career, why not adopt similar strategies in this hobby? If not sufficiently successful work-wise, why not make up for this in the softer sphere of culture? The fact that many collectors like buying and selling works again and again can be put back partly to these competitive patterns of conduct in the art market. Many collectors watch with envy what the others have.

While these aspects may seem too critical, this list is not to deny that collectors often love the works they possess, and feel that these pieces of art express their innermost self that they are unable to vent openly in family or business. Quite a few buyers are sensitive to the artists' needs, try to help them in dire circumstances, and weigh out options of patronage. In most cases, however, they expect (and get) something in return; truly selfless assistance is extremely rare. But where in the world is it everyday practice? At least in current Hungary, I do not think it is reasonable to expect help without interest in the artist-collector couple. It is perhaps more sober to view these transactions without illusion. Realistically seen, in most cases when exhibitions, catalogues or other services for an artist are sponsored, covered by private individuals or companies, the least we can suppose is that the artist returns the favour with works. Which for the patron actually means buying works.

Finally, while other motifs shall surface in later paragraphs, a surprising one is to finish this section here. Although rarely selfless, collectors have, nonetheless, a complex sense of responsibility, sometimes in a broad, vague sense, for society at large. Many – especially those engaging internationally – feel that by acquiring, cataloguing and publicly showing high-quality contemporary works, they contribute to the intellectual wealth of the nation, of the image of the country abroad. I share this conviction, for I believe that national identity, cultural wealth and international position are all subject to various cultural and other achievements, among them art collecting.

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Csaba Nemes, Stolen  
Facade, 1992, photo,  
courtesy Somlói-Spengler  
collection

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