

Hungary

## V. The Role of the Infrastructure of Contemporary Art

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

Local art fairs play a negligible role. Hungary has failed so far to establish a contemporary art fair with regional relevance. In fact, the Budapest Art Fair (just like similar initiatives in nearby Szentendre) attracts within Hungary only the same professional public that visits the galleries over the year anyhow. The sales made at the fair could just as well take place in the galleries at some other time; the fair exerts no clearly identifiable impact on collecting. International fairs, in contrast, have a rapidly growing effect on the Hungarian scene. Hungarian galleries apply to participate, collectors attempt to shell out the money for international works. This leads to a certain globalisation of the gallery and collecting scene in the country, as the flagships follow more and more the international trends, and these effects trickle down to the smaller, local players.

Among the commercial galleries, established ones (over ten years old) and newcomers equally have their catch. A surprisingly large number of new galleries (launched since 2000) have been quite successful in building up their clientele, and luring away buyers from senior galleries. Non-profit galleries have an increasingly important say in the game. As collectors become experienced, they realise that curators working at these institutions, and artists exhibiting there, often have prophetic power. What appears as a peripheral new phenomenon in the arts scene, perhaps in one of the non-profit “gate-keeper galleries”, may within a year or two have ascended to higher status.

Among the museums, the Ludwig Museum in Budapest takes a central position, yet its co-operation with collectors is brand new and still fairly weak, rather symbolic. Both the previous (founding) and the current director can be judged as mistrustful of private engagement in art, although in the past year or two there have been gestures of familiarising between the museum administration and private collectors. Let us add in defence of the museum that few private collectors reach up to the level of quality represented by the permanent exhibition and the vocation of the Ludwig Museum.

Neither the Hungarian National Gallery nor the Municipal Gallery (the two other important public collections of modern and contemporary art in the capital) can boast closer ties with collectors. To put it bluntly, most collectors do not even know that both of these museums have a permanent exhibition of post-World War II art, and that their collections include some seminal works. In return, most curators and chief administrators working at these (and other) museums in Hungary are prone to similar ignorance. They rarely take the occasions to get to know private collectors and their holdings personally, instead refrain from reading the publications about this scene, and rather observe collecting and the art market from aristocratic distance, with a mixture of looking down on private entrepreneurs in contemporary art, and envying them.

Museums outside Budapest show a similar landscape in this respect, with very few colleagues taking an active stance towards the private sphere. Again, the other side of the coin is that most collectors would be flabbergasted to hear and see how excellent public collections there are in the provinces, from Dunaújváros to Pécs. In a word, the two parties have a long tradition of ignoring each other, although some of this bias has recently been repaired, giving way to helpful co-operation between the two sides, for instance in Miskolc.

Art magazines seldom provide food for thought to private collectors. Some of them obviously seek their favour, there is a general trend of art criticism turning into neutral art writing at a relatively low intellectual level. Some other periodicals keep a clear distance to anything that occurs to be for-profit in art, while a third group of journals aims to strike a middle way, trying to serve many layers of the public, from professional to lay. Whichever strategy, most publications remain unsuccessful in addressing collectors, few of whom follow the professional journals. The reasons for this vary from the often hermetic style of the essayists to the arrogance of those buyers who deem their business acumen and financial resources sufficient for navigating in art, and decline on further reading.

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Csaba Nemes, On The Street, 2003, oil  
on canvas, 110x130 cm, courtesy:  
collection Nelli Hudra and Roland Illés

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