

Hungary

## IV. The Structural Set-Up of Collections

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

As we have seen, quite a few collectors have arrived at contemporary art via modern art; accordingly, numerable holdings of today's art have neighbouring positions from various phases of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in one and the same collection. In the Western world normally unthinkable due to excessive prices, several Hungarian collectors have been able over the past two decades to amass Hungarian works spanning the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The preponderance of classical modernist pieces in these collections tends to make the contemporary choices first conservative. But in the longer run, seeing modern and contemporary art together, under the same roof, lends an impetus to these collectors to dare experiments. They see that what was categorised "avant-garde" once, has solidified by now, and thus today's new waves are likely to share the same fate of canonisation.

In terms of media, painting predominates. Other traditional forms (graphics, sculpture) are much less popular, but their position is improving. Photography, new media, installation, object art, other ephemeral, site-specific, and mixed media works are still lagging behind, but likewise spreading. In recent years, the elite layer of collectors has definitely realised the importance of diversifying the media they collect. This can be explained 1) by the prevalence of painting, against which more and more artists, galleries and collectors rebel, 2) by growing international exposure, which implies different priorities, and 3) by a broadening exchange of information between museums and private collectors in Hungary. Traditionally, the relationship of art historians and private buyers being rather prejudiced, the canon followed by many collectors was much more conservative than that suggested by museums. Now that younger curators and collectors are more willing to get to know each other and openly discuss relevant issues, the model role of museums becomes more important. Many collectors have begun to realise that so far a rather narrow aesthetic line has delimited their activity.

This applies to the message of the works acquired, too. Whilst somewhat old-fashioned, this category is helpful for the sake of the current, simplified overlook, as it highlights the growing aptitude of collectors in Hungary to appreciate the various social, ecological, political and other concerns of contemporary art. Decorative compositions increasingly give way to complex expressions of dilemmas loaded with tension, contradiction and social involvement. The influence of galleries on collectors is also on the rise. In the first phase following the fall of the Wall, collectors were – for reasons lying at hand – very individualistic, often secretive in their approach, as well as financially stronger and faster than the young galleries. Most collectors were unwilling to pay a "gallery price", and we can still find artists and buyers negotiating in a double prices system (where atelier prices grossly undercut the gallery price level), yet this is now receding.

Quite a few galleries have gained strong positions, most of the influential artists have by now a closer or more distant, yet regular and conscious relationship to galleries, and many of the collectors have come to understand the added value offered by galleries. Year by year an increasing ratio of sales in the art market takes place in (or via) the galleries. Again, the current slump has gravely overwritten the situation in this respect, yet it is unlikely that the role of galleries would weaken in the long run.

As a result, some collections tell immediately, at first look the decisive impact of the gallery standing behind them, while in other cases the collector retains the right of selection stronger, yet accepts the dictate of the market: purchases have to be carried out increasingly by way of a gallery. This motivates more and more artists to ally with galleries, which, in turn, forces a growing circle of collectors to frequent the galleries and art dealers. The system of collecting becomes more and more institutional in Hungary; the once rather spontaneous acquisition of works tends to mirror the structural set-up of the art market.

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

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Luca Göbolyös,  
pioneer-cravat, 2006,  
lenticular photo, 100x100 cm,  
courtesy: collection György  
Pálfi

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