

Hungary

## VI. The Way Private Collectors Communicate

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

Private collecting enjoys broad publicity in Hungary. The willingness of collectors to show their works, and talk about their passion, is considerable, and in my experience bigger than elsewhere in the Western world. Although many increasingly fear the “three evils” of publicity – the tax office, burglary and public envy – there is still regular coverage of art collecting by a few specialised art writers, just as exhibitions of private collections expand. Particularly Budapest, with its surprisingly dense network of exhibition spaces (amounting to at least one hundred locations, from well-run commercial galleries to off-spaces for non-adjusted art) offers insights into private holdings literally at any time of the year. Several galleries (e.g. the non-profit Vízivárosi Galéria and the for-profit Godot Galéria) have introduced series showing a private collection once or twice a year.

Collectors are aware of the rise in the value of their works due to an exhibition like this, and they also learn a lot from seeing their choices in the neutral space of a gallery. Their position vis-a-vis the galleries and the artists likewise improves with these exhibitions, as they become an agent of publicity. At the same time, with a few exceptions (such as the Kassák Museum), larger public institutions rarely show private collections. The Hungarian National Gallery has broken the ice recently with a very successful show of the Irokéz Collection, but this is perhaps rather just an exception to the rule. For the Ludwig Museum, showing a private collection is entirely out of question. True, the international scope of this museum’s own collection has no peer among the private holdings in the country (with the sole exception of the Somlói–Spengler Collection, which attempts to catch up with international trends of collecting). In 2008, the Kunsthalle took a forward-looking initiative, by staging a grand, albeit very short, exhibition where each of its vast halls presented a private collection (altogether eleven), most of them selected along the criteria of mixing national and international works, as well as favouring new, experimental ways of expression.

A few collectors have set about establishing their own museums. In Tapolca, Ákos Vörösváry has been in charge of intriguing exhibitions based on his vast collection for nearly two decades now. In Veszprém, László Vass allied with the municipality, and a long-term deposit launched their smooth collaboration, with the presentation of the works changing regularly. In Debrecen, the new exhibition centre Modem, run by the municipality, has a contract with Péter Antal to show chapters of his collection regularly. In Tőreki and Várgesztes, a private artist colony each provides the framework for creatively collaborating with artists, and building up a collection.

Nearly a decade ago, MEO in Budapest was one of the most promising developments: an old factory had been spectacularly revamped, talented curators staged progressive exhibitions, and a forming private collection seemed to be standing behind, yet business, legal and ethical problems led to the failure of the project. Another private foundation in downtown Budapest, Kogart is known for its visitor-friendly exhibitions and its influence on the financial elite, yet the contemporary edge of their artistic programme and of their collection is very compromised. Other ailing private initiatives (e.g. APA and VAM) testify to similar dilemmas; no proper private museum has so far solidified that would meet all criteria of 1) an advanced collection, 2) a creative solution of architecture and interior design, and 3) a sustainable program of progressive exhibitions. Nonetheless, among the over one hundred private collections of contemporary art in Hungary there are several ones that keep seeking options for a permanent and public placement.

Collectors increasingly get to know each other. Recently a communication agency has set up a platform for their regular meetings, as well as a webs-site for interaction, while a few collectors go further and jointly fund art prizes, visits abroad and, vice versa, invitations of international art experts to Hungary. Most of this activity concentrates on Budapest, very few initiatives outside the capital are in a position to keep pace. Looking at the social strata involved, the record is happier: thanks to the otherwise so controversial media hype around collecting, private engagement with contemporary art has begun to disseminate healthily to ever broader groups, and is no longer the pastime of the elite.

Corporate collecting partakes in that, too. Although nowhere close to proper business involvement in contemporary art as we know it globally, also companies in Hungary have commenced to sponsor exhibitions, build up a collection, decorate their offices with decent works, fund art prizes, and seek image-polishing through other forms of co-operating with art institutions. Among the company collections, that of Raiffeisen Bank is the most solid, while among the company-funded prizes Strabag Award dominated the scene for over a decade, with the brand new Aviva Prize now poised for taking it over. In most corporate projects, however, the domination of the marketing aims can not be overlooked. Art has no value on its own for most companies standing behind these promotions, with these campaigns being rather manipulative in their message. Lest I appear biased against these public relations tools, let me quickly add that they do contribute to a spread of contemporary art to layers of the public that museums have difficulty to address.

To add one more aspect of the communicative effects of collecting, a few women collectors have recently appeared on the scene, attracting wider attention. It would be, however, an over-statement that some allegedly female taste characterises their choices. It appears rather that women have a say in collectors’ choices more widely, yet this does not become visible in a male-ruled society.

Perhaps the only domain with a distinct female touch is the collecting of design items, such as contemporary jewellery. At the same time, the related fields of curating and art management seem to be increasingly invaded by women; more and more projects, exhibitions and campaigns are thought out by women, and students in arts management courses show an overwhelming female majority.

## VII. The Impact of Diverse Groups of Collectors on the Art Scene

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Csaba Nemes, Prodigal Son,  
1998, c-print, 143x100 cm,  
courtesy: Somló-Spengler  
collection

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