

Hungary

VIII. International Outlook and Selected Further Reading

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

You may wonder why I have not given more names of artists and collectors. Sadly, as Hungarian art has restricted international outreach yet, even the big fish in our small pond would mean little to foreign readers. Those Hungarian artists who do have some recognition abroad (typically neo-conceptual mid-career figures, such as Róza El-Hassan, Attila Csörgő, or the Kis Varsó duo) are under-represented in Hungarian collections. In contrast, the most sought-after local artists (e.g. Imre Bukta, László Felugossy) have limited reference abroad.

Among the collectors, only those have a chance of making a name abroad who mix Hungarian positions with international art. Some of these people live abroad (e.g. Gábor Hunya in Vienna, András Szöllősi-Nagy in Paris), while recently a few businessmen based in Hungary have also begun buying internationally (e.g. László Gerő, Ferenc Karvalits, Béla Horváth). The taste of this narrow elite is similar to the choices of new collectors elsewhere in Eastern Europe: they try to lift their respective local artists onto a higher echelon of international recognition by buying blue-chip foreign artists from respected galleries.

Collecting regionally is very rare both in Hungary and elsewhere in the former Eastern bloc. Although positions would mutually strengthen each other (as the permanent exhibitions of several East European museums testify), private collectors put no trust in piecing together regional sequences, as they are afraid the East European names would fail to attract proper international attention. Collecting contemporary is, in a word, a strategy for the elite of these countries to catch up with the global powers in art. The task of the collections is to prove to the wide world that the artists and collectors of each nation here in East Europe belong to the same club of universal values. It is a desired therapy of inferiority complexes, pursued always nationally, without noting that every other nation state in the region struggles the same way.

What is different in Hungary if compared to the contemporary scenes in other countries of our region, is the massive presence of individual collectors and institutional sponsors in the art game. To my knowledge there is no other country in the region with such a dynamic sphere of collecting. This corresponds to the general observation that Budapest offers a highly competitive gallery landscape in the non-profit and the for-profit sectors alike.

The art market and contemporary collecting in Hungary are, in my hypothesis, in a leading position in East Europe, yet this outburst of financial investment and civic energy is mostly restricted within the borders of the country. It remains to be seen whether today's few international-oriented swallows will eventually make a summer, and integrate this scene in the global network. I, for one, reckon that doing this by regional co-operation in East Europe would be much easier. If the art market and collecting pick up in other countries, too, and if galleries, museums, collectors in these countries mutually promote each other, then success internationally would lie much closer. Perhaps this current research will contribute to that.

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