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## The Hungarian Contemporary Art Puzzle



By Ginanne Brownell

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BUDAPEST — It is a question that Attila Pocze has grown accustomed to being asked.

“Why are our young artists not well known on the international scene? Why are we not there?” said Mr. Pocze, the founder and director of Vintage Galeria in Budapest.

Why contemporary art in Hungary does not have as strong an international reputation as neighbors like Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia is something of a mystery — even to the Budapest artists, curators, art historians and gallery owners who are involved in the scene. But they also say that things are changing, that local contemporary art is becoming more visible both on the international scene and in Budapest, where galleries are working together to raise awareness.

Hungarian contemporary art has a strong historical base, especially in photography. Robert Capa, André Kertész, Martin Munkacsi, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyula Halasz — better known as Brassai — were all Hungarian. They are the focus of an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London until October, “Eyewitness: Hungarian Photography in the 20th Century.”



An opening for the work of Attila Szucs at the Erika Deak Gallery. Erika Deak Gallery

In Budapest, Moholy-Nagy’s art and photographs can be seen in the retrospective “The Art of Light” at the Ludwig Museum until



These men had emigrated and built their careers in the West. Those who stayed home during the Communist era had a harder time.

“Hungarian culture tends to be more focused on music and literature, and we didn’t really respect the visual arts as a real intellectual cultural achievement,” said Barnabas Bencsik, the director of the Ludwig Museum, established in 1989 to promote modern and contemporary Hungarian and international art.

Mr. Bencsik said that during the Cold War, cultural interaction with the West in the visual arts was rare, aside from that connected to the Mucsarnok — also known as the Kunsthalle, established in 1877. But other institutions have sprung up to support the arts in Hungary, like the Studio of Young Artists Association and the Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange. The Hungarian Contemporary Art Galleries Association has more than 20 members.

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A recent installation by Emese Benczur: “Find Your Place.” Ani Molnar Gallery

“There are quite a few things here that need to be changed, that is obvious,” said Annamaria Molnar, the association’s president and the director of Ani Molnar Gallery. “One of the biggest values is that we talk to each other. Even though we are competitors, we are

still able to meet and operate in order to achieve a higher reputation.”

One of the association’s chief goals is to lobby the government to reduce the 25 percent tax on purchased art, one of the highest rates in Europe.

“Other countries have taxes of 7 percent or 12 percent, prices that encourage people to buy art work,” said Erika Deak, the vice president of the association and owner of Erika Deak Gallery. “I do lots of sales outside of Hungary, and it is uncomfortable because people always say, ‘What is this tax situation?’”

The gallery association is also working to attain better representation at international art fairs. Several Budapest galleries participated in the Vienna Art Fair in April. The Vintage Gallery exhibited work at the main show at Art Basel in June — the first time a Hungarian gallery had been invited to participate. The Kisterem Gallery was one of the featured exhibitors at Liste, the satellite fair in Basel that showcases younger artists and galleries.



Szilard Cseke's 2010 oil painting "We were little in France, but will be nothing in Romania." Ani Molnar Gallery

Artists and gallery owners in Budapest complain that the art scene has struggled for recognition because of a lack of focus and continuity. Balint Havas, one half of the artistic group Little Warsaw, pointed to the Kunsthalle as an example. The museum changes directors every four years. “There are a lot of good attempts,” he said, “and then it finishes and someone else comes with a certain ability and they take things into a totally new direction.”

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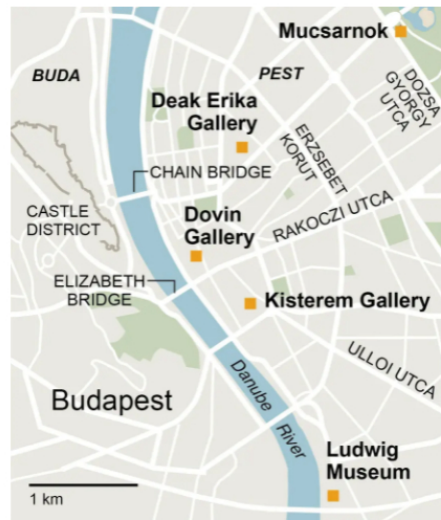


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The Budapest Art Fair is another example. Started in the late 1990s, it was growing in size and stature each year. Then in 2010 a second art fair, Art Market took place within two weeks of the original fair.

“It was totally nonsense,” said the artist Attila Szucs. “They just totally killed each other in a very small field.” (The Budapest Art Fair will not be taking place this year, but Art Market is scheduled for Oct. 26 to 30.)

Despite these issues, there is a sense that things are improving. “I have seen a change recently,” Mr. Havas said. “There are more and more contacts being made, I see there are more layers of communication.”



International Herald Tribune

There also are more local efforts to promote contemporary art, including a plan by the Varfok Gallery to create a contemporary art street with several galleries and the open-air Gallery 19. The Varfok Gallery, one of the oldest commercial galleries in the city, is on Varfok Street, one of the main routes up the hill to Buda Castle.

“One of the most important aims of Varfok Gallery’s owner, Karoly Szaloky, was to generate a vivid contemporary art district here on Varfok Street, following great international examples — as Montmartre or rue Doudeauville in Paris or Soho in London,” said Krisztina Kovacs, an art historian who works for the gallery.

Varfok Gallery’s sister gallery, Spiritusz, also occupies a spot on Varfok Street. Other galleries there include the Mono Gallery; Ponton Gallery, which is part of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design; and the Varnegyed Gallery. Gallery 19 is an open-air art space that takes its name from the 19 trees that line the street. The gallery displays art in structures similar to advertising kiosks.

“The aim of Gallery 19, apart from spreading contemporary art toward a wider circle, is to reinforce this contemporary art atmosphere of the street and give a nicer view to the tourists going toward the castle,” Ms. Kovacs said.

And that is another way to expose Hungary’s artists to the outside

world.

“I think Hungarian contemporary art is ready to be seen,” said Margit Valko, owner and director of Kisterem Gallery. “We are now trying to be more visible.”

**Correction: July 22, 2011**

*A photo caption with an earlier version of this article misspelled the artist Szilárd Cseke's family name.*

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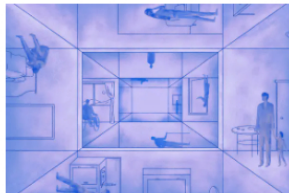
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