

Placing Bookmarks: The Institutionalisation and De-Institutionalisation of Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and Contemporary Art

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The recent interest in avant-garde art from Hungary shown by international museums such as Tate has been paralleled by transformations to the country's art institutions as a consequence of sweeping political changes. This essay contextualises these changes in relation to the expanding global market for art from the region, and examines the impact that initiatives by private galleries as well as artists and curators are having on the writing of a critical history of Hungarian art.



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One must refrain from any form of organization or institutionalization.

Miklós Erdély, 1981¹

- ¹ In September 2013 a week-long exhibition entitled *Bookmarks: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Post-Conceptual Positions in Hungarian Art from the Sixties to the Present* was organised in a rented gallery space in the centre of Budapest. As suggested by its long title, it sought to delineate a narrative of 'historic threads' that have played a central role in defining 'artistic positions of Hungarian contemporary art in the 2010s'.² Remarkably, the ambitious agenda was put together by three private galleries in anticipation of the high-profile visit of Tate's newly established Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee – the youngest of the museum's international councils consisting of influential collectors – which together with several museum curators made a stopover in Budapest en route to Moscow on what was their first field trip to the region. The fact that it fell to ACB, Kisterem and Vintage galleries rather than a local museum to produce this synoptic overview of Hungarian neo-avant-garde and contemporary art is indicative of the changing balance between public institutions and private initiatives both within the specific context of current Hungarian cultural politics

Since this collaborative pop-up exhibition staged for the Tate committee's study trip, the Budapest art scene has also been frequented by a team of curators from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as a group from the Centre Pompidou in Paris, to mention only the most prestigious delegations of leading global museums whose visits have contributed to the increased visibility and institutional representation of Hungarian art internationally. What is striking about this opening up of an art scene that had regularly considered itself to be inherently 'hidden' when evaluating its accomplishments both from the socialist times and after the system change of 1989, is that it has taken place in parallel to momentous political changes as a result of 'the authoritarian transformation of the institutional structures and funding system of cultural life'.³ In a flashback to the dichotomous thinking of the socialist era, contemporary art in Hungary is once again discussed in oppositional terms as a counter to the 'state-controlled cultural-political system'.⁴ At the same time, the sharp reduction in state funding for contemporary art and repositioning of the policy of public institutions has been accompanied by the rising influence of the private sector, a development that marks a new departure within a traditionally non-market guided art system.

The *Bookmarks* project is in that sense emblematic of the changing institutional terrain of the local art world, in which rival galleries and prominent collectors work together² towards the strategic goal of increasing the international visibility of Hungarian art. What is more, two years later this exhibition, with its focus on neo-avant-garde artists and their disciples aptly reflecting current collecting trends, was restaged in the context of an international art fair. A third and final incarnation followed shortly after when it was shown as part of the first edition of a grassroots and intentionally non-governmental biennial called OFF-Biennale Budapest in 2015, underlining its progressive credentials and siding with the oppositional streams of the Hungarian contemporary art world. An additional reason to consider *Bookmarks* as a case in point is in relation to local art history since, as the title of the show inferred, the exhibition aimed in rhetorical terms to 'pose a question about the missing book' of Hungarian conceptual art.⁵ The fact that it is 'very hard to find a book in English explaining the top five artists of the 60s' was also emphasised by Hungarian collector Zsolt Somló, who warned that as a result there was an increased likelihood that the 'country's canon will be determined from abroad'.⁶ Ultimately, the institutionalisation of Hungarian art into global art structures is inseparable from its historicisation, underscoring the responsibility and enhanced role of art history in the face of these processes.

The discrepancy between the inclusion of Hungarian neo-avant-garde and³ contemporary art in global art structures and a paradoxical process of 'deinstitutionalisation' at home forms the central axis of this enquiry, which focuses on the period between the first and last *Bookmarks* editions. Taking this series of

exhibitions as a case in point, the article examines the strategies developed by private galleries, collectors and independent curators to overcome the historic omission of Hungarian art from the more prestigious and lucrative circuits of the international art world, as well as the simultaneous impulses coming from major museums towards integrating Hungarian conceptual and contemporary art within more globally oriented art historical narratives. The eclipse of public institutions by private initiatives is contextualised in relation to both the accelerated mechanisms of neo-liberal globalisation and as a side-effect of the resurgence of national consolidation in the cultural sphere. The current process of historicisation of Hungarian neo-avant-garde art is further investigated in terms of the tension between the impatient demand for an accessible history of regional conceptual art and the enduring commitment on the part of methodical art historians to uncover the complexity of art practice under socialism. Finally, the question is posed whether in an art ecosystem that has been thrown off balance, there remains a potential for non-profit-oriented practices aligned with the artistic streams of post-Occupy global art movements that are critical of the dominance of financial capital.

In East European art history the revolutionary year of 1989 stands as the definitive watershed, bracketing the end of the communist period and announcing the emergence of, in the words of art historian Piotr Piotrowski, 'a new artistic geography' from the cauldron of 'historical and geographic transformation'.⁷ Already in the 1990s, the shortcomings of the transition were analysed in post-communist art worlds in terms of the post-colonialist critique of intra-European relations, articulated by Slovenian art theorist Igor Zabel through the notion of East European 'otherness' to the West, as well as in reference to the larger 'shift towards global multinational capitalism'.⁸ From a distance of more than a quarter of a century, it seems even more relevant to consider the East European changes as inseparable from wider mechanisms of economic globalisation and its critique, bearing in mind that, as writer and activist Naomi Klein has argued, the 'mass privatization of former Soviet economies' was but one element of a victorious 'corporate globalisation process' that also radically transformed parts of Asia, Africa and South America.⁹ When considering the recent history of globalisation, it is therefore important, according to historian Sebastian Conrad, 'not to accept political entities *a priori* as the boundaries of analysis' but instead to trace 'the actual scope of entanglements and interconnections'.¹⁰ In this light, the developments in East European art worlds since 1989 should be considered not just in terms of competing national accounts, but also as multiple manifestations of economic and cultural globalisation.

This date is also recognised as a turning point in the development of global art structures and instituting narratives, with the chief curator of the Centre Pompidou, Christine Macel, recently acknowledging that many of the 'substantial changes'

witnessed by art worlds over the past three decades actually 'originate in 1989'.¹¹ It was indeed the 'dissolution of the cultural hegemony of Europe and United States' that in her view constituted 'one of the most important consequences of such historical shifts'.¹² In 1989, the Centre Pompidou's landmark exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* itself reflected on the post-colonial imperative by giving equal exposure to renowned Western artists and the same number of artists from the non-Western world, a curatorial ploy that drew immediate criticism and in a recent reassessment was characterised as the 'embodiment of a neo-colonialist attitude that allowed the contemporary art system to colonize, commercially and intellectually, areas that were previously out of bounds'.¹³ Since East European art has also until recently been largely omitted from dominant accounts and is now exposed to similar forces, the predicament of being caught between gestures of post-colonial solidarity and the economics of neo-colonialism is a familiar one.

The post-1989 period is also one in which global capitalism has impacted directly on the functioning of public art institutions, with the result that today, as art historian Alexander Alberro has remarked, they 'do not even pretend to be autonomous from
5 the forces of economic power – a notion that museums claimed to uphold as recently as a couple of decades ago'.¹⁴ The status of the public museum has changed as a consequence of the dramatic rise in private investment in contemporary art and the reduction of state support that forces them into an unequal competition with a raft of new private museums.¹⁵ The increased permeability of not-for-profit and for-profit fields means that public art institutions that once stood 'aloof from "the market" are increasingly involved with this new world'.¹⁶ Defining the art market as a 'totality of economic infrastructures, social relations and financial transactions through which art works are being traded and through which various actors engage in the exchange of goods and services related to art', Dutch art historian Marta Gnyep has in that regard convincingly demonstrated that today it is collectors who have become the 'the driving force behind the growth of the contemporary art market'.¹⁷

The Tate's innovative framework of acquisition committees, established from the early 2000s and focusing mostly on under-represented world regions including Latin America, Asia-Pacific, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Africa, can be viewed not only as a means to institutionalise the role of collectors within the public museum, but also as instrumental in fostering new geographies of interest for collecting. The setting up in 2012 of the Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee (REEAC) can be taken as indicative of the maturity of the region's collecting scene, as well as the renewed interest of art history and the art market in the
6 conceptual art of the socialist period. As a result of the committee's activities and the personal donations of its collector members, Tate's international collection has been

expanded with works by Hungarian artists Imre Bak (born 1939), Tamás Kaszás (born 1976), Dóra Maurer (born 1937) and Tamás St Auby (Szentjóby) (born 1944).¹⁸

The vogue for East European art is clearly not just present at Tate, but can be observed in the programmes of fellow gate-keeping institutions such as MoMA and the Centre Pompidou, which have also developed new institutional structures in response to the changing museological terrain. MoMA's Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP), an internal cross-departmental curatorial research initiative focusing on neo-avant-garde art from the geographical areas of Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and Asia, in fact predates REEAC at the Tate. Launched in 2009, C-MAP is predominantly engaged with gathering insights into the art histories of the regions by inviting guest scholars to New York and devising curatorial excursions to receptive art scenes. C-MAP also provides vital background research for informed collecting decisions by the museum, as was visible in the recent exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* that relied on the museum's own collection and also included newly acquired works by Hungarian artists Dóra Maurer and Endre Tót (born 1937).¹⁹

The Centre Pompidou's 2010 exhibition *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* resolutely demonstrated the institution's growing interest in the art of the region, starting from the premise that 'Eastern Europe does not exist' and proposing the notions of 'uneven pace of history' and 'reflective nostalgia' as organising principles that go beyond the binary division of East and West.²⁰ This was also subsequently reflected in their collection, which gained impetus from the most recent involvement of East European collectors in the museum's medium-specific photography acquisitions committee.²¹ The purchase and donation of works by Hungarian artists Gábor Ősz (born 1962), Géza Perneczky (born 1936), Miklós Erdély (1928–1986) and Csaba Nemes (born 1966) goes some way towards matching the substantial representation of ex-Yugoslav, Polish, Czech and Slovak artists in the Centre Pompidou's collections and exhibitions.

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Within Eastern Europe, the pioneering collection Arteast 2000+ of Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana was established in 2000 with the aim of bringing together the neo-avant-garde art from former socialist countries and contributing to the 'process of historicization' by laying the foundations for 'a more equitable exchange of ideas' through interregional comparisons and self-empowering integration of the region's singular art production.²² However, the precarious circumstances in which many public museums in the region operate are also exemplified in the case of Moderna Galerija, for although it managed to acquire a purposeful venue for the collection in 2011, only a month later it was informed that it 'would not be getting any additional funding for the program in the new building'.²³ Resorting to the curatorial strategy of 'recycling', and making a virtue of necessity, the museum offered an unexpected critique of 'the

too fast and too superficial consumption of intellectual content' by restaging the collection in numerous editions, lately under the telling title *Low-Budget Utopias* (2016).²⁴ Interestingly, the collection also made an experimental excursion to the
9 Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow in 2015, showing that regional public institutions are also not immune to collaborations with the new wave of private museums. As a matter of fact, due to the retraction of state support for culture since the financial crisis of 2008, many public museums cannot even compete with the rising buying power of private collectors from the region who now have more representative collections of East European conceptual art.²⁵

In Hungary, public art institutions have been exposed to a specific set of challenging circumstances in the wake of changes to the leadership, funding and structure of the art world since 2010 when, as art historian Edit András put it, 'the new right wing government realized that museums, as privileged spaces of national self-representation, had to be more closely controlled, since they were perceived as too cosmopolitan and independent'.²⁶ These measures have included the forced merger of the Hungarian National Gallery and Museum of Fine Arts, the incorporation of the
10 'ultra-conservative' Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA) into a new constitution with 'full power over cultural issues' and control over 'the subsidies given to the arts', and its takeover of Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle.²⁷ The consolidation of control over art institutions and the promotion of a conservative cultural agenda disrupted the establishment of post-1989 accounts of contemporary art and attempts to illuminate the achievements of the neo-avant-garde, while the 'deinstitutionalisation' of critical art practices was also inseparable from the removal or withdrawal of sympathetic curators from positions of institutional influence.

A defining moment in the struggle of art professionals against 'anti-democratic practices' came in May 2013, when it became clear that the Hungarian government would impose their candidate for the directorship of the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, prompting an unprecedented two-week occupation of the entrance hall of the museum.²⁸ Assembled under a non-sensationalist but precisely formulated
11 banner calling for 'transparency in cultural decision making', the 'Ludwig Stairs' protests became a forum for discussions that deepened the scene's understanding of the ideological transformation of Hungarian art institutions and forged a coalition that stretched from artists and curators to private gallerists and collectors, who also felt themselves to be affected by the changes. The protesters adopted many of the 'anti-representational and directly participatory' practices associated with the Occupy movement of 2011, such as its direct democracy techniques of collective decision making.²⁹ Although the government was unmoved, a number of other protests were also generated within the scope of the series of Action Days organised by the independent non-profit art space tranzit.hu, and most prominently voiced through the

organisation of the OFF-Biennale Budapest in 2015 that exemplified the defiant character of the local art world. In the wake of these dramatic events, when the contemporary art scene found itself practically on the streets, subjected to programmatic de-institutionalisation, with a loss of public institutional support and a self-imposed boycott of state funding, for a brief moment new lines of cross-generational solidarity and cooperation of non-profit and for-profit fields opened up.

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Fig.1

13 Installation shot of *Bookmarks* exhibition, Galéria 56, Budapest, 2013
Photo © Gyorgy Nyiro

It was in this climate that the first *Bookmarks* exhibition was organised as a collective endeavour of the three private galleries who, four months after the Ludwig occupation, staged a show in the specially rented premises of the defunct Galéria 56, displaying the works of the neo-avant-garde generation alongside those of younger artists (fig.1). Remarkably, they were experiencing the paradoxical return of non-institutional existence familiar to the unofficial artists under socialism. The difference, of course, being that while the 1970s generation ‘worked in isolation’ as we are informed in the exhibition publication, and the significance of their work ‘could only be recognised by a few fellow artists, professionals and friends’, this time round they could count on both the art market and international institutional interest.³⁰ The list of participating artists was drawn exclusively from the circles of the three galleries. From the neo-avant-garde generation were works by Imre Bak, Miklós Erdélyi, Tibor Hajas, György Jovánovics (born 1939), Ilona Keserű (born 1933), János Major (1934–2008), Dóra

Maurer, Tamás St.Auby and Endre Tót, while the junior participants were Tamás Kaszás, Little Warsaw, Ádám Kokesch (born 1973), Gábor Ősz, Société Réaliste, Dezső Szabó (born 1967), Péter Szalay (born 1981) and Gyula Várnai (born 1956). As is evident from this line up, there are numerous overlaps with the recent acquisitions of the aforementioned global museums.

Under the headline 'Tate's New Strategy', an informative account of the Tate REEAC trip to Budapest in 2013 was published in Hungarian art magazine *Műertő*, reporting about the visit of thirteen regional collectors and four in-house curators led by Frances Morris, then Head of Collection (International Art).³¹ The programme was devised by the Hungarian members of the committee, namely Péter Küllői, Zsolt Somló and Carl Kostyál and in addition to visiting the *Bookmarks* exhibition, specially conceived for the occasion, their itinerary included the permanent collections of the Ludwig Museum and Museum of Fine Art, as well as an exhibition of pre-war avant-garde art at Kieselbach Gallery. Studio visits to acclaimed experimental artist Dóra Maurer and socially-engaged artistic duo Little Warsaw were also scheduled. Reflecting on the visit, Morris explained the museological strategy behind the new acquisition committee as a means to 'restore the artistic unity of the history and legacy of European modernism, as well as to reflect on the most important questions of contemporary art from East and Central Europe', while Budapest was chosen, the correspondent was told, for the vigour of Hungarian avant-garde art, as well as for the activities of Hungarian artists from the 1960s. The visit to Dóra Maurer's studio was one of the highlights of the Tate trip, judging by the comments of Frances Morris, who recounted how they 'experienced the exceptional strength and originality' of her work (fig.2).³²

Fig.2

Dóra Maurer

Twist III from *Seven Twists I–VI* 1979, printed 2011

Tate P81230

© Dóra Maurer

Photo © Tate

In his entry on Dóra Maurer for the C-MAP research blog *Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe*, another professional visitor to Budapest, MoMA curator Christian Rattemeyer, categorised Maurer as ‘one of Eastern Europe’s most rigorously experimental artists of the past fifty years’.³³ He went on to claim that the artist’s ‘works from the ‘70s seem unconcerned with narrative, ideology, or politics’, noting, however, that due to ‘ephemerality, instability, open-endedness, investigation, and process’ Maurer achieved ‘a sense of freedom that today registers as radical, urgent, and engaged’.³⁴ Although it appears from these comments that Maurer has been released from the expectation that East European neo-avant-garde artists act as





The politics of inclusion of East European conceptual artists into global art collections shares common ground with dilemmas raised by the acquisition of works by other non-Western artists. One of the issues that comes to the fore is the tendency to select practices that display a certain 'connectivity with the existing collection of Western art'.³⁹ In other words, criticism is expressed here towards the stylistic and intellectual favouritism at stake in the collection building process, whereby curators feel more drawn to the familiar and the recognisable. On the other hand, as Christine Macel¹⁶ pointed out in relation to the Pompidou's 'intense collecting activity' that has recently also been 'extended to the countries of the former European Soviet bloc', there is a risk of 'homogenisation' once these works are incorporated into the existing narratives.⁴⁰ Acknowledging the requirement for 'recontextualisation of the works in their local contexts of origin', she has insisted on the need for thorough documentation in order to make 'a future comprehensive analysis of heterogeneities' possible.⁴¹ Therefore it is clear that neither the art market nor public collections can do without the careful work of art historians in producing a viable critical context that avoids neutralising meanings and flattening associations arising from historically specific social and political situations.

Fig.3
Dóra Maurer
Once we Departed 1972
© Dóra Maurer

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Dóra Maurer is no exception here, as although her work is gaining widespread recognition, the contextualisation of her practice in art history is still in the making. One brief dip into the particularities of the context of conceptual art of the 1970s in Hungary could, for instance, illustrate the delicacy of the neo-avant-garde's ephemeral nature and collaborative and social spirit. This can be observed in an enigmatic photograph from the series *Once We Departed* taken by Maurer at the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in 1972 (fig.3). It depicts four bards of Hungarian conceptual art – Miklós Erdély, Tibor Gáyor (born 1929), György Jovánovics and Tamás St Auby – in a rotational swirl that consists of one artist apparently positioned on the ground, another suspended horizontally in the air, one reading a book upside down in a tree, while the last emerges from the undergrowth with a cigarette in his hand. In later interviews the artists revealed the secrets of the seemingly impossible pre-digital manipulation in the poses they struck, and also made clear that everyone had contributed with their ideas to the outcome of this tableau.⁴² The whole setting of Balatonboglár, where fellow artist György Galántai (born 1941) rented a disused chapel from the Catholic Church and turned it into an unofficial meeting place for the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in the early 1970s, is also of importance for understanding the spontaneous nature of the action.⁴³

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The claim made by the organisers of the *Bookmarks* exhibition in reference to the incomplete accounts of Hungarian conceptual art is a persuasive one. It was indeed first-hand experience of the 'unfamiliarity with Hungarian art' of the general audience¹⁹ at international art fairs that prompted the galleries to re-initiate discussion about the art history of the period.⁴⁷ Rather than an outright lack of a comprehensive historicisation of the nation's neo-avant-garde, it is perhaps more precise to say that what is missing is actually a 'usable' book about the art of the period. Artistic positioning within the historical narratives are a precondition, as has become clear for the gallerists, for both more credible institutional integration and more efficient art market performance. Alongside the ever increasing acceleration of interest in global art and its markets, there is a sense of impatience with the pedantic practice of art history. Needless to say, in the recent reshuffling of the Hungarian art scene, many art historians were also de-institutionalised and their publicly funded research projects disrupted. A case in point is *The Long Sixties*, a Central European comparative research initiative that began in 2010 but lost a vital institutional partner when the Ludwig Museum changed management in May 2013, and has since been dispersed into diverse streams.⁴⁸ Smaller art museums have to some extent taken up the mantle, with the Kassák Museum initiating an ambitious research programme in 2014 to devise a 'comprehensive study of Hungarian visual art in the 1960s and 70s' with a focus on 'the regional context' replacing the 'isolated nationalist view'.⁴⁹ Private initiatives have also stepped in with, for instance, ACB Gallery launching their own Research Lab in 2015 to fill 'a gap in the presentation and publication of Hungarian neo-avant-garde and post-avant-garde oeuvres with regard to the context of current international discourses'.⁵⁰

The rocky path to producing a relevant history of Hungarian art of the socialist period²⁰ is illuminated by art historian Miklós Peternák's slow-burning attempt to assess the history of local conceptual art. This work stretched over four decades, before emerging into public light in 2014, when he curated an exhibition in a regional gallery in Paks, which could be taken as another sign of the recent de-territorialisation of the Hungarian art world.⁵¹ The catalogue published for the occasion contained an unchanged essay that Peternák wrote in the early 1980s, intended as a companion for an exhibition on conceptual art at the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest that never materialised, and which was then kept under wraps until it was published online

in the late 1990s. In the preface that Peternak wrote in the 2014 catalogue, he remarked:

It is hoped that the present volume will contribute to our understanding of conceptual art in its original sense ... so that it can finally assume its due historical position; or in other words, by rendering it visible, researchable, processable and collectable, Hungarian Conceptual Art could become an integral part of the national and
21 international cultural discourse, and attain a position beyond the perhaps attractive and mystical, but by no means satisfactory status of marginalia and 'hidden treasures'.⁵²

There is an implicit acknowledgement in his comments of the mounting impact of both globalisation and marketisation on the long hibernation of the movement.

This persevering art historical attempt was one of many initiatives, past and present, to work towards creating a more accurate picture of artistic endeavours from the time when the closed socialist system imposed its own rules on the art institutional landscape and artists devised innovative strategies to circumnavigate state control.⁵³ One of the generators of the recent revisiting of art from the 1960s and 1970s was the programme of tranzit.hu, which has also run a collaborative pan-European curatorial project *Parallel Chronologies* dealing with the subject.⁵⁴ It was through this platform that Hungarian art historian László Beke's 1971 curatorial initiative *Idea/Imagination* was published as a book in 2008. Based on a call to young artists to respond on a sheet of paper to his proposal that 'the work = the documentation of imagination', the resulting collection is considered the first Hungarian conceptual art exhibition. The English version of the book came out only in 2014, and Beke wrote a small preface poignantly warning that these contributions 'represent intellectual freedom rather than material values'.⁵⁵ Again, this could be seen as an observation about the unstoppable economisation of the dematerialised practices of the period, which through their inclusion in public and private collections and presence on the art market are currently undergoing processes of re-materialisation as art objects, overwriting their primary status at the time as ephemeral actions and concepts.

Fig.4

Installation shot of *Bookmarks* exhibition, Art Cologne, 2015

Photo © Andy Buchwald

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When the *Bookmarks* exhibition was restaged in April 2015 in the context of Art
24 Cologne the trio of galleries appointed a curator, Katalin Székely, who also wrote a text
for the new exhibition catalogue that set the younger and older artists within a more
substantial art historical dialogue (fig.4).⁵⁶ Well positioned at the entrance to the fair,
the show was announced as tracing 'the history and impact of important currents of
Hungarian art over the last 50 years'.⁵⁷ The original list of participating artists was
slightly modified for the new context, putting more emphasis on the neo-avant-garde
generation. A few artists were left out, including Major and Ősz, while invitations were
extended to Gábor Attalai (1934–2011), Gábor Altorjay (born 1946), Károly Halász
(born 1946), Katalin Ladik (born 1942), László Lakner (born 1936) and Géza Pernecky
(born 1936). The director of the fair, Daniel Hug, gallerist and art director of American-
Swiss origin, who also happened to be the grandson of Hungarian avant-garde artist
László Moholy-Nagy, explained his motivation for hosting the show as follows: 'For me,
it was important to do this "Bookmarks" exhibition right now as a statement to the
Hungarian government, which has taken kind of a terrible turn', adding that he hopes
the exhibition can 'point out that there is tremendous interest in progressive art
practices' both within Hungary and internationally.⁵⁸ This rhetoric caused a stir in the
art circles at home as it failed to mention that the presentation in Cologne was actually
organised with governmental support.⁵⁹ In the same interview, Hug also explained that
'Poland was discovered in the early 2000s and then about 10 years ago people got





curatorial initiatives.⁶² In an interview given to the *Art Newspaper* during Art Basel he emphasised the importance of the OFF-Biennale, describing it as a manifestation that showed that there is a 'strong alternative and progressive art scene in Budapest, besides what is happening on the official level'.⁶³

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After a phase of heightened confrontation and direct actions against the takeover by the Hungarian Academy of Arts of key institutional structures – protests which were met with unremitting government indifference towards the views of art professionals – a group of independent curators, most of whom formerly worked at the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, decided to take a different approach.⁶⁴ The idea behind the first OFF-Biennale Budapest was to demonstrate the resilience of the contemporary art scene by devising a grassroots, horizontal and inclusive platform, to both galvanise the domestic art scene and mobilise international solidarity.⁶⁵ This decentralised event, which took place in the late spring of 2015 and consisted of more than two hundred separate programmes that were held in 136 locations including apartments, private galleries and public spaces, had a self-imposed rule to exclude any government supported venues.⁶⁶ The OFF-Biennale was also innovatively funded, drawing grants from international foundations devoted to promoting civic society and also directing its fundraising towards the private sector and a circle of supportive collectors.⁶⁷ OFF-Biennale Budapest was therefore both a direct response to the particular challenges faced by the Hungarian art scene, as well as an indicator of a switch from the model of state funding of the arts towards reliance on private benefactors, which is a particularly momentous change in a post-communist art world.

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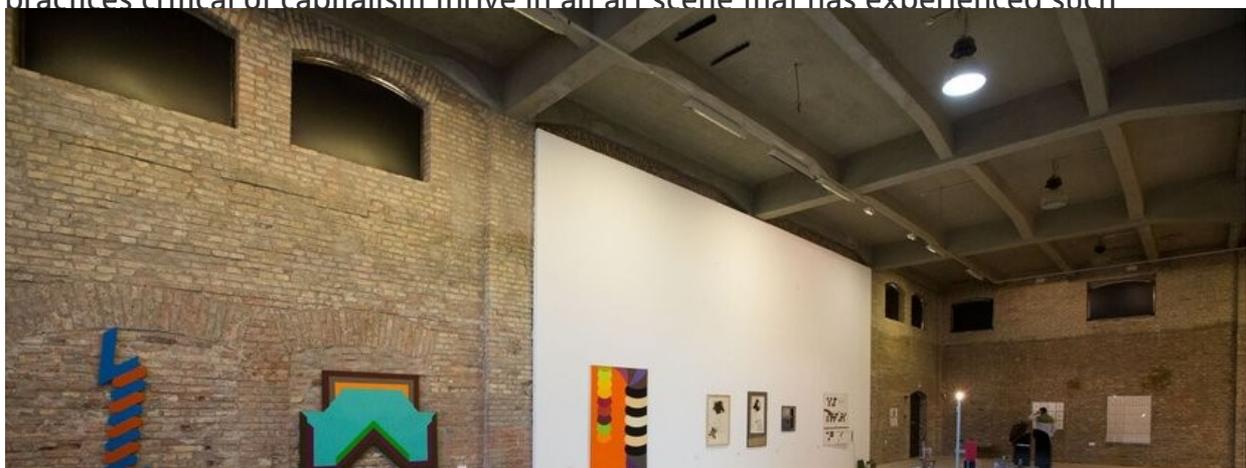
Fig.5

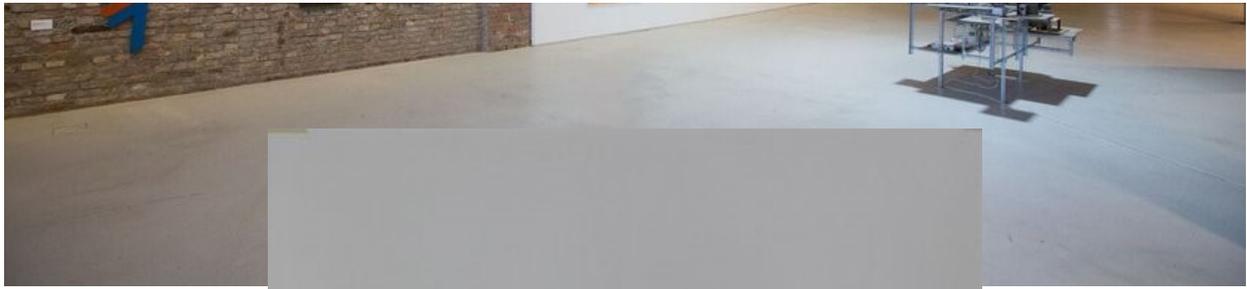
Installation shot of *Bookmarks* exhibition, OFF-Biennale, 2015

Photo © Zoltan Kerekes

The *Bookmarks* exhibition that was restaged as part of the OFF-Biennale for a third and final time shortly after its art fair presentation stood out in this context, as most of the other programmes were specially made for the biennial and were on much smaller ²⁷scale, often self-funded and realised on a voluntary basis (fig.5). It was tellingly held in the vacant premises of a former private museum, MEO, which in the early 2000s attempted to operate in an ambitious post-industrial setting on the outskirts of Budapest. The inclusion of *Bookmarks* divided critics, who either thought it to be the most accomplished exhibition in the OFF- Biennale, or considered it too implicated in the grey zone of state-private partnership, while it was also commented that the 'presence of private for profit galleries seemed justifiable' if they provided 'an infrastructure' and did not 'promote their own artists under the banner of the biennale'.⁶⁸ In the biennial setting, the neo-avant-garde works that were positioned in dialogue with their contemporary correspondences seemingly returned from a white cube presentation back to the unofficial context in which they originated in the first place.

With the strong legacy of socially radical artistic practices developed by the neo-avant-garde artists in reaction to the complex political realities of life under communist rule, as well as the long-lasting tradition of artists' indifference to art market mechanisms preconditioned by the economic policies of the socialist system, the question arises how far these particularities are reflected in contemporary art. To what extent can practices critical of capitalism thrive in an art scene that has experienced such





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Fig.6
Csaba Nemes
Guggenheim (Frozen Assets) 2014
© Csaba Nemes

In the international context of public art museums, these considerations have come to the fore in various campaigns that have addressed the issues of corporate sponsorship and 'artwashing'. Artist and activist of the Liberate Tate collective Mel Evans has, for instance, claimed that the 'unethical singularity of oil company arts sponsorship reeks of the industry's spills, tailing ponds and contaminated rivers' in a book that was published before the recent termination of BP sponsorship of Tate.⁷⁰ In New York, art world protests against the '1%' that were first voiced in the 2011 Occupy movement are currently directed towards the inequality and social injustice issues in relation to the rights of migrant workers working on the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. The Gulf Labour coalition of artists has engaged in negotiations as well as direct actions against the Guggenheim Museum in New York, one of the concerned parties, describing it as a '1% Museum with a 1% Board that cares very little about its lowest-paid employees and the example it is setting to the world'.⁷¹ Interestingly, the cover image for the Gulf Labour publication is credited to Csaba Nemes, Hungarian artist and activist, who during his artist residency in New York in autumn 2014 took part in several direct actions of the coalition that resulted in a series of drawings entitled *Guggenheim (Frozen Assets)* (fig.6).⁷²

Nemes readily participated in those events as he came from the intense climate of Budapest where, together with artists Szabolcs KissPál (born 1967) and photographer Gabriella Csozõ (born 1969), he was a key member of the Free Artists group that

initiated and was involved in many direct actions against the establishment of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and took an active part in the 'Ludwig Stairs' occupation.⁷³ Nemes was in touch with Noah Fisher (born 1977), an artist engaged in the Occupy movement and Gulf Labour, who in 2012 presented his activities at a symposium in Budapest in which Csoz  also participated, an artist whose practice was influenced by witnessing Occupy Wall Street in 2011.⁷⁴ This brief episode, one of many similar encounters, demonstrates the connections and interactions of Hungarian and international artists who share interests and a devotion to expressing their critical views in relation to the institutional art world and wider economic and political circumstances. In that sense, it is clear that exchanges on an international level are not only bound to the processes of institutionalisation of recognised artists into global art structures, but rather global networks are also established around solidarities and common causes in relation to the pressing issues of today's world.

While it might be assumed that such engagements are a priori anti-art market oriented, this is largely not the case, as artists internationally and in Hungary are compelled to subsidise their practice by selling their works to public and private collections, as other economic models are generally not functioning, and it is getting harder to achieve non-market careers even if they generate significant cultural capital.⁷⁵ Some artists have devised special tactics and goals in their approach to the art market, such as Tam s Kasz s, whose work is concerned with investigating methods of survival in the wake of the current crisis by turning to anthropological sources and living on the land in search of possible solutions. Currently working with the Kisterem gallery and with a significant international presence, his long-term collaboration with Anik  Lor nt (born 1977) bears the name *Ex-Artists Collective*, indicating their desire to eventually retire from both the institutional and economic art world once their participation in those structures has secured the material circumstances in which to live and work free from such restraints.⁷⁶

In terms of the neo-avant-garde's critical approach to the art market, Tam s St Auby's activities are of particular relevance. Emphatically political and uncompromising in his early career, leading to his exile in Switzerland in the mid-1970s, St Auby has remained equally radical in his later conceptual practice. This found expression in his *Minimum Subsistence Level Standard Project 1984 W 1974–2016*, a poetically formulated post-1968 revolutionary proposal calling for the seizure of the 'tools of artistic production' from the 'iconolatric artists and their institutional promoters' who had made it their 'private property'.⁷⁷ As a result of this radical restructuring of the mechanisms of the art world 'the work of art as piece of merchandise would cease to exist' and be replaced by a system of 'Universal Subsistence Allocation'.⁷⁸ While '1984' and 'W' in the title are oblique references to the phenomenon of 'double speech' as a characteristic form of communication in dictatorships analysed by George Orwell, the

bid for basic income level was aimed at the whole population, and in the artist's view the means for achieving this should be found from military budgets.

Critical of the art object as a form of commodity, yet not categorically opposed to private galleries in whose programmes he occasionally partakes, as is evident from his presence in the *Bookmarks* project, St Auby also obstructs the usual logic of art market functioning. This attitude is visible in his work *Czechoslovak Radio 1968 1969–2016*, envisaged as a 'portable memorial against war as homage to the natural inventiveness of the people' realised in the form of sulphur covered brick, which he declared to be an 'unlimited multiple'.⁷⁹ Significantly, it was in an edition of two that the work appeared in the core exhibition that was conceptualised as the 'brain' of Documenta 13 in 2012. Destabilising the principle of the singularity and uniqueness of artworks could be seen as an articulation of a deliberate strategy of countering art market dominance by means of devaluation. According to art theorist Andrea Phillips, 'devaluation in the
32system of artistic production' would involve de-incentivising the 'aspiration to value that propels the artworld as an intrinsic process of capital production'.⁸⁰

What has become apparent is that the Hungarian art scene not only follows the mechanisms of accelerated marketisation of the contemporary and neo-avant-garde art practices, but also articulates recent developments by devising credible responses. The readiness of the global art system to incorporate Hungarian artistic achievements, visible in trends that have become prominent over the last few years, has been met with a corresponding level of keenness from local art structures which, due to fundamental changes to national art institutions, are currently dominated by private initiatives and commercial enterprises. Significantly, the increased international interest in the institutionalisation of East European art has been met in Hungary with an abstruse process of de-institutionalisation, to which the local artworld responded both through instances of direct action, as well as through more generative
33manifestations, such as a collectively conceived art biennial. As has been shown through the case of the *Bookmarks* exhibition, attempts to negotiate the velocity of globalisation are taking place at the dynamic interface of social, political and economic forces, while sound art history retains its primary role in the processes of authentication of both neo-avant-garde and contemporary art.

Notes

1. Miklós Erdély, 'Optimista előadás' (Optimistic Lecture) (1981), in Miklós Peternák (ed.), *Miklós Erdély: Művészeti írások*, trans. by Zsuzsanna Szegedy-Maszák, Budapest 1991, p.133.

2. ACB Gallery, Kisterem and Vintage Gallery, *Bookmarks: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Post-Conceptual Positions in Hungarian Art from the Sixties to the Present*, exhibition brochure, Budapest 2013, unpaginated.

3. See the letter of the Hungarian section of International Association of Art Critics entitled 'The Antidemocratic Makeover of the Cultural Scene in Hungary', published in *Art Leaks*, 8 December 2012, <https://art-leaks.org/2012/12/08/the-antidemocratic-makeover-of-the-cultural-scene-in-hungary/>, accessed 31 May 2016. For discussion of the Hungarian art scene as 'hidden' see László Beke, 'The Hidden Dimensions of the Hungarian Art of the 1960s', in *Sixties: New Pursuits in Hungarian Fine Arts*, exhibition catalogue, Képzőművészeti Kiadó, Budapest 1991. See also the exhibition *Budapest Box: The Hidden Scene in the 1990s*, 4 July–29 September 2002, Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, reviewed in Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Hidden Scene in Budapest', *Umělec*, no.3, 2002, pp.28–30.
4. See Barnabás Bencsik, 'The Steamroller Advances Relentlessly', *mezosfera.org*, 10 April 2016, <http://mezosfera.org/the-steamroller-advances-relentlessly/>, accessed 31 May 2016.
5. Interviews conducted by the authors with Orsolya Hegedüs, ACB Gallery and Margit Valkó, Kisterem Gallery, Budapest, 6 November 2015, and Attila Pöcze, Director of Vintage Gallery, Budapest, 1 December 2015.
6. Julia Michalska, 'Collectors Emerge from behind the Iron Curtain', *Art Newspaper*, 18 June 2015, http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/Art_Basel_2015/stars-of-the-east-collectors-are-starting-to-emerge-from-behind-the-iron-curtain-/, accessed 31 May 2016.
- 35 7. Piotr Piotrowski, 'The Grey Zone of Europe', in Bojana Pejić and David Elliot (eds.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1999, p.36.
8. Igor Zabel, 'Otherness Again', in Pejić and Elliot 1999, p.112.
9. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York 2014, p.19.
10. Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, Princeton 2016, p.51.
11. Christine Macel, 'Another World', in *A History: Contemporary Art from the Centre Pompidou*, exhibition catalogue, Haus der Kunst, Munich 2016, p.4, <http://www.hausderkunst.de/en/agenda/detail/a-history-essay-by-christine-macel/>, accessed 31 May 2016.
12. Ibid.
13. Pablo Lafuente, 'Introduction: From the Outside In: "Magiciens de la Terre" and Two Histories of Exhibitions', in *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989*, London 2013, p.10.
14. Alexander Alberro, 'Institutions, Critique and Institutional Critique', in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2009, p.18.
15. See Marta Gnyep, *The Shift: Art and the Rise to Power of Contemporary Collectors*, Stockholm 2015, p.205.
16. Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the 21st Century*, London 2014, p.11.
17. Gnyep 2015, p.36.
18. Membership of the committees is subject to approval and the payment of an annual fee, while proposed donations also have to pass through an assessment process within the museum. Interview with Katalin Spengler and Zsolt Somló, Budapest, 4 May 2016.

19. The exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* was held at MoMA New York, 5 September 2015–3 January 2016.
20. Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, 'Promises of the Past', in Christine Macel and Nataša Petrešin (eds.), *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2010, pp.18–19.
21. The Groupe d'Acquisition pour la Photographie was established in 2014 with the Hungarian collectors Zsolt Somló and Csaba Tóth as members.
22. See Zdenka Badovinac, 'The Big and the Small: The Arteast 2000+ Collection as a Tool for New Cultural Production', in Ruth Addison and others (eds.), *Grammar of Freedom/Five Lessons: Works from the Arteast 2000+ Collection*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, exhibition catalogue, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow 2015, p.14.
23. Ibid., p.19.
24. Ibid.
25. See, for instance, the Marinko Sudac Collection, www.avantgarde-museum.com, accessed 31 May 2016.
26. Edit András, 'Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime', *e-flux journal*, no.57, September 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/vigorous-flagging-in-the-heart-of-europe-the-hungarian-homeland-under-the-right-wing-regime/>, accessed 31 May 2016.
27. Ibid.
28. See 'Unite for Contemporary Art', protest letter dated 9 May 2013, published in *Art Leaks*, 10 May 2013, <https://art-leaks.org/2013/05/10/unite-for-contemporary-art-budapest-hungary/>, accessed 31 May 2016.
29. See Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, London 2016, p.102.
30. *Bookmarks*, exhibition brochure, Budapest 2013, unpaginated.
31. Katalin Spengler, 'A Tate új stratégiája' (Tate's New Strategy), *Műertő*, 31 October 2013.
32. Ibid. (Translated by Reuben Fowkes.)
33. Christian Rattemeyer, 'A Decade in Art: Dora Maurer in the 1970s', blog post, 9 September 2014, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/282-a-decade-in-art-dora-maurer-in-the-1970s, accessed 31 May 2016.
34. Ibid.
35. Katalin Székely, 'Dóra Maurer', in Katalin Székely (ed.), *Bookmarks: Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-Conceptual Art from the Late 1960s to the Present*, Berlin 2015, p.52.
36. Interview with Attila Pöcze, Director of Vintage Gallery, 11 May 2016.
37. 'Dora Maurer: Hungary's Best Kept Secret', *Art Review*, March 2012, http://artreview.com/features/march_2012_feature_dora_maurer/, accessed 31 May 2016.
38. *Dóra Maurer: 6 out of 5*, White Cube, Mason's Yard, London, 24 May–9 July 2016.

39. Javier Pes writing in the *Art Newspaper*, June 2010, quoted in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (eds.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, exhibition catalogue, ZKM, Karlsruhe 2011, p.163.
40. Macel 2016, p.4.
41. Ibid.
42. Dóra Hegyi, Sándor Hornyik and Zsuzsa László (eds.), *Parallel Chronologies*, exhibition catalogue, tranzit.hu, Budapest 2011, pp.55–6.
43. See György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay (eds.), *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East Central Europe*, Budapest 2013, pp.23–32.
44. In addition to ACB, Kisterem and Vintage, private galleries with an international presence include Art + Text, Chimera Project, Deák Erika Gallery, Inda Gallery, Knoll Gallery, Molnár Ani Gallery, Trapéz and Viltin Gallery.
45. See Gábor Rieder, 'Hungarian Contemporary Art on the Global Scene: Opportunity and Necessity', in *Contemporary Art Market: Passion? Speculation?*, Budapest 2013, p.84.
46. Artists István Csákány, Attila Csörgő and Tamás St Auby participated in Documenta 13 in 2012, the first Hungarians to be selected since János Sugár's appearance at Documenta 9 in 1992.
47. Interview with Orsolya Hegedüs, ACB Gallery, and Margit Valkó, Kisterem Gallery, Budapest, 6 November 2015.
48. A selection of research papers were published in a special issue of *Acta Historiae Artium* edited by Edit András and Hedvig Turai. See *Acta Historiae Artium*, vol.56, 2015.
49. See statements on the research page of the Kassák Museum, <http://www.kassakmuzeum.hu/en/index.php?p=kutatas>, accessed 31 May 2016.
50. See the ACB Research Lab web page, http://acbgaleria.hu/acb_researchlab, accessed 31 May 2016.
51. See Miklós Peternák, *concept.hu*, exhibition catalogue, Paks Keptár, Paks 2014.
52. Ibid., pp.63–4.
53. See, for instance, the conference 'Contested Spheres: Actually Existing Artworlds under Socialism', held at Kassák Museum, Budapest, 27–28 May 2016.
54. Hegyi, Hornyik and László 2011.
55. See Dóra Hégyi (ed.), *Imagination/Idea: The Beginning of Hungarian Conceptual Art. The László Beke Collection, 1971*, Budapest 2014, p.3.
56. Katalin Székely, 'Bookmarks: Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-Conceptual Art from the Late 1960s to the Present', in Székely, *Bookmarks*, 2015, pp.4–13.
57. See 'Art Cologne 2015 Presents Bookmarks', press release, Art Cologne, January 2015.
58. Daniel Hug quoted in 'Bookmarks Urges Hungarian Government to Take a More Progressive Stance on Progressive Art', 17 April 2015, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-at-art-cologne-bookmarks-urges-hungarian-government-to>, accessed 31 May 2016.

59. A point also stressed by Barnabás Bencsik, former director of the Ludwig Museum Budapest, who regards *Bookmarks* as a symptom of the breakdown of the 'checks and balances' necessary for the healthy functioning of the art world. Interviewed in Budapest, 3 May 2016.
60. Daniel Hug quoted in 'Bookmarks Urges Hungarian Government to Take a More Progressive Stance on Progressive Art', 2015.
61. Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2008, p.5.
62. Donations included a work by Tamás Kaszás to Tate Modern in 2015 and works by Gábor Ősz and Csaba Nemes to the Centre Pompidou in 2016.
63. Julia Michalska, 'Collectors Emerge from behind the Iron Curtain', *Art Newspaper*, 18 June 2015, [http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/Art_Basel_2015/stars-of-the-east-collectors-are-starting-to-emerge-from-behind-the-iron-curtain-/,](http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/Art_Basel_2015/stars-of-the-east-collectors-are-starting-to-emerge-from-behind-the-iron-curtain-/) accessed 31 May 2016.
64. See Edit András, 'Hungary in Focus: Conservative Politics and its Impact on the Arts', *Artmargins*, 17 September 2013, [http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews-sp-837925570/721-hungary-in-focus-forum,](http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews-sp-837925570/721-hungary-in-focus-forum) accessed 31 May 2016.
65. See Gábor Andrási (ed.), 'A Survey After the First OFF-Biennale from Budapest: Alternative Hopes and Chances for Survival', *Idea*, no.47, 2015, pp.56–7.
66. See the website of OFF-Biennale Budapest, [http://offbiennale.hu/,](http://offbiennale.hu/) accessed 10 October 2016.
67. Ibid. Among the supporting foundations were the Open Society Initiative, Erste Foundation and Norwegian NGO Fund.
68. See Edit András's response to Gábor Andrási's survey in *Idea*, no.47, 2015, pp.56–7.
69. Franco Bifo Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End*, South Pasadena 2015, p.211.
70. Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts*, London 2015, p.11.
71. Andrew Ross (ed.), *The Gulf Labour: High Culture/Hard Labour*, New York 2015, p.188.
72. Ibid. See also Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'On Frozen Assets and Friendship', in *Csaba Nemes: When Politics Enters Everyday Life*, exhibition catalogue, MOCAK, Krakow 2015, pp.40–7.
73. See Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Hungarian Art in the Eye of the Storm', *Idea*, no.42, 2012, pp.55–60.
74. See 'Atmospheres of Protest: Symposium on Sustainability and Contemporary Art', Central European University, Budapest, 11 May 2012, [http://www.translocal.org/sustainability/atmospheres.html,](http://www.translocal.org/sustainability/atmospheres.html) accessed 31 May 2016.
75. See initiatives such as w.a.g.e., [http://www.wageforwork.com,](http://www.wageforwork.com) accessed 31 May 2016.
76. See Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Tamás Kaszás's Art Laboratory: Anticipating Collapse, Practicing Survival', *Ars Hungarica*, vol.3, 2013, pp.111–23. His recent solo exhibition at Muzeum Sztuki Łódź entitled *Exercises in Autonomy* ran from 3 June–25 September 2016.
77. Tamás St Auby, 'IPUT: Subsist.Ence Level St.Andard Project 1984 W (or This is what has become of the unicell)', exhibition press release, Ludwig Museum, Budapest 2013, [http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.php?inc=kiállítás&kiállításId=856&menuId=44,](http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.php?inc=kiállítás&kiállításId=856&menuId=44) accessed 31 May 2016.
78. Ibid.

79. Interview with Tamás St Auby in Maja and Reuben Fowkes (eds.), *Revolution I Love You: 1968 in Art, Politics and Philosophy*, exhibition catalogue, CACT, Thessaloniki 2008, pp.160–1.

80. Andrea Phillips, 'Devaluation', *Parse Journal*, no.2, November 2015, p.116.

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