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Hungarian Salon – The Institutional System of Fine Arts and the New Structure of the Contemporary Art Field in the Process of the System Change

In the countries of the former Eastern European Socialist Bloc a Soviet type institutional system operated which kept the fine arts under strong ideological control, but at the same time it also secured a safety net for the artists. The Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists functioned as the administrative body of fine arts, and the Art Fund of Hungary was responsible for financing the art world. During the period of the political transition and the privatisation process, the old system was eliminated. The Fund practically disappeared together with the Picture Gallery and most of its companies. The Association, which continued to operate independently of the state, lost its infrastructure almost completely and thus it got into a difficult situation. Furthermore, the Múcsarnok (in English Hall of Art or Kunsthalle), the central and most important exhibition hall for contemporary art in Hungary, started to provide space more and more to the “progressive” or the formerly “neo-avant-garde” artists, who were less connected to the centralized institutional system.

After 1989 in parallel with the rehabilitation and the art historical processing of the formerly non-, or semi-official artists, a new struggle begun for publicity and for the symbolic or economic resources. The main protagonists were the artist and critics strongly dependent on the old system, the representatives of the former neo-avant-garde and the young generation, following the new contemporary tendencies. The so called “rehabilitation exhibitions”, and the assumed over-favouring of the neo-avant-garde generation was not only criticized by the Association or by the so called conservative artists or critics. Some of the progressive artists and art historians were also critical about “surviving modernism” in the Hungarian art, as Edit András put it.

However, the biggest and hottest art debates were triggered around the exhibition policy of the Kunsthalle and the so-called Salon exhibitions, which were mainly fuelled by the needs and ambitions of those artists who had already enjoyed fame and relative financial security in the old system, but after 1989 found themselves in a difficult situation and actually turned out to be the losers of the political transition. This artists demanded old Salon-type exhibitions in the Kunsthalle, but the leadership of the institution rejected it several times. The main counter-argument was that the Kunsthalle is not a mass institution anymore, but a professional contemporary exhibition hall. In spite of this, in 1997 the Salon was still held, not without turbulent press scandals and political

manoeuvring in the background, while the Salon debate had become one important battlefield of the so called „culture war“ of the eighties.

In my thesis I use the history of the Kunsthalle and the conflicts around the National Salon as a prism, to picture the shape of the new institutional system of contemporary art, and the new born artistic field, which could only gain relative autonomy during the intense political and cultural conflicts. Hopefully this will make the events of the present more understandable. After Fidesz came to power in 2010, there were serious modifications and scandals around the Kunsthalle, while the system of the Salon exhibitions was re-established by the new leadership of the institution. One of my main question is that the very high intensity of the debates and struggles in the Hungarian art world is the reason of the political and cultural-political scandals of the period, the economic restructuring of the country, or it can be identified as field-struggles. Therefore Pierre Bourdieu's field-theory is a very important methodological basis for my thesis. Besides, while the centralized institutional system was similar in this countries, I would like to make a comparison with other post-state-socialist fields. So I would be extremely happy if I could find some other Eastern-European researchers dealing with similar problems.