

**BOUNDARY FORMATION IN
CONTEMPORARY ART CURATING IN
HUNGARY**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis maps the Hungarian contemporary art field focusing on curators, and the symbolic boundaries they create and maintain within the field. Its aim is to identify the boundaries formed by curators, to investigate their practices to maintain them, and to determine what impact these boundaries have on the isolation of the contemporary art field within the society. Interviews with curators and observations within the art field are used as methodological tools to answer these questions. The thesis identifies three types of symbolic boundaries that are maintained by curators. By selection of artworks according to certain criteria, curators can maintain a narrow realm of contemporary art. By neglecting mediation and by legitimization of contemporary art by referring to “culture” they maintain an autonomous field within the society, and by competing for certain competencies, they create more flexible professional or disciplinary boundaries as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art institutions, especially state-funded ones – and the major contemporary art institutions in Hungary are primarily state-funded - emphasize their role in creating publicity for contemporary art, and educating audience (see the Mission Statements of e.g. Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, or Ludwig Museum – Contemporary Art Museum). Their history predestinates them to declare this mission. However, the first predecessors of art museums were founded by the bourgeoisie as spaces to meet and “acquire a degree of self-consciousness” (Bennett 1995, p. 25), in order to gain full legitimacy governments had to widen the public of museums providing access to high culture to lower social classes as well in the late 19th century (Bennett, 1995; Ballé, 2002; Duncan, 1995; Zolberg, 1992, 1994).

Based on earlier researches by Katalin S. Nagy¹, and on my own recent surveys and focus group interviews², I may safely draw the conclusion that the audience in Hungary does not have access to political and social discourses initiated by contemporary art exhibitions. There are several reasons for this: they do not visit contemporary art institutions, they do not have experience with modern and contemporary art, thus they do not have the means to approach artworks and the discourses they referred. Moreover their expectations towards art are often very different from what contemporary art aims to achieve.

Hungarian art professionals also realize the lack of visibility of contemporary art, some of them worry that even the intellectual elite, who consume different segments of highbrow culture as for example experimental theater, contemporary literature, rarely or never visit contemporary art

¹ Katalin S. Nagy found similar stratification of taste among lay audiences in the 70s and 80s to what Bourdieu found and wrote about in the *Distinction* (1992). She also found as a general rule that in the 70s people accepted art that was made before 1910s, and rejected art that was made after 1910s. This boundary moved slowly forward by a few years in the 80s. She found that the most popular artist was Mihály Munkácsy, a Hungarian romantic realist painter of the second half of the 19th century (S. Nagy, 2007).

² I conducted two representative national surveys (2005, 2006) and online focus group interviews among Hungarian middle-class informants, and found that Munkácsy was still the favorite artist, and only around 0,5% of the 1000 respondents named a contemporary painter. The focus group interviews revealed that people still think in traditional ways about art, claiming that art should be beautiful, should please the viewer, be a way of self-expression for artists. My results were presented at the Congress of ISA in Durban in 2006, and at the interim conference of the Sociology of Arts Research Network of the ESA in Lüneburg in 2007.

institutions (Szoboszlai, 2002; György, 1997; Előd, 2005). There is no doubt that the background of this phenomenon is very complex, and only part of the reasoning can be derived from the deficiencies of the educational system.

Moreover, we also have to take into consideration the global trend, that contemporary art is usually more isolated and less popular than some other cultural forms, or some historic artistic periods, but undoubtedly this isolation is more significant than in other, even Eastern European countries. In Hungary, with one or two exceptions, no daily or weekly newspapers publish critiques on contemporary art exhibitions and events. Although, as my interviewees reported, in most of the neighboring countries the history of the art of the communist era is already processed, the great artists of the period are known within the society, in Hungary the thorough study of the era has just begun, the great artistic contributions are known only in a very small, mostly professional circle.

Among other reasons of isolation there seem to be institutional reasons as well. So I am interested in the institutional side of contemporary art, and since through exhibition-making curators are the most visible actors of the institutional system, and they have a very important mediating role between artists, institutions, and the audience, I focus on their practices.

Several studies deal with the influential role and position of curators in the art field, which I review in the second chapter, but almost none of them focus on how they actually practice their role as “gatekeeper” (Verdaasdonk, 2001; Greenfeld, 2001), as “editor” (Becker, 1982) or as “creator of creators” (Bourdieu, 1993). Among the few exceptions is the thorough study of the meaning-making processes among curators by Sophia Krzys Acord (2009), or the study of the development of the Israeli art field by Liah Greenfeld (1989, 2001).

All these approaches implicitly or explicitly suggest that curators are in a position of selecting and defining who can cross the boundary of art and become a (known) artist, and even what art is at all. Therefore to understand these practices the concept of boundaries and boundary formation, which have significant literature in the sociology of culture, seems useful. Michèle Lamont

referring to Epstein defines symbolic boundaries as “lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others. ... they play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power” (2001, p.15341).

Using the concept of symbolic boundaries I could formulate my research questions as follows: What kind of boundaries are curators forming within the Hungarian contemporary art field? How do they build these boundaries practically? How do these boundaries relate to the isolation of the field?

These questions seem to be under-investigated in the sociology of arts in general. Besides Verdaasdonk (2001) who designates the investigation of the “procedures gatekeepers actually follow in reaching agreement on the nature and value of cultural products” (p. 13298) as an important direction for future research, Lamont and Molnár also call for a more thorough and close study of boundary formation, a “systematic cataloguing of mechanisms of activation, maintenance, transposition, disputation, bridging, crossing or dissolving boundaries” (Lamont&Molnár 2002, p. 191).

Although I will focus on these specific aspects of the field, I provide additional information gained from interviews and observations to create a broader map of the scene, since no thorough sociological investigation has been conducted until now on the institutional side of the Hungarian contemporary art.

The overall aim of the study is to map the Hungarian contemporary art field focusing on curators, nevertheless, I approach the overall question through the concept of boundaries and boundary formation. I identify the types of boundaries curators are building towards the different agents of the art field. I also attempt to explore the different practices they use to maintain and justify these boundaries, furthermore, I reveal what impact boundary formation has on the remaining isolation of contemporary art in the Hungarian society. Finally, I formulate recommendations for the further investigations of the field.

Two main methodological tools are used to study the phenomena: interviews with art professionals, and observations. In the section entitled to Methodology I give a detailed account on the research strategy and the details of the methodology I chose.

I argue that three different tendencies of boundary formation can be observed among Hungarian curators. Through the multiple expectations towards artists, and with quite definite, but rather subjectively applied criteria of “good” art they designate a narrow realm of contemporary art. I also argue that in a less definite way, but through the ignorance of the mediating role of museums, and through reference to “culture” as a legitimizing tool without questioning the power relations behind this concept, curators also contribute to the maintenance of the realm of an autonomous contemporary art field. The third boundary can be observed between curators and art historians around the competency areas of the two professions.

This research adds value to current research on the art field in several ways. First of all, it provides general information about the rather understudied Hungarian contemporary art field through the perspective of curators. The significance of this is even more obvious in global comparison, since most of the internationally known and cited research projects are conducted on the international art scene, in the centers of art, while this study will be a report from the periphery of the art world. It contributes to the study of boundaries and boundary formation, by investigating closely the practices and narratives of curators on boundaries. Finally, it gives an overview on the literature of symbolic boundaries in the cultural field.

CHAPTER 1 - THE ART WORLD, BOUNDARY FORMATION AND THE CURATOR

In this part I briefly introduce the curator as a professional in general, and review the sociological literature on art world, on boundary-formation and on the curator as gatekeeper, in order to assess which approaches can be useful in attempting to answer my research questions.

1.1 Who is the (contemporary art) curator at all?

According to the thorough review of the literature by Sophia Krzys Acord, the figure of the curator appeared as early as in the 18th century, but curatorship as a profession became standardized only in the nineteenth century. However, the figure of the curator as we know it today appeared in the 60s and 70s together with the emergence of contemporary art. This was the time of the first charismatic curators, such as Harald Szeemann. These changes resulted in the change of required competencies of curators as well. Instead of art history the emphasis has been put on a deep and thorough knowledge of the international art context, and personal organizational skills became important, such as managing wide personal network, possessing effective social abilities, expertise on particular subject (Acord, 2009).

Curators often emphasize different roles, they as curators have to manage. As one of my interviewees described, a curator is an exhibition-maker, an organizer, a manager, a producer, a mediator, an artist, and an art historian.

In Hungary the first generation of the now-a-day contemporary art curators appeared in the 90s, they were mostly trained as art historians, since curatorial education has not appeared in Hungary until 2009. Szoboszlai describes how these people trained themselves, often abroad, to be curators, critics, institution leaders, since these types of knowledge were and are mostly still not available in the Hungarian higher educational system (2002). The conditions have not changed significantly until today, the younger generation of art professionals, especially curators, has

studied abroad as well, however, last year the Hungarian University of Fine Arts has started a curatorial program.

We can not go into greater depths in the literature, without defining the phrase ‘contemporary art’. This is a quite difficult task, though obviously the phrase does not refer to the artworks of all the currently living artists, and at the same time it may refer to the artworks of artists, who already died. The art historical periodization put the beginning of the period to the 60s (see for example Danto, 1997), but usually art professionals make a further distinction, saying that a contemporary artwork has to connect and contribute to actual discourses of art, not to already closed discourses of earlier periods (Csizmadia, 2007). This definition, however, requires thorough knowledge of art history, and it may allow subjectivism.

In my research I consider as contemporary art professionals, curators and artists who work and exhibit in institutions that label themselves as contemporary and whom the Hungarian contemporary art scene also acknowledges as such.

1.2 Bourdieu on the art field and on the “creators of creators”

In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) Bourdieu focuses on pointing out how the activities of the agents and functioning of the structure result in structural change and reproduction in the cultural field. Here I will focus on his general description of the field and of art professionals, and will translate it to the sub-field of contemporary art and curators.

According to Bourdieu the cultural field is a *space of positions* and at the same time the *space of position-takings* (artistic manifestos, political statements, even artworks, etc.). Every position in any one moment of time is dependent and actually determined very much by all the other positions in the field. If a position moves in the hierarchy, or a new position emerges this can have an effect on the whole field - the positions can be redefined. The structure of the field is the structure of the distribution of the capital that is necessary to gain external (economic) or field-specific (artistic prestige) profits. The artistic field is a *field of struggles* for conserving or

transforming the field, in which struggle the strategy used by the different agents depends on their position in the power relations.

According to Bourdieu, the work of art is an *object of belief*, a *fetish* that “exist as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art” (p.35). At the same time the work of art is a manifestation of the struggles, power relations, structure and inherent determinism of the field. In this regard not only the material production but the value production, that is, the symbolic production of a work becomes important as well. Consequently, in the field of cultural production the “monopoly of legitimate discourse”, the monopoly to decide what is a work of art is the ultimate aim of struggles.

The artistic field occupies the dominated pole of the field of power, while this latter is in the dominant pole of the field of class relations. This embeddedness in the field of power, or more generally in the field of economy results in that in the artistic field a double hierarchy prevails. The *heteronomous* principle of hierarchization - that reigns as an influence of the economic field - is *success* (number of book sold, number of audience, etc.), while originally in the artistic field the autonomous principle of hierarchization is the *degree specific consecration*, that is, artistic prestige (p. 39). The more autonomous the field, or a sub-field is, the more it tends to suspend or reverse the economic hierarchization. This reversal of the logic of economic field yields the emergence of a division between restricted production (artists produce for other artists, the only aim is the acknowledgement of the peers, artists are indifferent towards economic profit or success) and the large-scale production, which is often symbolically excluded and discredited inside the field. Therefore the specific law of the field is disinterestedness and indifference towards success and it is due to this law that popularity is suspicious especially in the autonomous sub-field of restricted production. Translating it to capitals, growing economic capital usually leads to a decrease in symbolic capital.

The sub-field of contemporary art and especially, its most experimental forms can be understood as manifesting the field of restricted production. According to Bourdieu, the function of

boundaries in this case is to protect the autonomy of the sub-field from the market, and from the control of dominant classes.

In the field of art – especially in the field of restricted production - the only legitimate capital is ‘prestige’ or ‘authority’ and economic capital can only secure the profits if it is converted into symbolic capital. Therefore for artists and art professionals, thus for curators as well (whom Bourdieu usually does not mention, probably because at the time when he wrote this essay curatorship as a profession was not so acknowledged yet) the only legitimate accumulation is making a known, recognized name for oneself, a “capital of consecration”, which implies the power to consecrate, to give value to objects (artworks) and persons (artists).

Bourdieu calls the art dealers, publishers, critics, and professionals who organize exhibitions (that is the curator), the “creators of creator”, because without them “discovering” and consecrating the artwork through publishing, exhibiting, staging etc., the work remains a “mere natural resource”. Moreover the strength of the consecration of a work depends on how well-established - strongly consecrated - the consecrator him/herself is³ (p.77).

Art professionals are also “cultural bankers”, who invest all their symbolic capital, their prestige they have accumulated in the artists they consecrate (p.75). Their authority, their prestige on the other hand exists only in relation to the whole field of production, in relation to all the other participants (artists, art dealers, critics, audience), therefore reputation is created by the whole field as a result of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate (p.78).

It is the role of the empirical research to assess to what extent the Hungarian contemporary art field functions as a field of restricted production, and what role curators play in it.

³ In this part Bourdieu seems to give ultimate authority to art professionals, and this contradicts to what he said about the field of restricted production, where the peers are the only consecrators of the artist, and artworks are far from being just natural resources as Bourdieu here argues.

1.3 Howard Becker and the collaborative art world

Howard Becker can be situated in the interactionist tradition. In his book *Art Worlds* (1982) he claims that artistic production is not an individual activity but built on extended cooperation among the different actors of art worlds, artists, critics, aestheticians, audiences, etc. The cooperation becomes possible by the collective acceptance and use of certain conventions. Aesthetic systems, value judgments build up those conventions that make art worlds function. According to Becker aesthetic values arises from the consensus among participants. Nevertheless, due to the finite capacity of the distribution systems, different groups are competing for attention of audiences, and for the advantages of being presented (p. 134).

Changes are initiated by innovators, and in the convincing work aestheticians have a crucial role. They have to decide what is art and what is not art, and they have to do it in a clear-cut and defensible way, so that the art world can follow their principles; moreover somehow they have to define an aesthetic standard that allows approximately as many works as the art world's distributive mechanism can accommodate. To the question of "who can ratify something as art?" Becker's answer is: whom other participants collectively agree on (p.150). Becker also claims, that there are prior consensuses in the art worlds on what kind of standards a work has to meet to be considered as art, and on who is accepted to make those judgments.

In art worlds artworks are object to and result of constant "editing" processes, from the collaborations and assistance that follows their creation, through the decisions made by participants other than the artist about the art works even long after the death of the creator, to the internalized anticipated reactions of peers by the creators (p. 200).

In Becker's model, curators - among other professionals – perform editorial functions when "creating and maintaining channels of distribution more adequate for some kinds of works than others, and totally inadequate for still others" (p.214). Audiences play a crucial role in this model by constantly reconstructing the artwork by appreciating and receiving it.

Comparing the two models

There are few relatively identical assumptions in Bourdieu's and Becker's approach. They both describe the art world as a realm of complex interrelations, and the artwork as a result of interactions and collective creation. Nevertheless, while Becker gives a detailed description of the art world, Bourdieu attempts to give answers to the "why" question. Becker focuses on collective interactions, Bourdieu on struggles for dominant positions within the field and/or for autonomy.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu himself acknowledged the contribution of Becker, for breaking with the illusion of the individual creator, and revealing the collaboratory nature of artistic production, but he also criticized him for reducing the artistic field to a sum of individual agents, who are linked simply by interactions (1993, p. 34).⁴

Due to this main paradigmatic difference (i.e. cooperation vs. struggle), I found Bourdieu's field theory more efficient in explaining motivations of actors and conflicts, and therefore boundary-making as well.

1.4 The curator as editor, as creator, as gatekeeper

As we saw above, the curator can be considered as a kind of "cultural banker" who invests symbolic capital in the artist, and at the same time as a "creator of a creator", who discovers and therefore consecrates the artist, according to Bourdieu. The curator can be considered as an editor too, who creates and maintains "channels of distribution" that for some kinds of work are more appropriate than for others. This is how Becker defines the role.

⁴ A strong point of Becker's description of the art world, is that it pays attention to aesthetic judgments, and claims the existence of some kind of consensus among the participants on the principles of acknowledging an artwork, and also explains how it functions (participant imagine how others might respond, and accommodate these imagining constantly to real experiences of other's judgments). This suggests, that besides contextual parameters, inherent qualities also determine whether an object becomes an artwork or not (he gives an example of the evaluation of jazz music by musicians on p. 155). This is in disagreement with the general approach of sociologists, who explicitly or implicitly agree that aesthetic judgments are arbitrary, and contextual, and their role is to support power struggles. In my opinion Bourdieu does not really succeed in avoiding this instrumental trap either.

Developing Bourdieu's ideas about art professionals, researchers started to work with the concept of the "gatekeeper", which was already in use in other areas of social sciences. In Hugo Verdaasdonk interpretation cultural gatekeepers "occupy institutional positions between cultural producers and consumers. They determine which products cross the boundary between the private and the public domains, and when this boundary is crossed, they propose classifications and evaluations of the products that are included in cultural repertoires" (p. 13295). He argues that opposing the general and long prevailing idea that gatekeepers' expertise lies in the identification of the intrinsic properties of artworks – properties that make them into a work of art -, they rather follow certain group-bound procedures to classify and rank artworks by style, genre and quality, and these group-bound procedures increase the chance of agreement on the classifications, or at least the acknowledgement of their validity.

Verdaasdonk refers to his own research among literary gatekeepers, mostly critics, and assesses that critics usually strongly agree on which artwork is of superior quality, but they agree much less on how to classify certain artworks. He also points out that several researchers suggest, that "consensus formation among reviewers and critics is a process that is strongly reproductive in nature: Previous selections shape subsequent choices" (p. 13297), which means that different groups of gatekeepers tend to accept and take over each others selections, which can lead to a decrease in the number of possible selected works.

Using the concept of gatekeeping Liah Greenfeld studied the two separate subsystems of the art world in Israel, the subsystems of figurative art and avant-garde art. She claims, that although in the avant-garde subsystem the criteria for choices of artworks is difficult to ascertain, since there is a demand for absolute openness and freedom of artistic expression, the choices of gatekeepers are actually quite uniform, and suggest the existence of a small solidarity group of reference. While in the figurative subsystem, where the use of specific criteria of evaluation is highly encouraged by the professional ideologies, individual judgment is much more likely (2001, p. 904).

According to her, curators of the Israeli avant-garde subsystem instead of making decisions according to their own personal theories, actually accept the decisions of other agents, like artists, peer curators and other experts of the field, and they rarely risk to exhibit completely unknown artists. They do not want to serve the public, but their professional community, and though they agree that every art style should be given equal chance to be good art, their decisions do not reflect this plurality. She concludes that “by constantly denying all legitimacy to intrinsic criteria in art, avant-garde philosophy creates a situation in which the “social reality” of an artistic school replaces the reality of aesthetic experience” (p. 922).

There different approaches and definitions of the role of curators in the sociology of arts, but all these ideas implicitly or explicitly share one aspect, that is the power aspect of this role. The power is in the selection, curators have the power to select, and thus to “consecrate” artists, to make them cross the boundary into the public domain, and finally to make them part of the artistic canon. Where do these boundaries run? How are they maintained?

1.5 Symbolic boundaries and boundary formation in culture

In social sciences a significant body of literature deals with boundaries (review by Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár 2002). These concepts often directly use Bourdieu’s field theory as a basis, and even if they do not refer to it, work together with it well. Considering the nature of my research question I focus on symbolic boundaries (as distinguished from social boundaries), which Lamont and Molnár define as follows:

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space... Examining them allows us to capture dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications ... They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources. (Lamont&Molnár 2002, p. 168)

Symbolic boundaries are different from social boundaries, in that the latter are manifested forms of differences and for which the former are only “necessary but insufficient condition”.

1.5.1 Symbolic boundaries and cultural/class inequality

Since curators play an important role in defining what contemporary art is, they directly contribute to the production of a segment of culture that is often considered as “elite”. This argument implies that the boundary-work of curators aims at maintaining a distinct cultural field that is considered as legitimate high culture by the society and appreciated mostly by the dominant classes. However, following Bourdieu’s train of thought, contemporary art (Bourdieu refers to avant-garde art) is rather a field of restricted production, which is relatively autonomous from class struggles and the market.

It is again the role of the empirical research to reveal whether this is true in the case of Hungarian contemporary art, and to assess whether curators play a role in protecting the field from external control or whether they play a mediating role between the field and the market, or the dominant classes.

The (historical) relation between fine art or more broadly the so-called “high culture” and certain segments of the society is supported by several studies, one of the best known of which is Paul DiMaggio’s analysis of the emergence of high culture institutions in Boston in the nineteenth century. He argues that two very important art institutions, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra were founded by members of the local elite, the “Boston Brahmins” with the aim of institutionalizing their ideas about high art, and raising and strengthening cultural and thus social boundaries between themselves and the immigrating masses, who were challenging their control and dominance in political arena (DiMaggio 1982, p. 382).

He also points out how the organizational model of these institutions – private, non-profit cooperational format - ensured the direct control by the Brahmins, and the isolation from the market, which was an essential criterion of defining and sustaining an elite art. According to

DiMaggio, in this case boundary-work consisted of three main steps: monopolization (“single organizational base for each art form”), legitimization (claim to “serve the community”), sacralization (mystification of the art work by creating distance between artist and audience) of the culture of dominant status groups (p. 380). Besides these, classification was an important requirement in this process, which meant the definition of strong boundaries between art and entertainment, the employment of artistic professionals – more and more in decision making as well -, putting more emphasis on theories of high art, and creating new etiquette of appropriation of art works (p.377).

David Halle is contesting Bourdieu’s claim of a direct relation between the dominant classes and high cultural consumption nowadays. Based on his research – conducted in New York City households - Halle argues that abstract art has no more but decoration function in the homes of the investigated families of middle and upper-middle classes, and this suggests that to buy abstract art does not require long training of appropriation of high culture but only a decision, that can have several reasons. Abstract art does not seem to be a real cultural barrier, he argues, and claims that culture is more complex than just being the instrument of domination and power, as some theorists suggests (Halle 1992, p. 147).

In the same volume, Diana Crane argues that the division between high culture and popular culture is not adequate for sociology, because there are no clear definitions or definable boundaries between them, no universal aesthetic system or standards for quality, and even professionals have no consensus about them. Therefore Crane suggests a categorization of recorded cultures that is drawn from the “environment in which they are created, produced and disseminated” (Crane 1992, p. 59). According to this she defines two major cultures, media culture and urban culture. The boundaries and boundary-work do not occur between these two major cultures, but mostly within the “culture worlds” of urban culture.

Crane refers to the work of Mulkay and Chaplin, who distinguished three types of gatekeeping practices, the model of aesthetic appraisal, the model of cultural persuasion, and the model of

social influence. The first model assumes that there are explicit standards to evaluate the inherent qualities of artworks, the second presumes, that new groups of creators develop new criteria of aesthetic judgment, and their success depends on whether they can persuade gatekeepers to accept these criteria. The third model suggests that success in art and in general in cultural worlds is a question of financial support of influential gatekeepers. Crane argues that while the first model is outdated by several sociological researches, the second and third model are much more realistic, and they are not mutually exclusive.

Crane also contests the direct relationship between certain segments of culture and dominant classes, arguing that the elite is fragmented into different educational, occupational elites, which control different parts of national cultures (a new concept besides media and urban culture, that the author does not define), but probably do not manipulate cultural messages as much as sociologists usually assume. In accordance with reception theory she emphasizes the importance of the interpretative practices of audiences, which are much more determined by life-styles than by class identities. Urban cultures are also controlled by different elites, and for my research it is important, that referring to Gans Crane claims, avant-garde cultures are controlled by intellectual and academic elites (p. 69). However, class-based cultural exclusion is disappearing in urban cultures, due to changing social realities of cities, the mobility of the middle-class and upper classes, the declining familial private sponsorship (in the US), the constantly changing ethnical composition, and the disappearing city centers - this latter actually threatening the survival of urban cultures on the whole (p. 71).

These studies contribute to the research of the relation of “elite” culture and dominant classes and provide some starting point for the investigation of boundary-work among curators; though – except DiMaggio – the authors do not focus directly on the mechanism of boundary-work.

However, there are other possible approaches to the study of boundary-formation practices of curators: defining boundary-work as a means of designating the frontier of contemporary art,

investigating boundaries within institutions, or as legitimization of a disciplinary or a professional field.

1.5.2 Boundaries of the field, insider and outsider art

Gatekeepers “determine which products cross the boundary between the private and the public domains, and when this boundary is crossed, they propose classifications and evaluations of the products that are included in cultural repertoires” claims Verdaasdonk, who mostly investigates the literary field. Zolberg and Cherbo use the “insider vs. outsider art” distinction when they investigate the boundaries of art, mostly of the visual arts. The concept of “outsider art” on the one hand refers to “objects or performances of aesthetic interest” produced by people who did not get any training, and may not think of themselves as artist, such as asylum inmates, elderly people in nursing homes, folk or ethnic artists, etc. (Zolberg, Cherbo 1997, p.1). On the other hand it can refer to trained artists who are outside the mainstream or outside the canon, “around which artistic products and their makers are evaluated, along with a body of work that represents those standards” (p.3).

Zolberg and Cherbo briefly review how the official canon, defined and maintained by the Academia became obsolete with the appearance of modernism, and how the autonomous sphere of fine art was contested by technological inventions, such as photography or color lithography, and new art forms, such as Pop Art, during the 20th century. However, they conclude that “in the postmodern era the transgression and maintenance of artistic boundaries coexist in a state of chronic tension” (p. 6).

“Determinants of “insider” status among artists are complex” claims Finney, and he criticizes Bourdieu for a tendency to “oversimplify the process of “admission” to the inside by reducing it to an outcome of a power struggle between the powerful and the powerless” (1997, p.82). He argues that artists have to master the existing styles and the myriad of conventions of the art-world, but have to be highly innovative, possess an “independent vision”, which is one of the

central barriers of becoming an insider. However, insider training is not a guarantee for artists, to become insider later, it is also a question of how successfully they can adapt to the institutions and networks of their art world. Studying a local art world Finney found that “the most important selective mechanisms for insider status were formal art education, acquiring professional attitudes, artistic style, network centrality, jurying, and sales” (p. 78). However, he points out that in metropolitan art worlds the most central factor to become insider is recognition by respected museums and galleries.

Cherbo demonstrates on the inclusion of Pop Art into American art history, how an outsider movement became suddenly insider, and shattered the “small elite enclave” of modernist art, and all the previously accepted norms and rules of the art world. She points out that to achieve this, the support of an influential art dealer, and the decision to bypass the museums and critics of the art world, and entering “directly the marketplace for approval” was essential (1997, p.86). Although critics were late and hesitant to recognize the new movement, Pop Art has eventually changed the international art scene, by grounding the “once lofty art world”, opening up the definition of art, and reordering the process of recognition (p. 95).

1.5.3 Symbolic boundaries within institutions

Several researchers focused on the practices of boundary-work within institutions. Zolberg investigated symbolic boundary-making in art institutions in the US and France in several studies, claiming that in these institutions, between the two alleged goals of professionalization and democratization, the first has priority (1992, 1994). In Zolberg’s research this manifested in the attitudes of museum directors, who explicitly claimed that they did not want to move in the “populist” direction, and that education should not go on in museums, because it threatens to devalue art. One director even said that he would like to select the visitors of the museum by their previous knowledge of art (1992, p. 195). Boundary-making was also recognizable in the low position and prestige of museum educators in museums (p.196).

Victoria Alexander was interested in the art founding strategies of different public and private sponsors in US art museums. She found that to some extent both funders and museums tried and managed to maximize their interests. The data confirmed that exhibition profiles changes according to the change in sponsorship, that is, the format and content of exhibitions reflects the emergence of corporate funding. However, in order to maintain their legitimacy as academic research institutions that house high culture as well and to meet professional standards, on one hand curators changed the exhibition format, but not the content (curating more popular or accessible exhibitions continuously based on thorough research work), and on the other hand museums tended to spend their inner budgets more on academic exhibitions, while housing more externally funded popular shows to meet the corporate sponsors' requirements and taste. She also concluded that museums are important institutions in canonization of artworks, thus in legitimizing and defining artistic canon, and influencing artistic boundaries.

1.5.4 Professional and disciplinary boundaries

To talk about disciplinary or professional boundary-formation among curators as a possible motivation is a valid direction of the research, since curatorship is a relatively new “profession”, especially in Hungary, searching for its place within the academic sphere as well. There is an emerging literature of “curatorial studies”, with a theoretical background based on art theory, philosophy, cultural studies, critical studies and partially sociology, and it is developing its own methodology, the so called “curatorial research”.

Since in the case of curatorship professional and disciplinary boundaries seem to merge, and curatorship seems to bear a double character in competing for dominance within the contemporary art field, especially in Hungary, I propose Thomas Gieryn's concept to approach this phenomenon.

The very concept of boundary-work was actually coined by Gieryn, who investigated scientific ideologies and demarcation of science by scientists. Boundary-work according to him “describes an ideological style found in scientists’ attempts to create a public image for science by contrasting it favorably to non-scientific intellectual or technical activities” (p.781). Gieryn distinguishes three types of boundary-work: expulsion (what is science, what is not), expansion (which epistemic authority has monopoly over an ontological domain), and the protection of autonomy.

I chose his approach for several reasons. He proposes an approach which can be applied in cases when two disciplines struggle for a domain of knowledge (as in the case of art history and curatorship), he focuses on actual practices of boundary work, and his approach makes it possible to investigate scientific or professional ideologies that serves boundary-work, on a stylistic and content level. In his study of three examples of professional ideologies he demonstrates how these boundary practices can be identified.

CHAPTER 2 - THE PAST AND PRESENT OF THE HUNGARIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

FIELD

Before continuing to the presentation of empirical results, we have to summarize the history of the Hungarian contemporary art field, and describe its present situation, to provide the necessary context.

First of all, we need to briefly review the history of the avant-garde art in the 20th century, because – as I have experienced it - a great part of the contemporary Hungarian art scene seems to be the direct inheritor of the sometimes tolerated, other times banned neo-avant-garde art of the 60s and 70s, since several figures of that countercultural scene started to teach at the Intermedia Department of the Hungarian University of Art in the 90s, moreover the contemporary art scene seems to suffer from a similar isolation as avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art, and it is still struggling with its near past. Much of the story of the post-war Hungarian art has remained unprocessed until today.

Throughout the 20th century until 1989, avant-garde art, and progressive artists existed in “second publicity”. This means, that unlike avant-garde of Western-Europe and the US, Hungarian avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art did not become part of the Hungarian culture, and it thus suffered from a continuous marginality within the national culture and isolation from the international scenes (Forgács, 2002). Forgács writes: “the aim of both the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde art was artistic and political freedom, and the achievement of international presence that allows for the creation of an alternative culture” (translated by me, 2002, p.11). According to her, avant-garde art has been struggling throughout the century with the reconciliation of the allegiance to national traditions and international validity, with the art and cultural policy supported by the official political power, and with the continuous absence of an art purchasing public of solid capital. In most of the 20th century contemporary art in general did not represent value for the

audience and for the art market; only contemporary architecture made it to the wider public, and gained acknowledgement. Other modern and avant-garde art forms met harsh rejection, except from a very narrow intellectual circle (2002, p.43).

Although the avant-garde attempted to reach out to a wider audience, to address young workers, due to the constant political isolation and oppression it never managed. The neo-avant-garde in the 60s and 70s had even less chance (Forgács, 2002). Moreover, the Hungarian avant-garde and later the neo-avant-garde were characterized by total ignorance of a possible supply and demand relation between the artist and the audience.

The second half of the 60s saw the emergence of a freer, post-Stalinist era, several smaller exhibitions in hidden but public spaces (like suburban culture houses), the appearance of appreciative art criticism (however, represented by only one art critic, Géza Perneczky), and a small period when writers, film-makers, artists were thinking and often working together. This short period was not enough to reach the audience, and the isolation gained a kind of justification in Perneczky's critiques, who claimed that this minority existence, higher norms, laboratory-work and experimenting are "morally very appealing, and much more sympathetic than putting art up for sale". His only concern was that the inwardness may result in "the rediscovery of the once solved tasks and the repetition of the classic avant-garde" (quoted by Forgács, translated by me, p. 60).

The break in the opening up of the Hungarian cultural life in '72 resulted in the emigration of many avant-garde artists of the counter-culture, and the neo-avant-garde fell into even deeper isolation. During the 70s Miklós Erdély gradually became the charismatic leading figure of the neo-avant-garde. The 70s was the era of the emergence of conceptual art as well, that became even more political, conceptual and bitter after '72.

The departure of the new generations after '89 was strongly determined by the neo-avant-garde tradition since several figures of the neo-avant-garde returned from emigration; the teachers of the Intermedia Department were and still are members or followers of the neo-avant-garde

generation. Szoboszlai claims that Tamás St.Auby (one of the leading figures of the period between '68 and '72, who emigrated in the 70s, and since his return to Hungary has been teaching in the Intermedia Department), his approach to art and his activity had a great influence on certain artists of the 90s; the discourse he maintains even nowadays meets the fundamental questions of newer generations of artists (2002, p. 342).

Although in the 90s the political isolation ceased, and many new and innovative institutions and initiatives appeared on the scene (Soros Centrum for Contemporary Art, ICA-Dunaújváros, Trafó, foreign cultural centers, non-profit galleries, and few commercial galleries dealing with contemporary art as well, etc.) contemporary art remained on the margins of culture, much more than other segments of contemporary culture (Szoboszlai, 2002).

According to Szoboszlai in the 90s no intensive trade emerged on the market of contemporary artworks - which he explained with the lack of a wider social basis for contemporary art - and young Hungarian artists could not make it to the international scene yet, although they created artworks of international level.

Szoboszlai quotes the well-known art theoretician Péter György, who wrote in 1997 that “in the last 20 years artists in return for the maintenance of their specific, autonomy-like ghetto have, with a few exceptions, virtually disqualified themselves from the influential groups of Hungarian intellectuals” (translated by me, p. 322).

Contemporary art curators, with a few exceptions, appeared in the 90s as well, and they became one of the most important actors in the shaping of the prestige and social judgment of art (Szoboszlai, p.325). However, due to the obscurity of methodology and terminology of art history and criticism writing, art critics stick to “supportive criticism”, and descriptive reviews, which do not have significant influence on the work of either curators or artists, or on the art trade (p.322). According to Szoboszlai, in the 90s many of this new type of exhibitions (curatorial exhibition) were heavily criticized and rejected by art professionals, claiming that their concepts were not well-based or the conclusions derived from the research were questionable.

As a conclusion of his review, Szoboszlai claims, that the institution system of contemporary art in Hungary in the 90s was not innovative enough and due to the inner divisions the professional lobby was unable to convincingly represent contemporary art in the media, before the audience, the private sector, the international market, and the state (p.349).

In the 2000s the conditions slightly changed since currently the directors of the main institutions come from the new generation of art professionals, and most of the curators are trained curators, besides their art historical training.

Today the Hungarian contemporary art field has two main institutions in Budapest, Ludwig Museum – Contemporary Art Museum, and Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, smaller institutions, like Trafó – House of Contemporary Art, Impex, tranzit.hu, etc., a few non-profit galleries such as Liget Gallery, and a few institutions in other cities, like Institute of Contemporary Art in Dunaújváros, and MODEM in Debrecen. The training of artists goes on in three higher educational institutions: in the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, in the University of Pécs, and in the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. The training of curators started in 2009 at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. The most important representative of the young contemporary artists is the Studio of Young Artists Association, which is a more than 70 year-old professional organization.

The main source of financing is the National Cultural Fund, which is responsible for distributing the state funds for culture, and the Hungarian Institute for Culture and Art, which regularly announces competitions and scholarships for artists and art professionals.

Only two or three commercial galleries have committed themselves to selling the works of those artists whose works appear in the above mentioned public contemporary art institutions. A few private collectors appeared on the scene as well. Nevertheless, these changes are slow and have just started, contemporary art is still poorly represented on the international art scene, and its isolation in the society has not diminished significantly.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

To investigate symbolic boundaries, several different methodological tools can be applied. In case of studying boundary-work among critics (see Verdaasdonk, 2001) or scientists (as we saw in Gieryn's research) to analyze texts can be an obvious choice, because they primarily produce texts during their work. In the case of curators, the question of appropriate methodology is more complex. Curators also produce texts mainly as exhibition catalogues or visitor guides, but this activity is just a part of their work, and in these texts they usually describe the concept and the artworks rather than justifying their choices with stylistic and quality aspects. Moreover, since my aim was to reveal what kinds of boundaries run along the field, to focus only on written materials would have provided limited results. I needed a more general, more explorative methodology, so I decided to make interviews and use my observations.

I have been working in the Hungarian contemporary art field since 2007 as a project assistant in a small non-profit organization, therefore I am in regular contact with several contemporary art curators.

However, my observations in the field were not systematic in the last three years, that is, I did not write field notes on a daily basis, I observed many public events (which I recorded with a voice recorder as well), and I observed several small talks and conversations among curators. It was different from a regular field work in another sense as well: even though I started to work in the contemporary art field with the aim of collecting more information about it, the project did not start as a consciously constructed research project.

In August 2009 I conducted six interviews (all of them with curators, two of them at the same time director of a smaller institution/gallery), and I completed those with four more interviews in April-May 2010 (three with curators and one with a director of an institution, who is also a curator). Seven of the interviewees are employees of leading contemporary art institutions, three

of them are free lancers. Some of them have other activities besides curating, such as writing critiques, researching, facilitating community events within the art field. Since the scene is very small, approximately 25-30 curators curate contemporary art exhibitions more or less regularly, to ensure anonymity I do not provide more information about the informants.

The interviews were semi-structured, and usually had a double purpose: some questions referred to the subjective narratives of curators on their practices, or to their opinions, other questions aimed at gaining information on the contemporary art field in general. Because of the exploratory character of the research, and the relative difficulty to approach symbolic boundaries through direct questions, I experimented with the guideline of the interviews. Some questions remained the same all along the field work, but some of them I changed from time to time depending on whether they worked previously or not, or whom I conducted the interview with.

3.1 Conceptualization of the interview questions

The first interviews contained quite broad and general questions, and based on the literature and previous observation of the art field, the main focus of the questions were curators' relations to artworks, exhibitions, institutions and audience. Since one of the research aims was to reveal boundary formation practices of curators towards artists, I asked the informants about how they define "contemporary art", what they consider an artwork, how they evaluate "good artworks" and "bad artworks", what kind of art they like, how they get know new artists. To know more about how they think of exhibitions, I asked them, what they see as a role of exhibitions, how they formulate the concept of an exhibition, when they are satisfied and when they are disappointed about the outcome, whose critic they take into consideration in the first place, what they think about the role of contemporary art institutions, and what they think about the audience of contemporary art in Hungary. I asked most of the interviewees to formulate opinion about two recent events, a scandalous performance connected to an art prize, and about the artworks of a

completely outsider street art activist, who had several exhibitions in the last two years. Certain interviewees I asked different questions as well, like the directors of institutions.

Due to the reactions and feedbacks from the interviewees, and the emerging issues in the first interviews, the questions became more concrete and direct towards the end of the field work. As the observations suggested that some professional boundaries may exist as well in the field, I slightly changed the guideline. However, most of the results regarding professional and disciplinary boundaries come from observations of events and discussions.

I hardly ever observed any discussion or conversation among curators about the private sector's relation to contemporary art, and these discussions almost never touched the art market, only rarely the role of private collectors, and more often the role of private sponsors. Due to this experience and to the time limit of interviews I decided not to ask curators about their attitudes toward the art market and private collectors, but I asked most of them about their opinion of private sponsorship using the case of the above mentioned art prize.

I have chosen to analyze the interviews along two dimensions. In the first step I used the method of 'data reduction', and in the second step 'data complication' (Coffey, Atkinson 1996). This latter method provided the possibility of opening up the analysis, to expand and transform the data and ask further questions of the content.

CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS

The observations suggested and the interviews further supported that three main tendency of boundary formation is detectable in the activities of curators. There is a rather significant boundary work towards artists, which, I assumed, can be grasped by their definition of art in general and of contemporary art in particular, by their evaluation of the quality of artworks, and by the processes of selection. I could also recognize a less determined boundary forming towards the audience or the society, and a kind of disciplinary/professional conflict too was observable between art historians and curators.

In what follows I will discuss the results of observations and interviews.

4.1 Boundaries towards artists

Due to the lack of a strong art market of contemporary art works in Hungary the only possibility for an artist to become known is to be exhibited in the institutions of contemporary art. These institutions employ curators, who have nearly absolute freedom to decide which Hungarian artists they would like to work with.

However, among the few constrains of selection that curators mentioned are financial limitations, or the institutional profile, sometimes professional reasons. Financial limitations are commonsensical in the art world, nearly everyone complained about them. Institutional profile can be a limiting factor (not necessarily a negative one) when curators feel obliged to accommodate their work to it. A curator of an institution of a smaller town and another curator of a gallery that works within a bigger institution claimed that they attempt to choose artists and themes/concepts, that somehow fit into the profile of the space, although these themes are not necessarily in line with their own interest. In other interviews the interviewees claimed that curators of big public institutions have to take into consideration the position of the institution in

the society, its publicity. Exhibitions, which are made for the professional “scene”, should be curated in smaller, non-profit galleries, they said.

One curator mentioned professional reasons. She claimed that there are exhibitions she cannot or do not want to make in the present Hungarian art scene: “It was different to work in Z (a capital abroad), the scene was smaller, and I could still curate exhibitions that I would never have curated here...because I would have thought that they would go totally unnoticed”.

The gate-keeping role of institutional curators makes the question about their criteria for selection relevant. In some interviews I asked the interviewees about what art is, and what makes an object artwork, reflecting on the common saying that “nowadays anything can be art”. I got mainly two types of answers, some of them answered that the work should appear in an artistic context, within the institutional system of the art world, for example in exhibitions, however, it does not have to be created by a trained artist. The other type of answer was that categorization is not important.

However, when I asked them about specific works (the works of the Two-Tailed Dog Party⁵), and the position of the creator of these works, who himself claimed that he is not an artist, curators gave very different answers about whether they consider him an artist. Some of them argued, that since those works can be interpreted according to an artistic tradition, we have the right to consider him an artist, regardless what he thinks about himself. Others answered that according to their criteria he is not an artist. Here an important argument was that the criterion of becoming an artist is to become a member of the artistic scene, to be able to speak its discourses, and have an artistic network.

I also asked the interviewees about the meaning or essence of being “contemporary”. The answers were quite homogeneous. All of the curators agreed on that a contemporary artwork has

⁵ The Two-Tailed Dog Party was initiated by a street art activist, who started to make humorous and critical posters as a reaction to the 2006 elections, and stickers in Szeged. Soon he was “discovered” by the contemporary art scene and exhibited by several curators. The founder of the party constantly claims, that he is not an artist, he even declared that he does not like contemporary art, and does not really understand it, and to demonstrate it he made a fake exhibition in an art gallery, where he made fake artworks, with whole biographies of fake artists as a provocation to the art world. More info on the Party: www.mkkp.hu.

to reflect on its context and reality. Moreover, it has to reflect on what has happened until now in the history of contemporary art and in the history of the certain artistic genre. One of the curators also mentioned, that she rarely considers paintings contemporary, because that format is not very adequate in the 21st century. Another curator gave a very firm answer. She said, that contemporary means that the artist is part of a network, that is, s/he is mastering the discourses that institutions of contemporary art produce. These institutions are easy to define, she claimed: the art schools and exhibition spaces of New York, London and Berlin, and few other cities; artworks that are part of these discourses or are aware of them, and somehow reflect on them, are contemporary.

The question about “good” and “bad” art resulted in a bigger variety of responses again. I also asked the curators to speak about the artworks or type of art they like, to provide them with more opportunity to speak about works and evaluation criteria.

First of all, several informants made a remark that the division of good and bad may not be appropriate, because the evaluation works often depends on the point of analysis.

One of the aspects that appeared in different ways in almost every response was referentiality, which means that the concept of the work have to be very informed about what has been done in the art in the last decades.

All of them responded that an artwork has to reflect on the context where it is created and ideally also on the context where it is exhibited. It has to be very focused in its attention, very “deliberate” in every detail, that is, all the solutions and details have to be “defensible”. This also means, that good works are usually very complex, and multi-layered, can have many different interpretations. Nevertheless, as one curator argued, a “work is either very complex, and then you can be absorbed in it and admire its complexity, or it can be simply a very good idea, and the two is not comparable, because they are different”. Another curator added that evaluation depends on the ambitions and initial goals of the work, and it has to be consequent in fulfilling this goal from the initial idea, trough the process of creation, until the visualization.

Several of them agreed that a good work “remains with the viewer”, it is either enigmatic, hard to grasp in every detail, therefore engages the viewer for longer time, or somehow can serve as a guidance in different situations of life, as one of them proposed.

Some of them mentioned that artists who are engaged in social, political or environmental problems in their art, are often not enough knowledgeable in those social, political or environmental discourses, or in critical theories, which makes the artworks “less valid” and “less credible”.

All the interviewees rejected pure aesthetization and formalism. One curator claimed, that in the case of political art for example any aesthetization can be dangerous, because it can cover “retrograde” thoughts that contradict the main argument of the work, thoughts that are unintended, strengthen stereotypes, and take off the edge of the criticism of the work. Nevertheless, several interviewees stated that a level of aesthetism, sensuality, personality is important for them in artworks, moreover, they prefer works that are interesting and captures the attention. Some of them added that they do not like provocative art if it is “too easy”, and direct, if there is “no idea in it”. One of them mentioned the work of Kriszta Nagy, who defecated at the Parliament behind a line of policemen, as an example of pure provocation, she does not like.

The criteria of innovation was not so strongly formulated as Greenfeld experienced it in the 80s in the Israeli avant-garde art scene, however, it was mentioned from time to time in different forms.

Several curators started the description of good art works with saying that it is a “question of taste”, and “others would probably say different things”, and although the criteria given for “good” art are correlating in the responses, some of the interviewees reminded me that this does not mean that their evaluation of certain artworks will be the same. One curator told me that it happened to her that the works of a Swedish artist that she really liked turned out to be bad artworks for a curator friend of her, even if they usually agreed on the evaluation of works. When

I asked what the reason was for the disagreement, she answered that for this foreign curator the works were superficial and too much aestheticized, while she personally “could invest more meaning in it”, the works gave more to her, she said. Finally she concluded “it was probably also because she knows 600 other better works that deal with this topic”.

Speaking about the kind of art they like, the curators became more specific and confident, they specified thematic focuses, and named certain artists. For the scope of my research these more personal criteria bear the same relevance since personal preferences often play a very important role in the selection of artists for an exhibition.

The thematic focuses and genre showed a certain variety: art related to archives, historical and cultural memory or collective memory, works related to space, the city and architecture, documentarist video art, political art, project or process-based art, conceptual and post-conceptual works, video art, installation art, photos, sound art. Paintings were not among the mentioned genres. Some interviewees explained this with saying that they are not very interested in paintings recently, or that they don’t find the format very relevant for certain themes, such as political art.

They added further, more precise criteria about the works themselves as well. A curator gave more precise description of what “complex” means for her:

[I like artists] who approach [topics] in a bit more complex way, that is, who, let’s say... besides thinking in installation and concept, by all means write on the one hand, this means, they have a very strong theoretical knowledge, and a kind of exemplary creative method, so they do not put let say an object there, but instead they try to map a certain way of thinking, and it is not just that they react on special space, institution, situation, but somehow can present in an installation what they [think] about quasi certain thematic, let say about historical past, or even about a photographic bequest, or different archives...

Another curator summarized that she prefers art that has metaphoric and sensual or aesthetic levels besides the “meaningful” content.

We can conclude that these evaluations are not so contradictory, there are certain, well-definable criteria that every curator find important, like referentiality, reflexivity, complexity or innovative idea, thorough and well-established approach and knowledge of the topic, contextuality, which

means reflexivity on the reality that surrounds the artists. This contradicts to the findings of Greenfeld. She claimed that in the Israeli avant-garde subsystem curators were very hesitant to give definite criteria for evaluating works.

Nevertheless when I asked curators about certain artworks, or they themselves mentioned works as examples, they evaluated them very differently. While one curator evaluated an artwork as “forceful”, because it addresses certain recent political issues, which no other artist addressed, the other admits, that the initiative was important, but evaluates it from the point of view of international discourses of the art field, and claims that the artist did not create it in a knowledgeable way.

In another case, when I asked curators about an art performance of Miklós Mécs, which strongly divided the art world when he rejected an art prize⁶ in 2009, the answers were again oscillating. Some curators judged it negatively, and labeled it as “gag art”, as a provocation, which was not “deliberate” in its details. Another curator labeled it as “reactionary”, which recalls the very contra-productive art supporting system of the Kádárist era. Again others praised the artist because of his braveness to take this political stance which is missing in the present Hungarian art scene. One of the curators who shared this latter opinion claimed that even if it is “gag art”, it does not mean it is bad art.

I asked several curators what they think about Hungarian contemporary artists, and except two interviewees all of them agreed that there are very few interesting and good artists now on the scene. One of them explained with this that she works with only very few Hungarian artists in her exhibitions. Another claimed, that they are not very informed regarding the actual discourses of

⁶ Summa Artium Foundation proposed an idea to found an art award similar to the Turner-Prize in Hungary, and the AVIVA Life Insurance Co. found it worth to support. They invited 6 art professionals (curators, and critics) to nominate 6 artists who would then make a two-week exhibition in Kunsthalle Budapest, during which the jury have to decide who wins the 5 million Forints prize. One of the nominated artists, Miklós Mécs found this generated competition among artists unacceptable. He first suggested to the other 5 participants to agree, that whoever wins the prize, they share the money. Only 2 artists responded. After this Mécs made a performance in Kunsthalle and handed over a letter to the jury in which he rejected the nomination, declaring that he does not want to participate in such ‘pony race’.

art, they are not enough mobile, compared to other young artists from the region, very few of them go abroad to study. They lack initiative and skills of self-management, which may be a national characteristic of Hungarians, she claimed. Others blamed the art educational system as well, for not introducing students into the current discourses and for not preparing them to real life situations. A curator, who had an artistic practice in an earlier period of her life, described this as follows:

...every day, when you go to your studio and start to work on an artwork, or on anything, you have to put the question to yourself, why, and you have to actually reposition it in this situation, and this is not easy. And what I see is that, here, here many people do not think of this, and none of the teachers help them in this, so it is not a legitimate thing, that you build quasi a conscious creative method, and that you have a conscious creative strategy, which requires very significant managerial skills too, so for you to survive in the contemporary art scene you need a very determined self-management, and it is the obligation of the school to teach you this.

I also asked curators about how they come to know new artists. They usually answered that on exhibitions, or by recommendation of other curators, rarely other artists. There was one who slightly humorously claimed, that he could even work with the same 20-30 artists he knows already all his life. Two of them mentioned that they are often jurying in competitions, so they can see portfolios of many young artists. One curator mentioned that she has artist friends, and they introduce her to new artists. Another curator claimed that a good way to come to know artists and follow their work would be studio visit, but almost no one does it nowadays. As one of them said:

..I think no one has enough time to fish, because I could simply go to Studio [Studio of Young Artists] and look at all the portfolios, it happened that I asked for video materials, but of course those videos were mainly videos of artists we already knew.. euuh.. well, yes, the exhibition is the forum ...[where one can come to know new artists]

There were a few interesting critiques concerning curatorial choices. One of the interviewees when talking about the Hungarian curators in general claimed that they choose from a very limited circle of Hungarian artist (although she also agreed, that there are few good artists), which causes that artists become “worn out” fast. Their choices and approach are very elitist, that is,

they work mainly with radical conceptual art, which is more convertible on the international scene, and which through the teachers from neo-avant-garde at Intermedia Department has an influence on the younger generation of artists still until today.

Elitism is very strongly present in the curatorial work, what they don't call elitism, I think they rather call it a kind of quality principle, so to choose always the best, the finest... the most appropriate, so it is measured very much on a pharmacy balance, therefore it has a kind of sterility, I think...

She also argued, that there is a strong urge of conformity among curators to the international scene, and international discourses and trends, that there is no time to make thorough research for exhibitions, and on the other hand this conformity to global discourses prevents the art scene to reflect on the social problems that weigh on their own society.

Another curator mentioned a similar phenomena. He said that there is a circle of curators who watch each other very much, they make exhibitions for each other, and they use a very professional language in catalogues and texts in the exhibition, which is hardly understandable for the viewers.

Spontaneously, only one or two interviewees reflected on their own dominant position in selecting artists and in building the canon. Some of them rejected this claim even when I asked directly about power relations. One curator answered that this is something only those artists say, who are rarely exhibited.

Speaking about the Hungarian curators in general, one of them formulated that the international contemporary art scene is very wide, and Hungarian curators have direct connection only to a very small segment of it, certain trends, certain institutions of the non-profit sector, like Documenta, which are rather leftist. She argued that the most influential curators in Hungary, who try to develop a certain profile in their work, follow the taste of a small segment of the international art world, the leftist professionals, who are nevertheless in dominant positions especially in Europe.

These responses revealed some important details about boundary work of curators towards artists. We can conclude that although criteria for value judgments are not so fluid, as sociologists often think, the different viewpoints and individual preferences make the value judgments within a certain interval rather unpredictable. This contradicts to what Verdaasdonk found among literary gate-keepers. While curators more or less agree on the categorization, even on the criteria of good art, they do not agree on the evaluation of certain artworks.

Curators' actual practices of selection (selection by preference, selecting artists they already know, selecting artworks that fit the curatorial concept), their high standards of quality, and expectations towards artists (self-management, networking, mastering the discourses), that relatively few of them can meet, contribute to the creation and maintenance of a narrow art scene with few insiders. This narrow scene reproduces itself through the dominant position of the opinion leader curators, who follow "a small elitist group" of international professionals.

Finney's description of the requirements for an "insider" artist is very similar to what I found, except that in the Hungarian contemporary art world sales are almost never mentioned, because they are very rare.

4.2 Boundary formation towards the audience

Probably an interview is a less efficient tool to reveal boundary-work among curators towards the audience, observations and analysis of the communication of exhibitions, such as the text of catalogues, textual information provided in the exhibition space, text and methods of guided tours, would provide more information. However, the opinions, attitudes and thoughts of curators about the audience, about their own role, and the role of the institutional system can help us to shed light on boundaries.

The interviewed curators agreed on that in the Hungarian society there is a very low interest towards contemporary art, much lower than in Western societies, where contemporary art has a certain prestige. Nevertheless, it became clear during the interviews that the interviewees do not

think in these terms about the field. When they were talking about problems of the scene, except some of the institutional directors, they never mentioned the lack of interest as a problem. I also have to add here that during my observations this was almost never problematized in professional discussions among curators, or on symposiums or professional events, which suggests that most of the curators are not very concerned about this issue.

In the interviews curators explained this lack of social support with the deficiencies of the Hungarian educational system, and with the literature-oriented nature of the Hungarian culture.

Two of them claimed that the art scene is to blame as well, they felt themselves personally responsible as curators for the mediation or communication of exhibitions, but both of them admitted that they usually do not have time or financial source for that.

...and if we want to be self-critical, than actually ... the most important element of contemporary art would be art mediation, which is actually not so improved as the presentation industry, so the exhibition industry, or the... yes, the exhibitions [...] Moreover, contemporary art is deconstructing the canon, because in many cases it works against supporting a value system that can be organized in hierarchy, so the situation is double as difficult. But I repeat, I presume, that the lack of mediation is a very big problem as well, and maybe that it is difficult to mediate, so it cannot be easily formulated in catchwords what this all is about, therefore it receives less attention or media publicity.

During the interviews curators usually mentioned institutions, such as Kunsthalle or Ludwig Museum, in connection with their professional role, such as to “construct a canon”, to present international artists and practices, to contextualize art works, to develop international relationships, to position Hungarian artists in the international scene, to create a sphere “where you can consider certain things in a different way, in a different interval”, to interpret, reinterpret and put in a dialogue legacies and oeuvres, and unless I asked them directly about the educational responsibilities of these institutions they did not mention it. There were a few exceptions from this, mainly institution directors reflected on the educational role of public art institutions.

When speaking about museum education, all of them considered it important, although some of them do not work with museum educators at all, because in some institution it does not exist, or it exists only for small children. Several interviewees formulated that museum education is yet very

underdeveloped in Hungary, since it does not have a good educational background, and educators are therefore self-taught.

Answers were not consequent about whether contemporary art can be mediated at all for a lay audience, or whether the evaluation and interpretation of contemporary works can be learnt. Some of them argued that taste or a kind of “sense/sensibility for art” cannot be taught, one either has it or not.

Regarding the possibility of mediation there were contradictory claims, sometimes even within one interview, when a curator first claimed that an exhibition is hard work for the viewer as well, and she considers it an “intellectual sport”, later she claimed that she is interested in how the complexity of the associations can be presented on an exhibition in a way that is understandable for people with no previous knowledge. When I asked her, whether it is possible at all, she answered the following:

To tell the truth, this may sound not very nice now, for me it was always a... even though I have just made an exhibition, which was a kind of balsam for the crowds, the crowds as well, so it was after all a “popular thing”, but ... but those moments appeals to me which address only very few people, so it is rather elitist. Yes, well, you need pretty many things for this, but I think certain segments of contemporary art can be unbelievably complex.

Later she explained the conflict of professional and institutional aims in her work as follows:

... as a curator, it is possible that my.. my approach is very elitist, which is obviously does not show in the direction of this popular acceptability, at the same time when I work in an institution, I cannot avoid these issues, so this forms somehow my ideas too, and what should be done, but to tell the truth it is, it is absolutely a conflict.

Besides her, other curators pointed out the referentiality of contemporary art, which makes it very difficult to grasp without certain knowledge. Nevertheless, most of them told about their experiences, when the lay audience got closer to an artwork after a well formulated introduction of a work, or after a guided tour in the exhibition.

When I asked several curators, how the necessity of contemporary art, and the public support for contemporary art can be legitimized within the society, a common answer was, that a society needs culture. When I directly asked one of the interviewees, whether the curator is in a dominant position within the society to define what is culture, he disagreed saying that “someone has to define what is culture”.

To further support my argument, that there exists a certain boundary formation intention among curators, I should add that a director of an institution complained how difficult it is usually to cooperate with curators to rewrite their texts for catalogues or a guides to make the language less professional and more understandable.

I think these results suggest that there exist some practices among curators to designate an autonomous realm within the society for contemporary art, however, these data are quite vague, and further investigation is needed in this direction. What, nevertheless, support my argument is the fact, that curators rarely reflect on and almost never problematize the isolation of the field within the society; they do not think of public institutions in terms of their educational roles; only few of them consider mediation as a role of the curator.

I also risk the conclusion, that not questioning the vague and historically elitist concept of “culture”, to use it as a legitimization of the necessity of contemporary art in a society is a tool of boundary formation, especially in a field, that claims to be very reflexive, and to question all kinds of power relations in the society, except this one.

Nevertheless, to get closer to actual practices of symbolic boundary formation further investigation is needed.

4.3 Professional and disciplinary boundaries

During the three years within the art world, I could recognize certain patterns of conflicts among art professionals as well, which suggests that there are boundaries among professionals too. Some of these were also revealed by the interviews.

There seem to be a tendency to develop a boundary between curators and art historians. One of the interviewees told me that this conflict is not significant since 90% percent of the curators in the Hungarian art scene were trained as art historian. She also said, that the conflict would be more defined, if curators were not trained art historians. Nevertheless, I could still find evidences to the contrary.

This conflict caught my attention first during a round-table discussion that followed a debated exhibition about the history of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in the 60s and 70s. The exhibition was curated by contemporary art curators, and was labeled as “research exhibition”. The aim of the round-table was to discuss what a “research exhibition” is and what opportunities it bears, but it ended up in a debate between curators and art historians about competencies to make such historical exhibition. Art historians argued, that the exhibition did not add any new information to the art history of neo-avant-garde art, because it worked with already known works and documents, and that no thorough research was done before the exhibition. Curators were defending the exhibition saying that although they did not research less known artworks or artists of the neo-avant-garde, some of the exhibited works and documents were unknown even in wider professional circles, and that the “curatorial concept” of the exhibition was to put the works into a new context, to put certain events in parallel. At the climax of the debate one of the art historians indirectly proposed that there is no need for this kind of exhibitions, instead the research projects of young art historians regarding this era should be supported.

A similar disagreement about competencies emerged in a conversation I participated in an exhibition space. Two curators and an art historian were discussing a huge exhibition of gender-related art from Eastern-Europe, and they disagreed nearly on everything. The curators were

criticizing the exhibition as a whole, the concept, the format, the selection. They were questioning whether such a big art historical material should be processed through exhibition at all, or rather in a publication⁷. They claimed that the exhibition did not reflect on “the exhibition as a medium” at all, and its approach to exhibition was 30 year old approach, which is just emphasizing the belatedness of this region. The art historian opposed these claims, saying that she liked the exhibition very much, especially the selection, and that the installation of the exhibition is secondary for her, because she is not an expert of that, but the material exhibited is very important, and certain parts have especially good selection of artworks. This short conversation gave an insight into the different approaches of exhibition making, and into the indirect contestation of certain competences, especially by curators this time.

The theme of the relation of art history and curatorship appeared several times during the interviews as well. Curators usually did not speak about conflicts they only mentioned the differences between the two approaches. They argued that the retrospective approach of art history is not relevant in case of contemporary art works, and art historians are not prepared with knowledge and tools to deal with contemporary problematic.

One of the interviewees also pointed out, that some curators make a sharp distinction between being a curator or an art historian, by using only the designation “curator” for themselves. There was one occasion, when she shed light on a possible source of conflict. She concluded this in connection with the exhibition, mentioned at the beginning of this section:

... so the pressure is so big to follow the trends, and I am not saying this in a pejorative sense, that this is a constant state of emergency, a constant stress euh... to be always actual, but without having a real deep knowledge in the background... so therefore the curator use not just the artist but the researcher as well ... draws in the researcher’s knowledge... therefore the researcher remains always in the background... so I think the good solution would be if ... if there would be somehow, a kind of normalized cooperation, so where ... how can I say that, these depths could be shown as well, because actually it needs a serious research activity to really recognize the connections.

⁷ The questioning of the exhibition as an appropriate format for representing certain knowledge was a reoccurring topic in the interviews as well.

These observations and results support the existence of certain conflicts and boundaries, however, they seem to be situational, and more fluid, because other cases, like the “Kogart-case”⁸ prove that when contemporary art as a professional scene, and institutions and their staff as experts are contested, the field react as one entity. It is a question how this situation will change when a new generation of curators without art historian training will appear.

The interesting thing about this disciplinary or professional boundary is that we can observe boundary-work on both sides of it. If we use the Gieryn’s approach we can define a kind of *expulsion* from art historians’ side, when they refer to art historical or scientific research as opposed to the more superficial curatorial research to prove that certain periods of art, historical periods should be investigated by them. A kind of slight expansion can be recognized on both sides, while art historians claim competence over the content of historical exhibition, curators may be more concerned about exhibition as a format. Nevertheless, these claims often overlap. Regarding the struggle for autonomy more information is needed.

A further question is what motivates the creation and maintenance of symbolic boundaries. To refer back to Bourdieu’s field theory, the conflicts and boundary formation within the field is the result of the struggle for domination by different social groups. To thoroughly investigate this claim we should have more data on the social background of artists and curators.

⁸ In 2008 the then Minister for Education and Culture announced that as an introduction and incentive of the Arts&Business model in Hungary, the Ministry will support the Kogart Foundation (a private foundation of a millionaire, Gábor Kovács) in developing a collection of Hungarian contemporary art with a maximum of 50 million Ft in each year for three years, if the Foundation finds private supporters as well. The contemporary art field heavily protested against the initiative. AICA signed a petition, which was supported by another petition signed by the Association of Young Artists. There were voices that pointed out, how this action may intervene into the processes of the very small contemporary art market, and as well into the canon creating processes within the public contemporary art institutions, since the thus developed collection may become larger in five years than the collection of Ludwig Museum. Some explicitly claimed that the creation of a “representative Hungarian contemporary collection” (as the Ministry formulated it) is a statement against the public institutions, that are to represent professional authority in the contemporary art field (Sasvári, 2008; Somlyódi, 2008).

This unfortunate initiative of a reversed Arts&Business model showed where the boundaries of the contemporary art field run. Artists and professionals protested together, and as Sasvári’s article suggested not just the indignation over the inappropriate spending of public funds resulted this protest, but the implicit questioning of the professional authority.

What we can conclude is that due to its isolation from the society and from market forces, the Hungarian contemporary art field with all its institutions seems to behave as an autonomous subfield, a field of “restricted production”.

One of the curators pointed out that there is a rather significant counter-selection among them, because that life-style requires certain financial support, financial security from the parents’ side. She also pointed out, that several curators who are part of the international network lived abroad for a longer period in their childhood with their families, and they are coming from a stable bourgeois background, both of which are a significant advantage. The data I have collected about the socio-economic background of curators, which is not statistically representative, prove this claim, moreover it shows that several curators come from a scientific intellectual background. These results suggest that motivations and the process of reproduction should be further investigated. In this regard Crane’s argument, that avant-garde cultures are dominated by intellectual and academic elites can serve as a guidance, that needs further justification.

6. CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this research was to map the Hungarian contemporary art field focusing on practices of curators. The specific objectives were to define boundaries within the contemporary art field that are created and maintained by curators, to investigate how the boundary-work is actually realized in practice, to evaluate earlier theories of boundaries, and to reveal the impacts of boundary work on the remaining isolation of the contemporary art field.

My empirical research, that contained observations and interviews, considers possible methodological limitations of the research and discusses recommendations for the progression of this research in the future.

Based on the literature and my findings I conclude that the Hungarian art field is similar to the Israeli art scene in the 80s-90s, described above by Greenfeld, in that contemporary art exists in a separate and very autonomous realm and mainly dominates the public institutions, while the art market has not entered the field yet, and commercial galleries and collectors are interested in more popular styles.

Curators contribute to the maintenance of this autonomy in several ways. Applying high standards of quality based on discourses and practices of a small, but dominant elite group of international contemporary art professionals, they define an area which becomes almost unavailable for artists who do not master the language of those art discourses. This results in counter-selection which maintains the exclusivity and ultimately the autonomy of the field.

The other way to maintain the autonomy of the field is to legitimize it as part of “culture” that a society unquestionably needs. In this direction the research, possibly due to methodological constraints, has not brought very convincing results. However, it revealed that there is a tendency among curators to legitimize contemporary art by referring to the necessity of culture, and leave the very concept of “culture” uncontested despite of the alleged highly critical nature of

contemporary art. A further tendency to neglect the role of the curator as a mediator, as well as the educational role of public art institutions, and the rejection of a more popular communication of contemporary art exhibitions also supports the assumption of the existence of boundary work towards the audience and the wider society. Nevertheless, these suppositions need further proof by different research methods, such as content analysis of texts, and observations.

The third type of boundary-work the fieldwork revealed aims at gaining legitimacy and securing autonomy for curatorship as a profession within the contemporary art field. Some signs of this are the conflicts between art historians and curators, and the lobby work within certain professional organizations. These practices are not so defined as the previous two, and in certain intra-field situations they escalate, while in other situations, when challenges are coming from outside of the contemporary art field they probably dissolve, but these observations need further verification.

We may attempt to draw the broader conclusion that the lack of a wider publicity for contemporary art, and an open minded art purchasing public of solid capital hinder the development of a strong contemporary art market that could contest the autonomy and isolation of the contemporary art scene.

There are many possible ways to develop the research of boundaries. Considering the limitations of this research, it can be improved in several directions. There are certain specific questions that the research leaves unsolved, these are already indicated above in the section about results. Besides these, the involvement of new methodological tools, such as analysis of texts, analysis of articles, visual analysis of exhibitions, photo elicitations could contribute to the investigation of boundary-work. The investigation of “the other side” of certain boundaries could contribute to our knowledge, like the investigation of the reaction of artists to the boundaries they have to face to become insider. Furthermore international comparison would be necessary, as well as the comparison with other realms of culture which would reveal more about the original field as well.

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