

Hungarian University of Fine Arts  
Doctoral School

**Shifts in the Meaning of Center and Periphery in the Fine Arts**  
Attitudes and Opportunities at the Center and the Margins

Theses of DLA Dissertation

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2024

**1. The emergence of the global art world system dates back to the 16th century, but the relationship between cultural centers and peripheries is not merely a direct reflection of political and economic power dynamics.**

The spatial dynamics of the center-periphery model, foundational to world-systems theory, should be interpreted more metaphorically. Rather than corresponding directly to specific geographical regions, this model delineates global divisions based on relative positions within the international division of labor. The characteristics of the center-periphery model remain relevant in today's world economy, although many research centers now analyze and develop it according to current aspects of globalization. The position of the world's countries within the system is not static; however, since the 16th century, East-Central Europe, including Hungary, has been consistently regarded as semi-peripheral. Regional science attributes three distinct meanings to the core-periphery concept: geographic or locational, economic or developmental, and social or dependency-related. Each of these dimensions holds significance independently, but their interrelation is particularly important in the context of regional research. Centers or peripheral regions identified from these different perspectives do not necessarily align.

At the level of horizontal division, borders should be understood not only as physical demarcations but also as instruments of political rhetoric and ideology, serving primarily to shape social and cultural divisions. Border studies specifically examine areas that are interconnected across national boundaries. In Europe, central regions emerged around major Western European cities, where the concentration of economic resources and political decision-making facilitated economic renewal and the accumulation of innovations. In contrast, semi-peripheral East-Central Europe, historically regarded as a "melting pot of peoples," has been a site of ongoing disputes and conflicts. Nevertheless, active cultural exchange and mobility between countries in this region have persisted.

Positions within the cultural world system have also been fluid, with centers frequently relinquishing their dominance to emerging ones, while peripheral regions continuously strive to break free from their subordinate roles.

**2. The history of the art world system is largely characterized by the development of centers, which have evolved significantly over time in both their cultural relationships with and influence on peripheral regions.**

During the Renaissance, a North-South cultural axis traversed Europe, connecting Italy with Germany and the Netherlands. This axis shifted into a West-East division following the French Revolution. In the Age of Enlightenment, Western norms were regarded as universal values, and the universalism of the colonial era further marginalized artistic production from peripheral regions. After World War II, the center of the art world moved to North America, with New York emerging as its new capital. Although cultural ties between Western Europe and the United States remained strong, exchanges with the Soviet Union and its satellite states were severely limited due to the tense political climate. As a result, the canon of international contemporary art during this period was dominated almost exclusively by American and Western European artists.

Following the end of the Cold War in 1989, New York and London transitioned from international market centers to global cultural hubs, while several previously peripheral regional centers in Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America experienced significant growth. The globalization of contemporary art accelerated through global trade agreements, impacting both the autonomous and commercial art subfields, although at differing rates. By the first decade of the 21st century, these transformations had converged, resulting in the formation of an expanded global art field. However, some research indicates that even by the 2020s, the proliferation of regional cultural networks had not fully counterbalanced the Western hegemony established over centuries.

The relations between central and (semi-)peripheral actors now resemble asymmetrical interdependencies that go beyond the unidirectional expansion of cultural imperialism. When agents from both centers and peripheries interact within a shared global context, they undergo mutual transformation, including the Western centers themselves, contributing to the emergence of a new global cultural logic.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily disrupted the functioning of the art world, shifting attention from global to local dynamics. While sustainability efforts continue to conflict with the imperative of maintaining cross-border connectivity, which is essential for peripheral regions, the

digital transition has been achieved primarily by large global institutions, leaving peripheral regions to navigate numerous compromises for their survival. Furthermore, the stability of global systems faces growing challenges from the rise of anti-globalist and nationalist sentiments, in addition to escalating geopolitical tensions, all of which pose potential threats to the established structures of the global art world.

**3. An analysis of the global standing of Hungarian visual arts further affirms that economic and cultural centers and peripheries do not always coincide, and these positions can change over time and space.**

The first time in modern Hungarian history in which an independent cultural framework, distinct from that of other nations, can be identified emerged following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise during the era of dualism. Hungary's initial entry onto the global artistic stage was marked by the painters of the Nagybánya Artist Colony, whose significance lies, in part, in their exodus from the center. The outbreak of World War I severed direct connections with Western European artistic hubs, representing a pivotal historical moment after which Hungary's close ties with Western art largely ceased.

As a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon, several culturally advanced cities, such as Pozsony (Bratislava), Kassa (Košice), Nagyvárad (Oradea), Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and Brassó (Braşov), were ceded, leaving Budapest without regional competitors, while the country's internal network became stronger and denser.

Following World War II, during the Cold War, East-Central Europe became politically and economically dependent on both the Soviet Union and Western states, which were in direct opposition to one another. Under the Rákosi regime, Soviet-oriented Stalinist ideology prevailed, leading to the isolation of Hungary from Western centers and the imposition of socialist realism's formal and ideological constraints on the arts.

Under the "soft dictatorship" of the Kádár regime, which assumed power following the 1956 Revolution, and guided by the communist cultural politician György Aczél, promoted artists and intellectuals who presented the regime's ideology in ways that were accessible to the public.

Concurrently, the regime tolerated an increasing number of previously prohibited perspectives. Neo-avant-garde artists, who sought to engage with international contemporary art movements, remained a marginal subculture. The regime's approach was to isolate these artists from public visibility rather than actively eliminate them.

Following the collapse of the state-socialist system, the countries of the Eastern Bloc became significantly dependent on foreign investment, a classic manifestation of the structural inequality between center and periphery. Beginning in the early 1980s, as these economies transitioned from socialism to capitalism, market-oriented tendencies also began to surface within the arts.

**4. The transformation of the position of fine arts in Hungary since the 1980s has progressed at a different pace compared to changes within the political sphere. As the brief period of attention directed toward post-socialist countries by the cultural centers of the West shifted elsewhere, the Hungarian art scene continued to occupy a semi-peripheral status.**

The 1991 art theory conference titled *The Province Disappears, the Region Remains*, held in Zsennye, sought to reposition the visual arts of the region within the context of shifting political and social dynamics. Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski examined the peripheral regions that had undergone similar historical and political transformations following the collapse of the socialist system, aiming to integrate these regions into the global art discourse. The exhibition *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* highlighted the enduring inequalities between East and West, even a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Within the global system, the postcolonial "Other" and the post-socialist "Semi-Other" emerged as distinct categories. This differentiation stems from the fact that the culture of the postcolonial "Other" is rooted in external, non-Western traditions, whereas the identity of the East-Central European "Semi-Other" is shaped by its marginalization from the dominant Western center.

In the 1990s, East-Central European art historians emerged as paradigm shifters, not only through the development of new theoretical frameworks but also through their increasingly active roles in organizing art events.

From 1981 onwards, Lóránd Hegyi curated several exhibitions under the term "*New Sensibility*", but the art he regarded as progressive at the time outlived the temporal framework in which it

could still be considered relevant. Consequently, despite the numerous criticisms this artistic tendency received, especially for its apolitical nature and strong embedment in the art market, fresh Hungarian initiatives in the 1990s received less attention than they deserved, both at home and internationally.

Another significant obstacle was the inability of critical cultural studies to penetrate Eastern European art discourse during the Cold War, which limited the impact of postmodernist foundations on reshaping artistic thought. A defining characteristic of the post-communist period was the persistence of an unchanged institutional framework, which further inhibited the transformation of artistic practices and theoretical developments.

**5. In Győr and its surrounding areas, European developmental trends emerged earlier, influenced by the region's proximity to Western European centers. While contemporary art experienced a period of growth in the 1990s, this boom ultimately proved to be short-lived.**

City-level artistic initiatives in Győr only began in the late 1960s, facing significant challenges due to the lack of an established artistic tradition. The founding of the Győr Artist Colony in 1968 marked the city's participation in the broader art colony movement emerging across Hungary. Notable developments in the local art scene include the inaugural Győr International Graphic Biennale and the launch of the Mediawave Festival, both held in 1991. The Municipal Museum of Art was established in 1994, with its collection initially based on the Péter Váczy and Radnai collections.

From the 2000s onward, the city's financial support for the arts began to decline, and grant funding became increasingly limited, a trend exacerbated by the global economic crisis of 2008. In 2009, the Municipal Art Museum underwent a change in management, and the Mediawave Festival was held in Győr for the last time. In the subsequent period, extending until the leadership change in 2020, the fine arts in Győr operated under a more constrained approach. The current situation remains shaped by the concepts established in the mid-1990s, with little indication of innovation or efforts to engage with contemporary artistic trends.

## **6. The center-periphery relations are crucial in the creation and presentation of art.**

Within the art field everyone holds a specific position that they occupy in relation to other actors. These statuses are dynamic and subject to constant change due to competition among them.

Changes in the social status of artists are closely linked to the transformation of recognition mechanisms for artistic work, which developed alongside the evolution of artistic institutions. The instruments and mechanisms of this development evolved as professional standards have constantly changed.

The visibility of an artist's work is fundamental to a successful career.

The degree of centralisation in cultural policy at any given time has a strong influence on the social recognition of artists.

As a result of globalization, transformations have taken place that go beyond the Western-centric artistic canon. However, these changes have taken place unevenly and on different timelines.

In the information society, the Internet offers new and broader opportunities for artists, but personal contact and the direct, physical presence of artworks remain essential for building relationships in the art field, as well as in the processes of valuing and recognising artworks.

## **7. The meaning of the center-periphery dichotomy in relation to the field of fine arts has changed under the influence of globalization.**

Instead of the center-periphery relationship of the modernist era, global power structures dominate. Rather than employing geopolitical symbolism, the concept of temporal comparison, or “chronopolitics” offers a potential solution.

Regional levels can play a defining role in fine arts, as well as the extent to which a given environment can provide local responses to global issues. In cross-border cultural relations, the concepts of transnationality and interlocality come to the forefront.