

**Eszter Biró**

## **Chasing Flusser, Chasing Subjectivity: The Resistance of Family Photographs**

### **Momentary Shock**

It was around 2007, I was a photography student in further education in Hungary, when my photo aesthetics teacher introduced Flusser's theory of "technical image apparatus". It caused a momentary shock among my year-group. It was the first time, as future practitioners, that we began to interrogate and reflect on *who* we are working for, and most importantly, *how*. While I was not yet-equipped to answer Flusser's urgent questions, his theory embedded in my thinking, which I kept re-addressing throughout my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Its impact began to manifest in 2014-2015 when my former teacher ran weekly reading group sessions on chapters of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser 2000) for members of the Studio of Young Photographers Hungary; theorists, curators and artists spent an in-depth conversation. I noticed that most of our examples – to make-sense – came from an already entangled digital thinking. However, my photographic practice through which I began to interrogate Flusser's ideas, turned towards the material, to the archival and specifically to family photographs. This turn was twofold. One, his theory originates from the pre-digital era; which already pointed towards and prepared for the multi-layered complex challenges the digital technologies poses. Consequently, it seemed reasonable to begin from the same photographic understanding and conditions he had. Two, Flusser made a radical observation on amateur photographs; that eventually family albums, will be emptied of subjective content, and will be overridden with code (1982: 58). I was intrigued by such prognosis and simultaneously disagreed with it. Through the practice-based research projects I conducted on family photographs, I observed resistance against the coded; as did many such as Roland Barthes (1982) and the theorists I discuss in this article.

### **The Incident**

In 2009, I had a family photography-related school project; which made me realise that I didn't know if I had any family photographs. When I asked my maternal grandparents of the whereabouts of these pictures; the seemingly innocent request faced confrontation. "*What are they good for?*" grandpa shouted, left, and then returned with a greasy pack of family photographs. On top of the pile was my grandmother's bicycle ID portraying a passionate, fierce young girl. When I

asked her about the photograph; she refused to engage; she wouldn't identify with the person depicted on the image. As she later explained, this unsettled her, because that girl – Vera – due to the Holocaust, never realised her future; they have separate fates.

This exchange between us was an incident – I realised that the encoded visual representations on the surface of the photographs were not in correspondence with its private meaning – that challenged everything I knew about photography; which was based on aesthetics, semiotics and Flusser's theory. It eventually morphed into a research interest; it took a decade to understand the multi-layered, complex process that worked in my grandmother. After the war, in Eastern Europe, the Stalinist programme shifted the focus towards future-building; while the recent past was effectively removed from collective discourse (Knutsen 2015: 125). In accordance, my grandmother conducted her *tabula rasa*. However, she not only repressed the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust, but hid away from our everyday domestic environment everything that was marking it, that could contextualise what was lost, such as family photographs.

As Allan Sekula explains photographs and archives are entangled with ideology; the private photographs, which content cannot be utilised, are deselected from the accessible, visible, official archive (1986: 10). Such creates a dependency, similarly to the photographer's participation in the technical image apparatus, it feeds a mechanism, and results in loss of agency.

## Counter-Actions

Consequently, I arrived to Flusser's prognosis, understanding that the apparatus is as much responsible for the removal of content as to its production. It determines what is in the light and on what it casts darkness on. Sekula argues that the displaced retains its presence, but is invisible, forming a shadow archive. Hence, my investigation shifted towards gaining agency to control the light: 'breaking the apparatus', 'breaking the conspiracies of silence' (Zerubavel 2012) and focused on methods of salvaging that could still be excavated.

Gabrielle Schwab, drawing on Abraham and Torok's psychoanalytical work (1994), regards the 'conspiracy of silence' as a crypt that encloses the difficult past (Schwab 2010). It, however, cannot contain perfectly, the troubling past that now and then re-surfaces and hunts. Marianne Hirsch calls these instances post-memories (2012a), which in her oeuvre directly connected it to family photographs (2012b), which corresponds with Flusser. We perform according to the familial look which in mechanism works as the technical image apparatus's programme, the photographer and family members, compose themselves according to codes, which as nuclear imagery, is interchangeable to any others' family photograph. It forms a shielding screen on the surface, protecting the viewer from reaching beneath to the painful, non-pleasant, conflicting and trau-

matic content (Hirsch 2012c). However, Hirsch argues that there are details left in the image through which family photograph can be unlocked (2012d: 118–121). These as, Barthes describes, pierces through (1982: 26) and can overwrite the visual codes of the programme by evoking subjective content. The power of family photographs, as material objects, is that they reconnect its present viewer with the past, they create events of re-surfacing. By asking for the photographs, I turned towards the removed; which threatened such status quo of my grandmother's silence. As Hirsch and Schwab argue, these events of re-surfacing create opportunities, if we turn towards and process the past – instead of the immediate cover-up –, then we can effectively counteract the mechanism, break the silence, fall out of the apparatus's control and regain agency.

### Locating Subjectivity

In my doctoral research *Beyond The Photograph* (Biró 2020), I study these events to observe how can such subjective content counter-act the apparatus. In an autoethnographic approach, to generate resurfacing, I conducted a series of re-enactments of my grandparents' gestures: using an eraser, I began to remove the visual surface of family photographs. The process, through an embodied experience, enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanism of conspiracy of silence. That it is not a passive, but an on-going emotional work, an active turning-away-from.



Picture 1 Biró. Eszter. 'M3'. in *Eraser Works*. 2016. Eraser on kraft paper mounted on plexi. 150x200x2mm. Glasgow

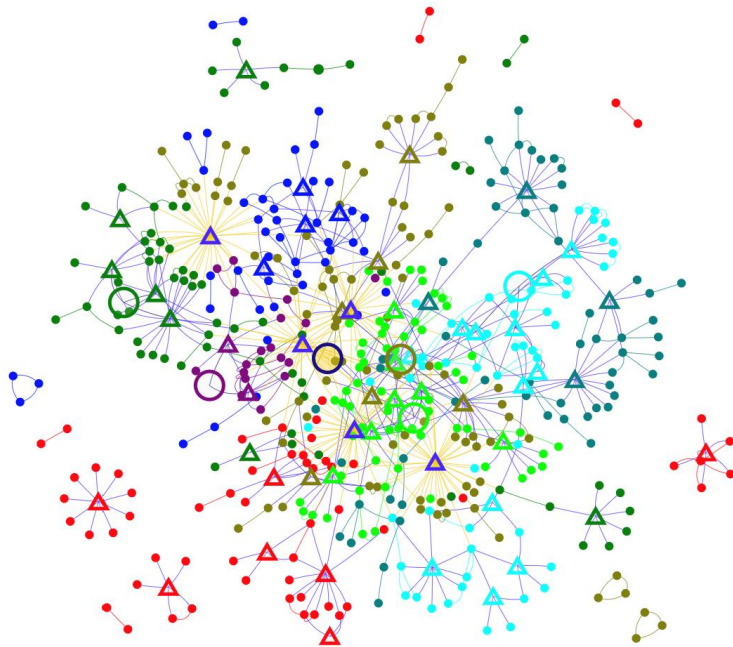
Each ‘erased’ photograph brought further insights. For example, ‘Plate M3’ depicts the familial composition of the mother-baby iconography, at the site of our balcony in Hungary, at the summer of 1956. Through the extended engagement the erasing required, I conducted an in-depth reading, based on Annette Kuhn’s “performative viewing” protocol (2007). The erasure of ‘Plate M3’ revealed a transgenerational trauma transmission between the female members of my family. While through multiple readings, I noticed that the excavated, subjective, experience-based content began to impact the historical; it overwrote and re-shuffled elements of the ideologically determined fixed narrative. It wasn’t breaking it, but began to bend it; signalling a regained dynamic between the private and the ideological. As a material translation, I laser cut holes into wood that resulted in a similar flexibility.



*Picture 2 Biró. Eszter. Album prototype. 2017. A4 landscape, 2mm MDF. Glasgow*

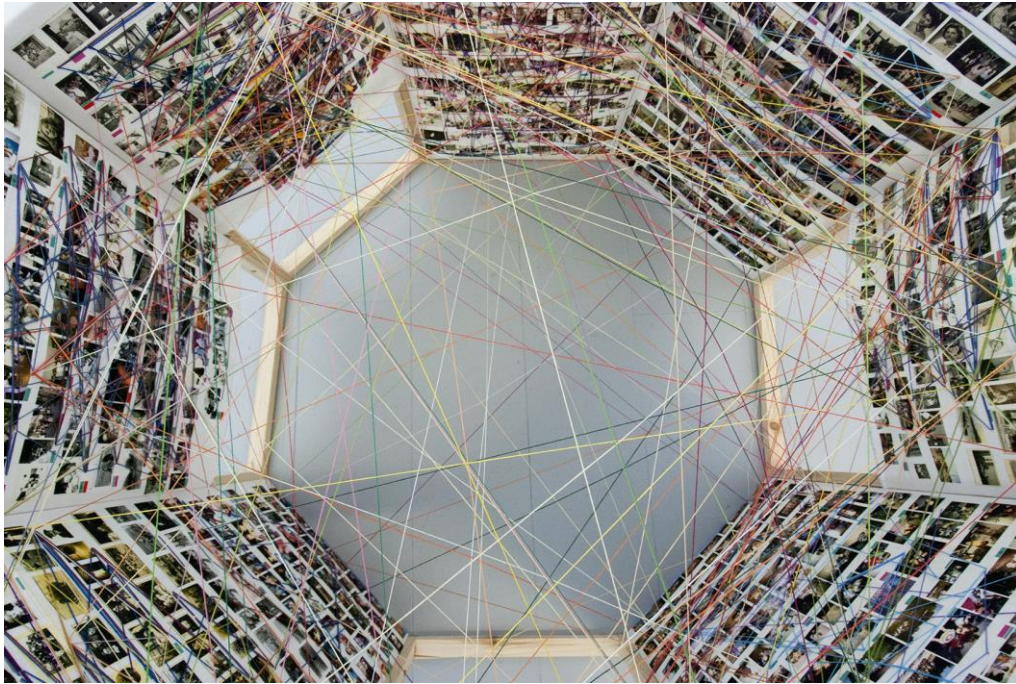
As the final doctoral research project, I set to map and trace such dynamism. To create a data pool, I collaborated with eight participants, who I asked to conduct a series of “performative viewings”. I joined their storytelling on family photographs as their audience – the emotional partner in their journeys. My data formed from the unity of the photograph and the story, acting as an entry in an archive. Then taking up the role of an editor, for each participant, I began to draw their narrative connections network. These included direct references, shared thematic content; and those emotional impulses that, as a reaction, signal a presence of a past that is not fully accessed, processed and are not yet affable.

Simultaneously, I signalled all entries, where the storyteller's subjectivity surfaced—specifically, those instances when, by opening up situations or characters, they reflected on themselves. Then as a second round of analysis I signalled all entries that had historical content and began to tag these through keywords that referred to historical experience. Obviously, there are infinite numbers of possibilities of tags, nevertheless I created about 30, those which were most prominent through the storytelling. Through inter-connecting these entries the eight intra-networks joined into an extended multi-layered net. I visualised the result both digitally – with a dynamic graph that show how people's parallel (hi)stories are connected through a shared fixed history; and through material – creating a maquette that models a scenario where people turn towards and share their (hi)stories forming their discursive space for collective histories.



Picture 3 Biró, Eszter. Screenshot of the Network graph. 2019. Last visited 11/06/19 <https://confabulations-v3.herokuapp.com/graph>

Each colour is a participant's network, where the historical connection is signalled with yellow lines. In the graph when I moved an element of a historical network, the intra-network shifted as well. On the other hand a movement of a intra-network element only temporarily shifted the main network, which repositioned itself. However, if multiple entries were moved at once, that caused a significant shift of the historical. This models the dynamic between the private and apparatus. As we currently see in populist politics, the apparatus, from the top, easily shifts the discourse downwards, however from down to upwards, it needs simultaneous multiple voices to achieve similar impact. Conspiracy of silence reduces the possibility of such simultaneous voices. However, the Maquette, shows the possibilities of such an event.

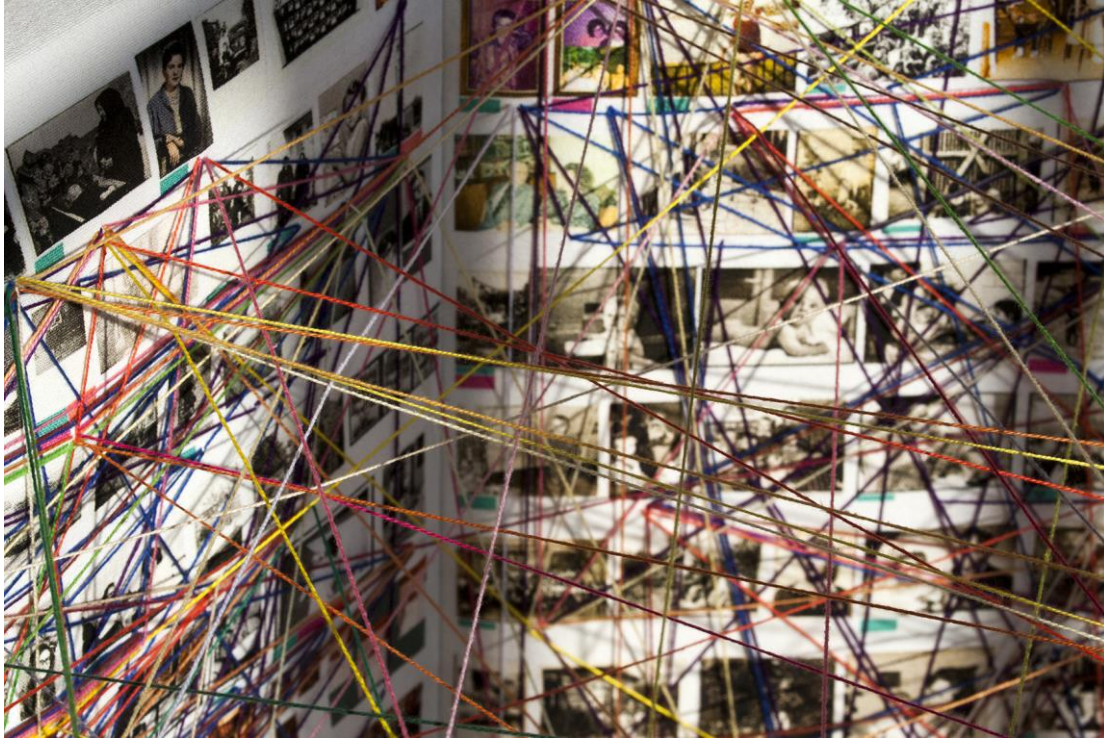


*Picture 4 Biró. Eszter. Dialogical Maquette. 2019. Canvas print and thread, 85x56x85cm. Glasgow.*

The Maquette models the discursive space of eight people, the vertically running blue threads draw their intra-network, the horizontal threads traces their possible exchanges – inter-network.

The Maquette shows a complex and somewhat chaotic net. Flusser argues the automatic program intends for simplicity (2000: 58–59), therefore such chaos is caused by something, that counter-acts the simplification of the apparatus. Looking at the Maquette holistically, about the third of the entries are both connected to intra and inter-network from which a high percentage were signalled subjective. These function as main joints of the intra-network and kernels that connect them with the inter-network.

The act of sharing, is thus a crucial element in counter-acting the apparatus, it gives way to the subjectivity, which filters history through personal experience. Sharing, however is not breaking the apparatus, but each instance of it contributes towards it. The Maquette is a discursive space, where the storytellers – due to the listening–dialogical partner’s emotional openness – could speak safely. By diluting their voice to the collective they began to make shifts, which subsequently made the collective discourse safer for others; that escalated to the chaos, which eventually deconstructs the apparatus.



*Picture 5 Biró Eszter, Dialogical Maquette 2019. Canvas Print and thread, 85x56x85 c, Glasgow*

## Conclusion

After more than a decade of engaging with Flusser's ideas, I conclude that I cannot break, but I can work against the apparatus. Partially, by developing my voice as an artist, and most significantly by creating participatory projects that create discursive safe spaces where I can enable others to find their voices. These are results of a journey, which Flusser significantly influenced at the initial stages of growth. That momentary shock in 2007 I experienced was a critical displacement, which resulted in a different developmental path. Thus, until art and design schools teach Flusser, he retains his relevance.

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