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ACTIVE – ARCHIVE – RESEARCH

"To this day, I consider Boglar as my second academy, which was far more important than the first, not only because it gave me the opportunity to erase all unnecessary knowledge, but also because it taught me what can be called "everything-is-art." Along with works of art, every man-made object, whatever its function, has substance that simultaneously relates to its age, place and creator. That is not saying anything new, because many scholars of the material culture of old periods have long believed so. The novelty lies in extending this principle as a method to any non-artistic or artistic product of the present, as I did when presenting the chapel project. The method is essay-like, which, again, is not something new. What is new is that I am exchanging unrelated aspects of views of existence in such a way as to create correlations between distant things and meanings. This will easily prove not entirely new either, but it is newer; in the Flusserian sense, this is a computational way of reading, which is why I describe things as if I were reading them. I don't read texts, I read meanings. In this reading mode, anything can be connected to anything else, if at least one point justifies doing so."

György Galántai

"(...) the world is not in fact a case, but a variant and correlation."

Péter Nádas

'In the Flusserian sense': how are we to understand this phrase when it is used by 'an intellectual kin,' an artist who himself connected many of his works and activities to the ideas and theories of Vilém Flusser, a thinker with such diverse interests, and an oeuvre of such richness and complexity? This report aims to sum up the preliminary conception and the results of an archival research and research lab which was conducted and organized at Artpool Art Research Center, Budapest, in the autumn of 2023, highlighting the possibilities of exploring the parallels between the respective thoughts of Vilém Flusser and György Galántai.

What I was hoping to establish was how György Galántai's concept of the *active archive* can be used in archival research. How can the investigations and various projects that are carried out at Artpool and focus on its exceptional material and structure, become part of the archive? My method consisted of three parts. The first was a preliminary research in which I tried to establish my own connections, to choose the paths that best corresponded to my prior knowledge and interests.

Then I organized a lab of young researchers. At three lab events, we used the most important of the archive's many exceptional features, the personal presence of its founders, György

Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay. While their knowledge and perspective provide an important 'primary source,' their presence also made it possible to ask questions, have discussions, and for the research to become an active-interactive process. Starting with the definition of personal knowledge as formulated by Michael Polanyi (Mihály Polányi), I tried to reconsider the subjective-objective approach.

György Galántai defined the active archive as follows: 'The ARTPOOL project (1979) is based on the idea of an "ACTIVE ARCHIVE" that is the result of a special kind of artistic activity. The idea differs from the practice of traditional archives in that it not only collects what is created outside it, but also 'develops,' with its own activity, the material to be archived. (...) It encourages the growth of the archive with calls for projects, cooperation, exchange, the extension of the network and the circulation of information in the network. The "ACTIVE ARCHIVE" is a living institution that can be understood as an organic and open artwork or as an activist art project. Its field of action is the world, it has a definite purpose and direction, it follows changes sensitively and is itself changing. (...) As it *interacts with tasks of research into art, historical research makes unprecedented advances in enhancing problem-solving skills and the courage to try out previously unknown research methods.* Two of the main benefits of the 'ACTIVE ARCHIVE' are that art 'oriented towards a vision of the future' will not be disconnected from its past, and that the hermetic view of history, which 'lacks a vision of the future', will become a living thing". (Emphasis mine.)

Some elements of this definition will sound familiar to many, as it has many similarities with a popular and widely used term of our time, the 'living archive.' But the latter, as a 'product' of digitization, refers specifically to the role that archives can play in the democratization of knowledge. György Galántai's insight was well ahead of its time.

To define the 'living archive,' the authors of *Open Museum ,* a seminal work that furthered the emergence of new museology in Hungary, refer to writer and editor Kate Theimer, who is the author of the ArchiveNext site. 'It is an important part of her argument that this is sharing and exchanging knowledge, with the participants sharing opinions and ideas, which leads to the extension of their own knowledge of the archive, its existence, and its functioning. She thus outlines an ideal situation in which both parties (the initiator of the participation and the participant) are going through a learning process' (Gadó 2018).

Several important authors have contributed to the self-definition of Artpool as an archive and provided art-historical analyses of its characteristics, as well as various historiographical narratives (Galántai 1992; György 2004; Havasréti 2004, 2009; Klaniczay–Sasvári 2003; Kürti–László 2019, 2021). The website, a primary source, should also be mentioned, of course: largely informed by György Galántai's world view and conception of art, it is based on the fairly exceptional collection of documents and ideas that has been accumulated since the year of its

foundation, 1979. For me, the analyses of József Havasréti are the most authoritative, not without reason. By what he calls '(media) archaeology' he approaches the *Current Letters (Aktuális Levelek)* by placing this important samizdat publication in the context of the public discourse of the period, thus paying close attention to contextual relationships (Havasréti 2009: 43–75). Further, his book on the operation and history of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio (hereafter referred to as Boglár, which is the founder's own sobriquet), which was the basis for the creation of the archive, also reveals correlations that place György Galántai's artistic activity in a broader context (Havasréti 2009: 77–97). The most emphatic observation in Havasréti's analysis relates to the fundamental question of my research, and concerns how György Galántai's conception of art and life, his world view and his intention to change things, form a coherent basis for the creation, operation and structure of Artpool.

'György Galántai's text, "Hogyan tudott a művészet az életben elkezdődni?" (How Could Art Begin in Real Life?) plays a key role in the book. "'Mobility, playful gestures, a perspectival gaze, grasping things through their contexts, courage to be uncertain and to take the initiative, doing without firm identities and fixed ideas,' lists Wolfgang Müller-Funk the essayist's characteristic qualities (quoted in Bianchi 1998, 57). This is a fairly astute characterization of both the text and its author, Galántai. This fascinating text bears the hand of a versatile artist, for its author is not only a sculptor, graphic artist, musician, and mail artist, but a sensitive master of the medium of language as well. In his case, language is not a secondary medium, a mere tool of criticism, education theory or confession—not an intellectual 'by-product'. The distinctive conceptual/metaphorical dichotomy that marks Galántai's writings, the interweaving of profound seriousness and a grotesque outlook, a penchant for humorous neologisms—all these combine to characterize the whole of the author's conception of art with particular force. (…) He also presents his individual understanding of the significance of exhibitions at the chapel in a clear and compelling manner, and the same makes him consistently regard the events associated with the chapel, the subcultural repertoires and the mistreatment from the police and the authorities *as aesthetic events and works of art."* (Havasréti 2009: 83–84).

This 'regarding things as works of art' is an essential characteristic of the attitude of Galántai, as well as of Fluxus. There was, of course, a social and cultural historical, or 'prosaic,' reason for this, namely the attitude of the counterculture, the rejection of the rigid and parochial rules that needed to be observed to be part of the official or pro-regime art scene of the Kádár era. György Galántai's modus operandi, which today would be called 'community-based' or 'participatory,' was clearly an opposition to the cultural policy of the dictatorship.

Havasréti notes that "Galántai approaches the interrelatedness, even merging, of the social and the aesthetic dimensions, of politics and culture, essentially from the angle of context and

interpretation" (Havasréti 2009: 84). The holonic approach—interpreting large units while not losing sight of the parts, the details—is important not only because it is the basis of Galántai's artistic credo, but also because it is, in my view, the premise of the archive's operation, as well as one of the most important parallels with Vilém Flusser.

To examine this, it is worth taking a look at the different interactions between Artpool and its 'alter-archives.' I find that not only is this important for this research but may also shed light on new elements in the broader issue of knowledge production in general.

I used the term 'alter-archive' in an earlier, unpublished research report. However, the Artpool research further enriched its meaning: by keeping it in the focus of my attention, it made me realize what additional aspects it can add to the investigation. It is not a compound that is in use in this context, to the best of my knowledge: I in fact modelled it on the concept of the 'alter-canon,' proposed in a study in art history (Oesterreich–Handberg 2018). In it, the authors reconsider the centre–periphery division common in traditional art histories—in particular how it determines canonization in the museum sphere. I think that in the interest of democratic knowledge production, archives should also be examined with reference to the points of contact between their various types, the connections of their respective collections—including institutions that archive 'mainstream' artistic events (e.g. the documenta Archive); archives that emerge as a kind of extreme in the wake of some historical situation, such as a dictatorship (e.g. the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security); and artistic archives that are as diverse as their definitions are similar. It is worth using the term in two meanings: by considering them each other's alternatives, we can also exploit the values of their differences. Take the example of how the art scene in Brazil, operating under a military dictatorship, responded to the threat with art and sought to preserve the latter in a private archive, as in the case of another important mail artist, Paolo Bruscky.

Concerning Paolo Bruscky's and his contemporary Eduardo Kac's rich contribution to our understanding of the importance of art archives, we have to mention here Simone Osthoff's research published in 2009 (Osthoff 2009). After having analysed "how these artists, mostly Brazilians destabilize the archive creating fluid boundaries between their artworks, their writings, their archives", in her contribution to *Flusser Studies 24*, a thematic issue on "Archiving Flusser", she summarized the conceptions of her unfolding research phase. There she focuses "on the fluid boundaries between the subject and object of research, especially in decolonial practices and histories. In every instance, insights into the archive stemmed primarily from the dialogue with artists, but also from the exploration of a few curators and theorists, including Vilém Flusser." (Osthoff 2017: 1)

The intellectual kinship between the two is obvious at a cursory glance, but its details are yet to be uncovered. To my knowledge, only Hungarian art historian Katalin Cseh-Varga raised the issue of "network personalities" drawing parallel between Flusser's, Galántai's, Arthur Koestler's and Hans Selye's thinking in a different context. (Cseh-Varga 2020)

And finally, an archive must be mentioned that can be seen as an alter-archive in another sense, one that holds unexplored opportunities in this respect. This is the Vilém Flusser Archive, currently located in Berlin. It was no accident that Flusser had a strong influence on György Galántai—something Havasréti also underscores. The intellectual kinship between the two is obvious at a cursory glance, but its details are yet to be uncovered. Flusser became better known in Hungary in the early 1990s, with Artpool playing a major role in making the Hungarian translations available. The publishing rights were secured through a curious coincidence. Responding to the call for the 'Year of Chance' in 2000, Lilian A. Bell, a US mail artist, came to visit Hungary. During a conversation at Artpool, she discovered that Vilém Flusser was a relative of hers and helped to mediate the acquisition of the rights from Edith Flusser, the author's widow.

The intellectual pillars of the workshop

Artpool's working conditions gave me complete freedom to design a research project to be carried out there. As I have initiated several project-based, higher educational course developments in recent years, this was an attractive and interesting opportunity to apply their experience to archival research. In formulating the fundamental question, I used Michel Polanyi's philosophy of knowledge (Polanyi 1962). I sought to extend the concept of personal knowledge to the situation described above. I started to investigate how, in an artist's archive that is strongly linked to the world view and life events of a particular artist, we are able to acquire personal knowledge in his or her presence or absence. Polanyi entitled the first part of the book he devoted to the subject and published in 1958 *(Personal Knowledge—Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy)* 'The Art of Knowing.' Here, following chapters on objectivity, probability, order (i.e. chance), he looks at skills, and the latter is of particular interest to us in archival research.

It is in this chapter that Polanyi lays the foundations of his theory, starting from everyday life rather than abstract mathematical examples. By examining craftsmanship, he illustrates the importance, and in some cases the indispensability, of practising skills (such as riding a bicycle or swimming, where knowledge of the laws of gravity cannot replace experience). By analysing the use of certain tools, he throws light on what it means to focus on the whole (focal knowledge) or on the details and rules of using the tool (subsidiary knowledge) while doing something and

keeping its goal in mind. He also briefly refers to the classic thesis of Gestalt psychology, according to which "the particulars of a pattern or a tune must be apprehended jointly, for if you observe the particulars separately, they form no pattern or tune" (Polányi 1962: 56–57). Intention is key to the acquisition of knowledge—it is the intention to use it as a tool that makes an object one. There are countless concepts and objects in György Galántai's oeuvre in which something is transformed—is given a new meaning—by the artist's intention.

"Like the tool, the sign or the symbol can be conceived as such only in the eyes of a person who relies on them to achieve or to signify something. *This reliance is a personal commitment which is involved in all acts of intelligence by which we integrate some things subsidiarily to the centre of our focal attention.* Every act of personal assimilation by which we make a thing form an extension of ourselves through our subsidiary awareness of it, is a commitment of ourselves, a manner of disposing of ourselves." (Polanyi 1962: 61, emphasis in the original).

At the end of the chapter, he concludes: "Here, in the exercise of skill and the practice of connoisseurship, the art of knowing is seen to involve an intentional change of being, the pouring of ourselves into the subsidiary awareness of particulars, which in the performance of skills are instrumental to a skilful achievement, and which in the exercise of connoisseurship function as the elements of the observed comprehensive whole. The skilful performer is seen to be setting standards to himself and judging himself by them; the connoisseur is seen valuing comprehensive entities in terms of a standard set by him for their excellence' (Polanyi 1962: 64–65).

The method

Based on the preliminary research briefly summarized here, I developed a method that is partly based on my previous experiences in organizing labs and archival research, while they are reinterpreted in the light of the ideas of György Galántai, Vilém Flusser and Michel Polanyi.

The experiment aimed to chart the *intellectual and emotional encounters* that come about because, or in spite, of the generational differences, the dissimilarities of the social, political, cultural and media environments. (Michel Polanyi attributed *focal awareness during mental operations to the goals and steps of problem solving, while we are creating additional meanings by exploring the details, the background.* This kind of archival research, I believe, can facilitate the observation of the ways in which personal and tacit knowledge is produced.) Students with different backgrounds formulate their own research questions, for which we provide works and texts as inspiration.

The workshop consisted of three attendance sessions, structured according to the principle of gradual involvement. Each one approached the designated subject in a different way; what they

had in common was the presence of the founding artist and his collaborator, which ensured a personal transfer of knowledge.

The themes of the three sessions were archival research; the relationship of the artist and institutions; and network building and networkedness. In terms of form, the most important part of each session was the exchange of ideas (Galántai's term for learning) with György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay.

In conclusion, I summarized the results of my preliminary research and outlined the methodological questions that arose during the 'laboratory' study, which I will try to answer using the methodologies of the social and cultural sciences. In particular, I am interested in the applicability of the participatory action research method. This is still being developed, but I can summarize its essential features as follows. It is a collaborative, participatory and emancipatory method that allows different generations to think together in such a way that action researchers, 'recognizing the particularity of knowledge, change the theory and practice that maintain the constraints of the social structure' (Obláth 2017). Art-based participatory action research 'aims to challenge the dominance of logocentric scientific knowledge and to win recognition for personal, imaginative, embodied, lived knowledge (...) Art-based research is more capable of broadening perspectives than discursive, qualitative methods, and its aim is to support the formulation of new and surprising questions, rather than to solve problems or answer established questions.' The experimental nature of the method is fully in line with the original idea, while it can lead to knowledge that will help participants to better understand the parallels and differences between the Kádár era and the presently existing power relations.

This was, in fact, the purpose of evoking, at the beginning of the workshop, the web of correlations that are associated with György Galántai's work, *Tricolour*. As an introduction to the report on Artpool's website, we posted an image that was made timely by the anniversary, a few days earlier, of the revolution of 23 October 1956.

The international exhibition it referenced had taken place in 2005 in P60, Artpool's space at the time, and featured 192 artists from 26 countries. Named *The Art of Observation and the Experimenter (Telematic Art [The Art of Observation] The Art of Freedom, The Interpretation of Freedom in Relation to the Apparatus and the Functionary)*, the exhibition placed its concept in the framework of Vilém Flusser's philosophy. Starting from the exhibition, the hyperlinks of the archive reveal a system of relationships that, on the one hand, reflects the entire structure (through parts of the whole), and on the other hand, models the underlying concept, telematic art and society. 'At the heart of telematics is a type of anthropology that does not perceive the human person as an individual, but rather as the manner in which systems of relations function; as the realization of possible links,' reads the call for applications. The typical method of archiving, in turn, is linking

the past, the present and the future: at the time of the call, the exhibits obviously did not exist, but have since been digitally processed, and can now be browsed alphabetically and by country.

In the conception of the research lab Flusser's thoughts on memory played a crucial role and they were interwoven into our discussions at many points. "The facts that enhance some of the functions of our memory and thus render them far more performant than before will have no doubt profound effects on future civilisation. Let me briefly mention a few of these changes: Electronic memories may be informed more easily than cerebral memories, they keep this information stored for a much longer period, and they permit an easy re-copying of this information. This implies that we shall no longer attempt to store information in our brain, (a hopeless endeavour if we consider the amount of information at present), but that we shall feed this information into the electronic memories. By this, our brain will be freed for other tasks, like the one to process the information. This processing of information is called 'creativity': we may expect a veritable explosion of human creativity once we have freed ourselves from all the mechanizable aspects of thinking. (…) Man will no longer be a worker ('homo faber') but rather an information processor, a player with information ('homo ludens')."(Flusser, 1988:5)

This train of thinking (which goes on with fascinating remarks on remembering/forgetting) can gain further interpretation in the light of Michael Polanyi's personal knowledge theory and György Galántai's artistic oeuvre with its integral part, the Artpool active archive project.

Summary

I have found that the 'path' I sought to follow in my research—charting the archive of Artpool and studying its functioning through the reception in Hungary of Vilém Flusser—is much more promising than initially thought. For my research into the transformation of knowledge production and transmission, it is precisely Flusser's writings (formerly unknown to me), especially his correspondence, that offer me numerous points of reference. Diego Andrade Bornhausen published a study on pedagogy in Issue 34 of *Flusser Studies*, which I find to be an intellectual treasury. (Indeed, the 'intersubjective experience of knowledge' described by Flusser contains, in my opinion, many of the same elements as Michel Polanyi's philosophy of knowledge and György Galántai's general discussions of ontology and art theory.)

The most important aims of education include the transformation of technocratic knowledge into committed knowledge, and the transcending of ideology (in the sense of pointing it out, rather than eradicating it). "For Flusser, this school model would conjugate the polytechnic character with the philosophical, allowing "technicians to be artists again, artists to be technicians,

and both to be politically responsible." When theory and concrete experience were interconnected, "such a school would be a place of wisdom in the Platonic sense, with the difference that all would be kings, and the machines would be the idiots." (Bornhausen 2022: 7).

It is education that creates the possibility of transcending the objective/subjective dichotomy in the conception of both Flusser, who explores ways of transcending it from the vantage point of intersubjectivity, and Polanyi, whose basis is personal knowledge. The real challenge is to examine how their ideas can be used to develop contemporary forms of knowledge storage, processing, and transfer.

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