
“The Garbage Dump”, “God's Piglet” and Other Documents of Hungarian Underground Art, 1960s-1990s

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Abstract:

This paper takes a look at the social context of the arts in Hungary between the 1956 revolution for independence and the end of Soviet dominance in 1989. The author's purpose is to examine the alternative art scene that developed in defiance of repressive cultural policies through the lens of underground art periodicals, to trace the intricate interrelationship between politics, the culture of oppression the arts, and to show how short-lived, ephemeral publications played a crucial role in fostering a community of non-conformist neo-avantgarde artists. Selected periodicals covering a variety of subjects, including theory and criticism, experimental art, rock music and visual poetry, are analyzed.

Keywords: underground periodicals; dissident art; Hungarian art; neo-avantgarde; Artpool.

Introduction

While cataloging Eastern European artists' books at the Museum of Modern Art Library for the New York Art Resources Consortium last year, I happened upon a batch of small, self-produced, short-lived art periodicals, dating from the waning days of the Socialist era in my native Hungary. They came from a parallel, clandestine world of culture that had been outside my radar, even though I was a student of literature and the arts in Hungary when they were produced. Scouring for information about the underground art magazines of the 1970s-80s I started researching primary sources and ended up writing this paper on a subject I had little familiarity with in the beginning.

Historical background

The period under investigation, called the Kádár era after János Kádár, the first secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' party, was framed by the failed 1956 revolution for independence and the end of the Soviet rule in 1989. This era is often referred to as “soft communism,” or ironically, “goulash communism,” when Hungary was “the jolliest barracks in the camp”, its citizens enjoying a somewhat softer, more cushioned version of totalitarianism than the neighboring Soviet satellite states.

Official cultural policies of the Kádár era

The Hungarian dissident writer Miklós Haraszti offers a succinct description of the status of artists under a soft totalitarian regime in his book “The Velvet Prison”:

“Under Stalinism, the state keeps busy suppressing both its real and imagined opponents. It is consumed by paranoia and suspects everyone of potential heresy. It feels itself to be under siege. Society is militarized, ramparts are mounted, orders are issued. Artists are soldiers to be drafted in the battle to consolidate the victory of socialism. ... Neutrality is treason; ambiguity is betrayal. ...

As the socialist state grows more confident it no longer needs to use the blunderbuss of Stalinism. It can afford to relax.

Aesthetic policy begins to shift ... from “military” or “hard” to “civilian” or “soft”. Artists are permitted, within limits, to experiment with the *form* of their art. The boundaries of the permissible expand. In other words, the artist, a soldier armed with paint-brush or pen under Stalinism, is, after de-Stalinization, demobilized and returned to civilian life. He remains, however, very much on active duty, in the reserves, as it were, always aware that his status might change the moment war is declared.”ⁱ

Hungarian cultural policies during the era of “soft communism” are tied to the name of György Aczél, who in his various government and party positions dominated cultural life from 1958, when he became first deputy of the Minister for Culture, until the mid-1980s. His name is associated with what Edit Sasvári in her introduction to an exhibition she curated in 2000ⁱⁱ calls the “holy Trinity of cultural politics”: the three Ts, after the Hungarian abbreviation for “banned, tolerated, supported”ⁱⁱⁱ. Officially supported writers and artists were published or exhibited, received material support and state prizes while at the other end of the spectrum, books or exhibitions were banned, artists’ names were suppressed in the state media, and in the worst cases, prison sentences were meted out or the persons were forced to emigrate. The line dividing the categories was quite fluid, an artist could have been coddled for a while and then dropped; some art periodicals were tolerated and then forbidden; it was even possible to emerge from a long period of obscurity and receive a prize.^{iv} This is an oversimplified sketch of a complex piece of cultural and social history, the deeper analysis of which falls outside the scope of this paper.^v

Whether supported or tolerated, artists were under constant surveillance. In the early 2000s artist and art organizer György Galántai made public the extensive surveillance files that the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintained on him, minutely documenting his every move between 1979 and 1988 (“Painter” was the less than inventive code name the authorities used for him).^{vi}

The rise of alternative publications

It was against this background of officially enforced cultural policies, constant state meddling and surveillance that a parallel world of alternative culture emerged. Art-related publications formed part of the larger universe of underground literature, also called samizdat (from the Russian word meaning “self-published”). The division between political and art-related samizdat is somewhat arbitrary, if only because publishing anything outside the realm of officially sanctioned channels was a political act (until the late 1980s, even photocopying was forbidden). An important distinguishing feature of art samizdats was the presence of illustrations and an attention to aesthetic appeal.

Alternative art publications proliferated with the appearance of a generation of neo-avantgarde artists approximately in the mid-1960s, such as Tamás Szentjóby, Gábor Altorjay, Tibor Hajas, Miklós Erdély, János Vető, Péter Halász, Dóra Maurer and others, who burst on the scene with actions, performances, and happenings. Such manifestations, whether with

political undertones as Bálint Szombathy's 1972 "Lenin in Budapest," or utterly nonsensical, like the 1966 "Lunch in memory of Batu Khan" by Tamás Szentjóbby, flew in the face of the policy of benign official tolerance of a certain amount of non-conformist art. Publications generated, designed and published by artists gained the same relevance in creating the alternative art scene as happenings and performances.^{vii}

Prescient efforts to preserve these fugitive publications for posterity went almost hand-in-hand with their creation. The first bibliography of political samizdat was published as early as 1985 in the form of a poster by Gábor Demszky, who later served as mayor of Budapest, and the dissident László Rajk, son of the Communist Minister of the Interior executed after a show trial. The text, presented in Hungarian and English, was written by Susan Sontag.^{viii} The non-profit association and archive Artpool, founded by György Galántai and his wife Júlia Klaniczay in 1979 as an alternative art institute, has played a major role in collecting, preserving, describing and digitizing the documents of Hungarian non-conformist art of the 1960s-1990s from the start until the present day. "Artpool's aim is to collect, catalogue and guard those art experiments that otherwise would vanish without trace" wrote Galántai in 1983.^{ix}

From the plethora of art-related underground publications I decided to focus on periodicals for the purposes of this paper, basing my research on the holdings of the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York, and on the physical archives of Artpool in Budapest.

Critical analysis of underground art magazines of the Communist period commenced after Hungary left the Soviet orbit in 1989. The Hungarian-born artist and art critic Géza Pernecky gives a global overview of artists' periodicals from the 1970s-1990s in his bibliography "A háló" (later also published in English as "The Magazine Network"),^x analyzing the genre's roots in the "little magazines" of the classical avant-garde, and grouping them by subject matter, region and chronology. Csilla Bényi published online a thorough critical bibliography of Hungarian literary and art samizdat journals,^{xi} and Artpool's current website is an indispensable source for research. The first exhibition where viewers in the US could encounter Hungarian samizdats was organized by Franklin Furnace in New York in 1990.^{xii}

Description of art periodicals

In the following I would like to introduce a somewhat arbitrary sampling of underground art periodicals to demonstrate the variety and breadth of subjects, editorial concepts, formats and styles.

I. AL

AL was published by György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay between 1983-1985; it ran to 11 issues. The abbreviation stands both for the Hungarian words "Aktuális level" ("Topical letter," or, "Letter on current issues") and also for the English words "Artpool letter". The magazine's roots go back to the art exhibitions and performances organized by György Galántai between 1970 and 1973 in the lakeside city of Balatonboglár at a former chapel. The venue and the events were closed down by the authorities in 1973.^{xiii}

Ironically, a perceptive contemporary evaluation of *AL* comes from a police report, cited by Éva Forgács:

"During the period between 1970 and 1973, when Galántai was active in Balatonboglár, he was already playing a decisive organizational, community-forming role. ... However, the publication titled "AL" far more efficiently performs this task. ... The various gatherings are forgotten ... but the new

periodical keeps 200-250 individuals in contact with one another on a permanent basis. ... News of these events, which would otherwise remain the private affairs of 3-4 people, now reach hundreds and their ripple effect gives rise to further debates. ... The information published in "AL" ... – setting in motion a chain reaction – will forge together the avant-garde circles with until now have been dispersed."^{xiv}

A tour through Western Europe in 1982 was an important motivation for the Klaniczay-Galántai couple to launch the journal. At a time when travel to the West was severely curtailed, the journal's reports on conversations with European artists like Ben Vautier or on exhibitions like the Documenta 7 in Kassel brought vital information to the Hungarian circle of neo-avantgarde artists.

AL is illustrated and has the look and feel of an artists' periodical, but the textual content is just as important as the visual elements. It contains important critical pieces by noted art critics or art historians, as well as reviews of local exhibitions of little-known, forgotten or suppressed avant-garde artists. English summaries are provided for each issue.

A talk delivered at the opening of the "Dada in Hungary" exhibition by the maverick Modernist Hungarian fiction writer Miklós Szentkuthy points to the major influence of Dada on the neo-avantgarde. The lead article of the first issue – entitled "Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator? What is to be done?" – records a talk by Ákos Birkás on the death of the avant-garde. Birkás makes the fascinating and provocative claim that Hungarian neo-avantgarde failed because it was unable to generate institutions of its own that would foster and sustain it and also because it allowed the official cultural policy-makers to corner it into politically-tinged radicalism, instead of focusing on artistic experimentation.

Hungarian artists were understandably bitter or frustrated at the time, given the political circumstances; a fascinating exchange between Galántai and László Beke however indicates that a negative attitude became an expectation, akin to a seal of guarantee for the greatness of the work of art. In a conversation about the artist János Vető, who had been awarded a state prize, the critics emphasize that Vető's work exudes cheerfulness and optimism, something that makes his work – taken together with the prize – somehow suspect. In the end Beke affirms that Vető is a truly authentic artist despite his optimism.

The first issue carries the following statement from Galántai:

"The purpose of this letter is to put on paper random thoughts in their untidy, uncorrected state, thoughts that we would not normally put forward in writing as the written format requires thoughtful organization and shaping of the material. This letter is improvised... and as such, it is a rare document. It does not intend to appear more nor less than a topical letter."^{xv}

The validity of this statement is not borne out by a deeper analysis of the journal's contents. There is nothing untidy, or literally, "disheveled" about this highly theoretical, highbrow journal. Gergely Bikácsy's article from issue 3, entitled "Bonifac left at 5," is peppered with references to Lukács, Mauriac, Semprun, Perec and others; Loránd Hegyi's definitive article on post-modernism and contemporary art, entitled "Trans-avantgarde, post-modern, new subjectivity, or art after a period of expansion in the early 1980s" is neither spontaneous nor improvised. In fact, *AL* is replete with analytical articles and sometimes painfully agonizing discussions about the fate and future of Hungarian art and its place in a global context. This kind of discourse has a history going back to the late 18th century, and gloomy forecasts about the death of the nation along the lines of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried

Herder's theories appear quite frequently in 19th-century Hungarian literature. In fact, *AL*'s creators assumed a role in a venerable Hungarian tradition: when the cultural identity of the nation is threatened, it is the responsibility of the intellectuals to fight for its survival and preservation. Significantly, the title of one of Galántai's exhibitions in 1984 was entitled "Hungary can be yours" (it was immediately closed down).

In response to Birkás's prophecy of doom, *AL* was the editors' effort to create an alternative forum for non-conformist artists to initiate serious theoretical discussions and to provide information and networking opportunities. The police report I quoted before is a testament to their remarkable success. At a certain point *AL* was published in 500 copies – a higher number than what Kassák's famous *MA* ever achieved.^{xvi}

II. Világnézetségi Magazin

Világnézetségi Magazin, with seven issues published in 1984-1985, is in many ways the opposite of *AL*. While the former has a strong editorial concept and a stated mission, *Világnézetségi* does not have an editor, or an imprint; some issues do not carry a title. Articles or illustrations are not signed; if a name is mentioned at all, it is often a contorted or made-up version. In Csilla Bényi's words, *Világnézetségi* is a playfully deconstructed version of a traditional magazine. There is a whimsical quality about it: every issue is of a slightly different size; the fourth issue, published in December 1984, is presented as a calendar. Text is minimal, the magazine is filled with experimental art and concrete poetry. If *AL*'s editors considered their publication as a center for critical inquiry, *Világnézetségi* is a vehicle for free artistic experimentation. As an artists' periodical, it is outstandingly beautiful – the surviving issues have been featured in various exhibitions, most recently, this summer in Budapest, and have also become collector's items.

A short statement in the first issue by "Noshát Ernő" (one needs Artpool's meticulously kept archival files to find out that the writer in actual fact is the artist István Elek) conveys the spirit of spontaneity and experimentation:

"We launched the paper simply because we had a wish to do so. I do not wish to wait until next year to see what's being painted today. I don't even wish to wait until next week. I, I, I, I, I, I, I always read yesterday's paper. I even read the sports section of yesterday's paper. Just like that, I want to read the poem written yesterday, I want to see the painting painted yesterday."^{xvii}

The creators of the magazine were the artists of the "Hejettes szomlyazók," group, who insisted on spontaneity and collaborative work, probably influenced by Maciunas and the Fluxus group.^{xviii} The name, intentionally misspelt, does not translate easily – "substitutes for those who thirst" would be my attempt.^{xix} The journal's title playfully combines the words meaning *Weltanschauung* or "worldview" with "being seen" or "being looked at". (It is perhaps worth noting that a class entitled "Világnézetünk alapjai" or "Basics of our worldview," covering Marxist theory and ideology, was compulsory for high-school seniors in the 80s.) Looking at the world in a particular way and at the same time being observed – possibly being even watched – come together in the magazine's title, with a hint of the divide between "in" and "out," "the world" and "us".

III. Szétfolyóirat (Expresszió: Önmanipuláló szétfolyóirat)^{xx}

The earliest underground art journal, with six issues between 1971 and 1973, was edited by Árpád Ajtony and Béla Hap. Both editors came from a literary background, something that is reflected in the language and subtle irony of this primarily textual journal. Again, the title doesn't translate easily – it melds together the verb literally meaning "to flow away, flow in

different directions” and figuratively, “to disperse” – with the noun for “journal”.^{xxi} The word might refer to the way the journal was distributed: two separate versions of the initial issue were produced by the two editors in five copies and given to five people, who were asked to use half of the existing content, add to it and then pass on the new version to five more people. Hap’s version of the first issue is centered on experimental poetry, while Ajtony features the artists Miklós Erdély and Tibor Hajas.^{xxii} The second issue contains Béla Hap’s text on the definition of “underground” entitled “Quiet Hungarian Underground Manifesto”.^{xxiii} It starts off with an ironic take on the Communist Manifesto: “A specter is haunting the underground – the specter of becoming official,” then continues:

“What is the underground? Non-official art. An art ‘movement’ that neither supports nor attacks the establishment, but stays outside of it. By attacking the establishment it would recognize its existence.”...

“What does the Hungarian underground want? It wants to be art that is unidentifiable, unanalyzable, outsider, intangible, incorruptible. PRIVATE ART.” ...

“Who is it addressed to? To itself. The artists address each other. To all those showing a benign interest in it.”

The journal contains reviews of events and happenings, both in Hungary and abroad (e.g. Eat-Art Happenings in Düsseldorf in 1971), and also covers the art of the neighboring Socialist countries, especially Czechoslovakia, e.g. the artist Milan Knížák (Béla Hap was a noted translator from Czech). It contains essays in translation, e.g. Ken Friedman’s notes on conceptual art and excerpts from the Fluxshoe catalog, as well as visual poetry. One of the issues was edited by and features prominently the artist Dóra Maurer.

IV. Sznob Internacionál

While *Szétfolyóirat* defines the underground in a “quiet manifesto” and sees art and artists, somewhat naively, as outside of the political system, *Sznob* seems to delight in being provocative. Six issues were published at irregular frequency between 1981 and 1985, edited by Tamás Papp. The size of the various issues differs, some of them are large A5. In addition to art, it covered music, especially punk rock; the second issue is dedicated to the first Hungarian punk-rock orchestra named “Spions” (Spies). This issue was designed by the artist János Vető, who wrote in a letter in 2003 to Artpool that he will always be proud of the layout. It included reviews of rock concerts, and lyrics of songs (by Gergely Molnár, Tamás Ungvári and others), liberally laced with profanities. The irony and sarcasm that is a recurring feature of the period in every media takes the form of popular ditties and clever one-liners here as “poor folks, cheap bulletin”, or “Elvis Presley met Adorno, Adorno never met Elvis Presley”, or the lyrics for a song entitled IKARUSZ, a reference to one of the very few successful Hungarian industrial plants that manufactured autobuses:

“Fejlett technológia / autóbuzsmorál / népművészet / művelődési gyár
Ifjú népművelők / ronda szakszervezeti nők / részeg magyarok / mindenki halott”

In my translation, without the rhymes:

High-end technology / autobus morale / folk art / cultural factory
Young cultural workers / ugly women from the trade union / drunken Hungarians / everybody’s dead

Some of the texts leave irony behind in favor of sexism and violence. A typically provocative performance organized by the Spions band was “An Evening in Memory of Anna Frank” at the University Theater in Budapest in 1978, for which an official permit was granted. The lyrics of the song entitled “The Dream of Anna Frank” (reproduced in the second issue of the

magazine) written by Gergely Molnár under the alias Anton Ello, in which the name of Anna Frank is repeated in every line, are obscene, violent and have no reference whatsoever to the historic person; almost 40 years later, they haven't lost any of their shock value. *Sznob's* fourth issue is dedicated to the visual artist Tibor Hajas, who died tragically young in a car crash in 1980, and is illustrated with works by the artist.

V. Visual poetry: Narancsszív-sonett, Hátrányos helyzetű látomás, nyílt e

This small group of publications from the mid-1980s, all presenting visual poetry, deserves mention. The first one, “Narancsszív-sonett” or Orange Heart Sonnet, contains the first work of János Háý, now an acclaimed poet, writer and visual artist; it was produced in collaboration with János Kurdi Fehér. The visual elements and the text play equally important parts in this striking orange-colored publication with text on both covers in the shape of hearts. The editors state that they intend to present poetry that moves from impressionistic experimentalism towards thought-centered lyricism. “Hátrányos helyzetű látomás” (Disadvantaged vision) is presented as issue 2 of “Narancsszív-sonett” and is the work of Ottó Hévízi and Ferenc Szíjj, with cover design by Ildikó Jakus. “Nyílt e” (open “e”) is also the work of Hévízi and Szíjj.

VI. Zines: Isten malaca (God's piglet) and Szeméttelep (Garbage Dump)

These two publications usher in a different sort of samizdat – they come from the subculture of zines, and they both center around music. God's piglet, published in 1986 by the music critic Tamás Lévy, was the first punk fanzine in Hungary, and among other things it references the ensemble “Vágtázó Halottkémek” (The Galloping Coroners), the most influential Hungarian rock band of the period, while also presenting the folk ensemble “Muzsikás”. “Instead of an introduction we only want to say that, naturally, the journal ‘God's piglet’ is the continuation of the anthology ‘Bleed for me’,” says the introductory text (in my translation).

“Garbage dump” was edited by Gábor Báthory. It is presented as a graphic novel, and has a strongly anarchistic streak (e.g. “the ‘fatherland’ needs you – do you need the ‘fatherland’?”). As it was published in 1990-91, after the regime change and the fall of Communism, it poses the interesting question of the role and potential survival of samizdat into the 1990s.

Conclusion

Hungarian alternative art magazines of the 1970s-80s were born in defiance of official cultural policies, and while restrictions imposed from the outside defined their existence (often resulting in their shut-down), the impact in general was considerably more positive than could have been expected. Repression fostered a spirit of collaboration and community-building as opposed to individualism and competitiveness, sometimes resulting in the creation of unnamed, collaborative works of art (in Géza Perneczky's words, the artists fleeing from officialdom set out to conquer the regions of antihistoricism and anonymity)^{xxiv}. It imbued some contributors with an earnest sense of mission as leaders and trendsetters of a parallel world of culture or as unwavering radicals (political and artistic radicalism were closely intertwined). It encouraged free experimentation in art as well as the development of novel graphic and printing techniques. It engendered playfulness and a wonderful sense of irony. As the magazines were distributed for free, material considerations never became a major concern.

The art of the Hungarian neo-avantgarde of the 1960s-80s has become a focus of interest, as attested by an extremely well-received recent retrospective at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in

New York entitled “With the Eyes of Others: Hungarian Artists of the Sixties and Seventies,” or two substantial consecutive exhibitions on the “Hejettes Szomlyazók” group in Budapest this summer, the second one ongoing at the Ludwig Museum Budapest.

The survival of the ephemeral documents of the period is mostly due to the ceaseless hard work and untiring efforts of György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay. Artpool and its rich archival collections have recently been absorbed into the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest as an art research center. In-depth scholarly analysis of some of the documents has already started, as I have tried to show in this paper. Understandably, most of the existing studies investigate the material from a political and social history perspective, or fall into the quite extensive “samizdat studies” category.^{xxv} It is to be hoped that research will continue, and the little-known small underground art magazines of the Hungarian Socialist era will earn their deserved place as valued primary documents of the history of 20th-century art.

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ⁱⁱⁱ On György Aczél and cultural policies, see: Révész, Sándor. 199. *Aczél és korunk*. Budapest: Sík; Varga, Ágota, ed. 2013. *Aczél-történetek: beszélgetések tiltott, türt és támogatott kortársakkal Aczél Györgyről és a Kádár-korszakról*. Pécs: Alexandra.

^{iv} In the realm of journals, the saga of the literary and art magazine *Mozgó Világ* (*The World in Motion*), which from 1975 to 1983 traveled the full spectrum from supported to prohibited, may serve as a typical example.

^v The subject of cultural policies under Communism has become the topic of an extensive corpus of scholarly literature. Klara Kemp-Welch offers a thorough overview of the end of pluralism in Hungarian cultural life in the late 1940s, the dismantling of artists’ groups and the reorganization of artistic life in accordance with Socialist Realist orthodoxy. See: Kemp-Welch, Klara. 2014. *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956-1989*. London: I.B. Tauris. See especially the chapter on dissent, 101-140.

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