

Art as Communication and Organization

Artpool Archive (founded 1979, Budapest), the Exchange Gallery (founded 1978, Łódź) and Accumulatory 2 (1975-1990, Poznań) – independent art spaces in Hungary and Poland

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The paper focuses on three alternative art spaces in Hungary and Poland founded by artists in the 1970s.¹ They have in common that they contained an archive with a few 10.000 entries: Artists publications, testimonies of a direct or postal artistic exchange, printed material, objects that were easy to distribute, written ideas, but also the blank spaces in the stocks that pointed out to censorship. Curatorial strategies, the practices of the art spaces and their archival function will be presented and compared to achieve a better understanding of these spaces as a time-specific phenomenon.²

Basic artistic structures and strategies – on the foundation of the art spaces

It is worth to take a special look at the initiating projects of the art spaces in question – they can be understood as embryotic ideas that perpetuated within and deeply influenced the structure and strategies of these spaces.

“Artpool” and the “Chapelstudio”

The predecessor of “Artpool”, the so-called “Chapelstudio”, offered a forum to artists who were not allowed to exhibit. It was an old chapel in Balatonboglár, where a series of exhibitions and events was organized from 1970 to 1973 and which was closed down by the authorities.³ The initiator and artist György Galántai presented a variety of international art movements in Hungary and broadened the circulation of information among artists – in relation to the restricted flow of information by censorship and the border of the iron curtain. Galántai mentioned a total of thirty art directions that were presented, including Minimal Art,

¹ „Artpool Archive“ (founded 1979, Budapest), the „Exchange Gallery“ (founded 1978, Łódź) and „Accumulatory 2“ (1975-1990, Poznań).

² The article is based on a conference paper for a symposium on the occasion of the exhibition „ARTPOOL Aktives Archiv zeitgenössischer Kunst in Ungarn | Active Archive of Contemporary Art in Hungary“ (16 June to 3 September 2017) at the Weserburg | Museum für moderne Kunst, Bremen. With many thanks for the invitation to Anne Thurmann-Jajes (Weserburg | Museum für moderne Kunst) and to Julia Klaniczay for the invitation to publish the paper on Artpool’s website. For more information on the respective archives and parallel archives for artist’s publication see Schwarz, Isabelle: *Archive für Künstlerpublikationen der 1960er bis 1980er Jahre* (Schriftenreihe für Künstlerpublikationen; 4), Köln: Salon Verlag, 2008.

³ Since 1971 the events were under the surveillance of the cultural ministry. Among the participants were Gábor Attalai, Imre Bak, László Beke, Miklós Erdély, Péter Halász, Dóra Maurer, Géza Pernecky, Petr Stembera,

Land Art, Concrete and Visual poetry, Sound art, Conceptual Art, Kinetic art, Happening and Performance. Galántai and his later wife Julia Klaniczay wrote about the art space:

“[...] the Balatonboglár studio had established itself as the centre of officially proscribed avant-garde art, and in retrospect, one of the cradles of cultural change in Hungary.”⁴

Herein lies the idea of perceiving the art organization as a protest, a claim for a proper position and a critical reflection of the cultural and political conditions. Galántai explains:

“The institution itself may even be the medium. I was already a fluxus artist in the Balatonboglár days, albeit unconsciously: In the course of those four years, I regarded the Chapel Studio as my main work.”⁵

When organizing “Artpool”, Galántai shifted the emphasis from the presentation to the aspect of networking under the designation of Mail Art. In autumn 1978, when Galántai exhibited at the Fészek Club, he stamped on the exhibition poster the sentence „Please send me information about your activity“ and sent it to a mailing list of artists in European countries. The comprehensive responses brought life and material to the idea of forming a gallery archive. “Artpool” was created in 1979 to make the received information available, to preserve it and to open Hungary’s underground scene to art projects around the world.

The “Exchange Gallery” and the “Workshop of the Film Form”

The media artist Józef Robakowski co-founded in Torún in Poland different alternative and experimental artist’s groups, “OKO” (*EYE*, 1960), “STKF Pętla” (*Twórczy Klub Filmowy Pętla/Loop*, 1960-1966), “Zero-61” (1961-1969) and “Krağ” (*Stowarzyszenie Krağ/Circle*, 1965-1967). He came to Łódź in 1966 to study at the film academy and met a lively alternative art scene: a number of alternative artist’s initiatives (“Łódź Kaliska” and “STK” (*Association of Culture Creators/ Stowarzyszenie Tworcow Kultury*)) and independent, semi-private so-called ‘author’s galleries’⁶ – not only in Łódź, but all around the country. There was an increasing number of artistic samizdat writings in circulation (newsletter, bulletins, book copies, flyer etc.).

Endre Tót, Gábor Toth, Ugo Carrega, Jochen Gerz, Anette Messenger, Clemente Padin, Chieko Shiomi, Timm Ulrichs and Ben Vautier.

⁴ Artpool Art Research Center: “Artpool“. URL:<http://www.artpool.hu/Artpool.html> [September 2004].

⁵ Galántai, György: Artpool in the Beginnings: A Personal Account, in: *interarchive. Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field*, Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (eds.), Cologne, 2002, p. 395.

⁶ Piotr Rypson uses this term for semi-independent galleries in the 1960s and 1970s; see Rypson, Piotr: 1996. Mail Art in Polen/Mail Art in Poland, in: *Mail art. Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk*, Kornelia von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Staatliches Museum Schwerin (eds.), Schwerin, 1996, pp. 87-93, here p. 87. (Cat.)

Together with the Muzeum Sztuki, the film academy was able to generate an international atmosphere; Robakowski could travel, for example, to Hungary, Yugoslavia and Germany. Unlike Galántai, he could draw upon extensive local, national, and to some extent international contacts right from the start.

In 1970, he co-founded the “Workshop of the Film Form” (*Warsztat Formy Filmowej, WFF*). Łukasz Ronduda, curator for New Media in Warsaw, describes the workshop as follows:

“Workshop members believed this movement to be a mainstream of values absent from the world of professional art or cinematography, values like [...] a creative stance towards the world, enthusiasm, “pureness” (...). They saw the amateur movement as a source of energy that cleansed them of the rigid schemes of artistic procedures enforced by dominant culture.”⁷

The manifesto of the Workshop was written in 1975. In it, the participants proclaimed their independence from the official cultural program and the academic value system of art. Their aim was: to investigate transmission structures as well as the meaning and function of communication. These aims correspond to those of the “Exchange Gallery”, founded in 1978, whose initiating act lay in the direct exchange of material brought to him by Yugoslavian artists. The “Exchange Gallery”, today located at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, was a gallery in name only. Its true function was – unofficially – to serve as an archive, to make information available and to examine communication structures. Under his gallery’s name, the artist organized events, exhibitions, concerts, video screenings and performances. He illegally printed information that circulated in the alternative scene. Robakowski explained then that the gallery “[...] is something very fictitious, because there is some perfidy in this situation as the gallery does not exist as a real thing. It is a conception of what it should be. First of all it is not a gallery in the traditional sense, organizing exhibitions of paintings, drawings or sculptures. It is mainly a place where people can meet with each other, discuss, and exchange ideas and opinions”⁸.

The concept of the “Exchange Gallery” had been influenced by a long tradition of private and independent avant-garde artist’s initiatives from the early 20th century in Poland,⁹

⁷ Ronduda, Łukasz: The Workshop of the Film Form. Film realizations from the years 1970-1977, in: *The Workshop of the Film Form 1970-1977. Early Film Work from Poland*, Galen Joseph-Hunter, Łukasz Ronduda, Lori Zippay (eds.), 2004, p. 62.

⁸ Józef Robakowski, quoted in: Schraenen, Guy: Pour une approche des espaces alternatifs: Espace sonore, imprimé, physique (1-4)/A survey of alternative spaces: sound – printed – visual (1-4). In: *Artefactum*, No. 8; 9; 10; 11, 1985, unpagged.

⁹ Józef Robakowski in: “Józef Robakowski’s Multimedia Exchange Gallery” [Józef Robakowski in an interview with Alicja Cichowicz], <http://www.exchangegallery.cosmosnet.pl/english/wywiad.html> [January 2005].

namely “Jung Jidysz” (founded in 1919) and “a. r.” (*revolutionary artists* or *real avant-garde*, founded in 1929). Robakowski integrated characteristic aspects of these groups in his gallery project: interdisciplinarity, internationality, links to foreign art scenes and the belief in the creative force of networking.

“Accumulatory 2” and the NET

The history, structure and concept of “Accumulatory 2” (which can be translated as “battery”) have not yet been summarised for record. It was operated in Poznan from 1972 to 1990 by the conceptual artist Jarosław Kozłowski. He invited Polish and international artists to exhibit at his place. Their travel expenses were often paid by cultural institutes of the respective countries (e.g. the British Council or the Goethe Institute). Although the gallery had no strict program, the interests of its founder focussed particularly on Conceptual Art and Fluxus. Kozłowski was in contact with a number of independent galleries, for example the author’s gallery “Foksal”.

In 1971, Kozłowski had formulated and in the following year distributed the so called NET together with the art historian Andrzej Kostolowski.¹⁰ It was a programmatic manifesto or script in which they articulated thoughts on the function, structure and meaning of a communication network. The essential criteria of the NET comprised the openness of its structure and the decentralization of contacts that were involved in activities under the sign of the NET:

“[...] points of the NET are: private homes, studios and any other places, where art proposition are articulated [...] all points of NET are in contact: among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects and other forms of articulation.”¹¹

Kozłowski explains the connection between NET and the gallery as follows:

The first original idea [of NET] was to do it very privately. And that was based on this concept of direct immediate exchange among artists and eventually [to communicate] with others on very private grounds. But because of some problems with Polish secret service it became impossible. So in short time – purely by chance – I got an opportunity to start the gallery [...]. And in the whole period [of the gallery] the contacts were continued.¹²

¹⁰ For further information on the NET see Röder, Kornelia: *Topologie und Funktionsweise des Netzwerks der Mail Art*, Cologne: Salon-Verlag (Schriftenreihe für Künstlerpublikationen; 5), 2008, p. 176-178.

¹¹ Kozłowski, Jaroslaw, Kostolowski, Andrzej [1972]: NET, in: *Mail art. Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk*, Kornelia von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Staatliches Museum Schwerin (eds.), Schwerin, 1996, p. 14. (Cat.)

¹² Jarosław Kozłowski in an interview with the author, Poznań, 2005.

The gallery project – a private, non-commercial and anti-institutional venture –¹³ can be understood as a prolongation of the NET, as the artists’ own interpretation and realization of the open concept ‘NET’. “Accumulatory 2”, where exhibitions and lectures on actual art directions were held at,¹⁴ was developed under the protection and in the club of an official institution, the Student’s Union.¹⁵ Kozłowski activated the contacts of the NET by exhibiting most of the artists on its mailing list. Under the fluctuating and difficult situation, aspects like flexibility and openness, transferred from the NET concept, were existential for its survival; sometimes only due to organisational difficulties: Kozłowski often had to change the venue at very short notice. This led to the open program and structure which formed a shield to evade attacks by the police.

The ability to have quick reactions was also an integral shield of “Artpool” though not under the same artistic signs as of “Accumulatory 2”: In 1980, Galántai came up with the idea of “Artpool’s Periodical Space” (“APS”): Until 1987, he was able to organize a total of 20 exhibitions which were realized in different venues. Since they traded under one name, they became ‘institutionalised’ in a way. The idea that art can be correlated to a specific situation derives from Fluxus, an art direction that was close to Galántai’s conception of art.

Projects: Art organization and communication

In the following I will summarize exemplifying projects to extract central ideas of the fundamental art practice.

As regards “Artpool”, the structure of the projects was particularly marked by Mail Art and Fluxus. Mail Art projects chiefly comprise the conception, the multifaceted responses and their presentation. The fact that the idea becomes a cultural event through its presentation transforms Mail Art into a cultural strategy. Galántai and Julia Klaniczay organized a variety of Mail Art projects within the framework of “Artpool” and edited the Mail Art newsletter “Pool Window”.¹⁶ They also applied the structure of Mail Art on the organization of their art space and their projects – having in mind the “Artpool Art Tours” (1979 and 1982)¹⁷ or the

¹³ Jarosław Kozłowski in an interview with the author, Poznań, 2005.

¹⁴ See “Green. everything talks with Jaroslaw Kozlowski” [1994], in: everything, issue zero, URL:<http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~giraffe/e/hard/text/koslow.html> [February 2009].

¹⁵ The name “Accumulatory” was taken from an oversized neon advertisement of a former factory of car batteries that was fixed on the roof of the building where the student’s club was housed.

¹⁶ “Pool Windows”, No. 1-30, ed. by György Galántai and Julia Klaniczay, Budapest, 1980-1982.

¹⁷ Galántai and Klaniczay travelled around Europe – on the first tour especially through Italy – and visited a variety of galleries, art spaces, Mail Art initiatives and artists. The initial idea was to become an integral part of an international network, to acquire material and information, and – especially on the first tour – to see how art spaces with an associated archive could effectively function within the network. It was planned to exhibit the

illegal artist's magazine "AL" ("Aktuális Levél" or "Artpool Letters")¹⁸ in the middle of the 1980s. In the imprint the publishers stated:

"AL [...] is a forum for all voices discussing the topical problems of the Hungarian art scene. [...] AL is open to every art form and its aim is to facilitate communication between artists, AL tries to inform his readers about important art events abroad."¹⁹

The magazine itself served as the venue of presentation and turned into an implicitly political cultural strategy.

The situation for the Polish underground art scene became more difficult with the imposition of the martial law in 1981: interrogations, arrests, the confiscation of passports, house searches multiplied, the international exchange of artists publications suffered from confiscations.

Józef Robakowski – as a media artist – found that especially video could be exchanged with greater ease, sometimes even crossing the border in the luggage of students. He also employed video to document the underground scene,²⁰ including a vivid Polish punk scene. The art historian Maria Morzuch explains that for Polish artists, video functioned as a channel to the international art scene:

"That's why we could see performance art, but also the first Jim Jarmusch feature film [...]. It was very unusual that in the situation of being cut off from the world such a channel of current audiovisual information was created. It was also the reason to watch the tapes together, to get together, simply speaking, to be together."²¹

Robakowski organized a variety of events related to video. As a co-organizer and distributor, he took part in the international videonal-project "Infermental", a magazine made by videos; the principle of the assembling on which the making of "Infermental" was based on was also applied in the work with the gallery. In 1987, the "Exchange Gallery" co-organized the "First

'responses' to this idea – artistic material, mailing lists and recordings etc. – after the return under the title "PACCO dall'ITALIA/Olasz csomag", but it was banned by the cultural ministry. The recordings (discussions, sound art pieces e.g.) were traded under the name "Artpool Radio".

¹⁸ "AL", No. 1-11, ed. by György Galántai and Julia Klaniczay, Budapest, 1983-1985. Each issue of "AL" was printed in around 400 copies. The magazine was a preferred medium of the underground during the Aczél-era, among them "Inconnu Press", "Exchange", "Potencia Pura", "EXPRESSZio"; see Mulligan, Tom, "Hungarian Underground Art, 1970-1990", in: *Art Monthly* (U. K.), No. 137, 1990 (June), pp.12-13.

¹⁹ Galántai, György, Klaniczay, Julia, Editorial, in: *Aktuális Levél* (Artpool Letter), Budapest, No. 7, 1984 (March), unpagued. See also Ferenczi, László, On Lajos Kassák, in: *The Hungarian Quarterly* XXXVII, No. 143, 1996 (Autumn), p. 57.

²⁰ See Robakowski, Józef [1995-1997, *Lodz Progressive Art Movement*, in: *Żywa Galeria. Łódzki progresywny ruch artystyczny*, vol. 1. 1969-1992, Łódzki Dom Kultury, Galeria FF (ed.), Łódź, 2000, pp. 14-21, here p. 19. In 1984 Robakowski published the collected material; it was republished in 1986.

International Festival Video – Art – Clips“ in Łódź together with the “Association of Artists for Culture”. In an article in the festival’s brochure, Robakowski said about the meaning of video at that time:

“Throughout the world, video offers the possibility of contact between viewers and artists.... Like mail-art in the 60s and 70s, video has the potential of establishing independent communication between people. This is optimistic. The video-cassette becomes a letter.... Video loves freedom and it is out of freedom that it has grown.”²²

This unimpeded exchange between artists as well as between artist and viewer was a central idea in Robakowski’s work. The gallery was his artistic medium, working with it his artistic strategy. Thus it appears that all of his work was centered on the idea of communication: Not the content of the gallery was of prior importance, but the processes within. With this Robakowski followed his own concept of a dynamic archive based on discursive processes.²³

The emphasis of “Accumulatory 2” lay on the idea of networking and a conceptual approach, above already discussed in more detail on the hand of the NET.

Artistic and ideological concepts and discourses

The idea of the art space as an artistic articulation (an art work) applies at least to “Artpool” and the “Exchange Gallery”. In the context of the political circumstances in Hungary and Poland at that time the three art spaces can be connected to the so called institutional critique, a form of conceptual art since the 1960s. That means: art was perceived as a system that was embedded in social areas of life. As such art turned to be an example and a reflection of those social and political power structures that ruled these areas of life. In their critical approach artists applied especially those methods that served the system to obtain the power.

Institutional critique comprises the analysis of concrete social and political conditions of art. The art historian Benjamin Buchloh explains that this new art form tends “[...] to analyse especially those social institutions that first and foremost employed the laws of a positivistic instrumentality and the logic of administration in art which determined the conditions of the consummation of culture and that converted art production into a tool of ideological control

²¹ Rozmowa Marii Morzuch z Józefem Robakowskim. Konserwator Myśli/Maria Morzuch in conversation with Józef Robakowski. The Conservator of Ideas, in: *Kolekcja Multimedialna Galerii Wymiany Józefa Robakowskiego*, Muzeum Sztuki (ed.), Łódź, 1998, pp. 8-11. (Cat.)

²² Robakowski, Józef, “The First International Festival Video-Art-Clips. Lodz”, in: *Force Mental*, No. 15, Antwerp, 1987/1988, p. 570.

²³ See Schwarz, Isabelle: *Archive für Künstlerpublikationen der 1960er bis 1980er Jahre*, Köln: Salon Verlag, 2008 (Schriftenreihe für Künstlerpublikationen; 4), pp. 161-208.

and cultural legitimation²⁴. From this perspective, an artistic intervention against the cultural apparatus and its institutions has to be understood at the same time as a form of criticism of the system (*Systemkritik*). The formation of art spaces – although illegal – became a form of an artistic and political protest under a socialist system.

This is neither true for Kozłowski's gallery nor for his archive (a strictly private one – in opposite to the art spaces of Robakowski and Galántai). However, the critical opposition manifested in “Artpool” and the “Exchange Gallery” is also evident in “Accumulatory 2”, a gallery that Kozłowski called an “anti-institution“. He states that he started “Accumulatory 2” because he had no alternative.²⁵ The circumstances formed his gallery, the dynamic of its appearance and its program: the impossibility of printing, censorship constrictions, the permanent insecure situation, the tight financial framework etc. Kozłowski wanted to enable the concrete circumstances and conditions for alternative art to be visible in his gallery project:

“I even accepted the very fact that sometimes it was difficult to enter the space, because it gave us another freedom, another space, another breathing. And this concept was [...] anti-institutional, somehow protected by the situation. In a very natural way. Because we were not able to become institutionalised by the system.... For me it wasn't a problem to face these doors locked. Because there was always some other chance. And thanks to the very restrictive time we were not able to become established, which I liked. Especially from the perspective of time.”²⁶

The gallery as a conceptual artwork can be described as a sculpture – formed and shaped (on purpose) by the outside, the surrounding condition.

Galántai in turn saw his art as an expression of an attitude, a “[...] demonstrative commitment to freedom [that] often took the Dadaist form of rebellion against aesthetic norms and the accepted forms of art”²⁷. His art space was based on the concept of the so called *active archive*, comprising the circulation of information and archiving as an art practice.²⁸

²⁴ Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., Von der Ästhetik der Verwaltung zur institutionellen Kritik. Einige Aspekte der Konzeptkunst von 1962-1969, in: *Um 1968: konkrete Utopien in Kunst und Gesellschaft*, Marie Luise Syring (ed.), Cologne: DuMont, 1991, pp. 86-99, here p. 97.

²⁵ Jarosław Kozłowski in an interview with the author, Poznań, 2005.

²⁶ Jarosław Kozłowski in an interview with the author, Poznań, 2005.

²⁷ Pernecky, Géza, The sculptor's progress from word-collages through allegories to Fluxus concert, in: Galántai, György, Klaniczay, Julia (eds.), *Galántai. Lifeworks, 1968-1993*, Budapest: Artpool/Enciklopédia Kiadó, 1996. (Cat.)

²⁸ See Schwarz, Isabelle: *Archive für Künstlerpublikationen der 1960er bis 1980er Jahre* (Schriftenreihe für Künstlerpublikationen; 4), Köln: Salon Verlag, 2008, pp. 299-339, esp. pp. 325-328.

The idea of an independent space is more abstract in the “Exchange Gallery” because it was based on an abstract idea: Robakowski’s gallery was not constituted by the venue. It was exclusively realized in the moment of activity (of communication, in discussions, in providing and distributing information) in a virtual or encircled moment of freedom. This idea is related on the one hand to a situational view (claiming that space, time and action represent a unit in one moment – quite similar to the concept of the International Situationism that in turn adopted Dadaist ideas. This makes traditional lines visible and indicates how deeply this concept is connected to subversive artistic strategies in the history of art.

Over and above, the “Exchange Gallery” continued the concept of avant-garde archives: by presenting not a narrative concept but an openly dynamic, discontinuous form. These spaces represent a multi-medial space: the focus was not on the content but on the technique and medium of the storage.

In resume, although the strategies of the art spaces differ from each other, their directions are similar: internationality, networking, archiving and distributing information, communication and exchange. The three art spaces took a relevant part in the formation and structuring of a “cultural archive”, following the art historian Boris Groys who defined – in short – the term as a materialized cultural memory which forms hierarchies of values (*Werthierarchien*) within a culture through its organization or structuring.

The ‘invisible’ history of art spaces and alternative art scenes in the past has to be thought of in relative terms. The number of documents and artworks in the archives alone still suggests a revision of the history and a change of perception – something on which the Artpool Art Research Center as well as the Studienzentrum in Bremen have been working on with unremittingly engagement.

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