

Expansive Underground

Artpool's Path from Self-Institutionalization to a Museum

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In 1981 the Museum of Fine Arts commissioned György Galántai, who at the time was earning a living from graphic design, to design a poster for a nationwide museum event with the theme of museums and monuments at its focus. Taking a text-based, minimalistic approach with no visual elements, he solved the task by using the Hungarian translation of Jean Cocteau's poem *Sculptures*.¹ The festive tone of the classical piece composed by the avant-garde poet takes an unexpected turn in the last stanza and introduces a sharp contrast between the finesse of antiquity and the imagined attitude of the museum attendant:

Voluptuous Venuses, pliant-bodied nymphs,
divine mortals, mortal divinities,
a blind-eyed and speechless marble host,
I know your words and the rare secret of your gazes.

O, what celebration! Leaving behind futile,
animalistic desires and senseless love,
tracing the contours of your soft blue veins,
warming your frozen bodies with kisses.

¹ *Jean Cocteau válogatott versei* (Selected poems by Jean Cocteau), transl. into Hungarian, György Somlyó (Budapest: Európa, 1961), translated into English by Krisztina Sarkady-Hart.

Have you never felt, you, lover of exhibitions,
enchanted by the divine perfection of forms,
a desire, confused magic—while the silence slowly

envelopes the noise of ambling admirers,
and the spaced-out attendant turns away—
a desire to steal a kiss onto the lips of the statues?

As György Galántai remembers, the wording of the poster hit a soft spot with the attendants of the Museum of Fine Arts, who, being outraged by the text, demanded that the document be removed from all public areas. This small affair between the attendants, representing the museum and classical culture, and the artist, who can be linked with an experimental spirit, shed light on the discursive distance between the spheres represented by these two parties in socialist Hungary.

But how could such an interaction even take place between the players from different spectrums of the contemporary cultural scene? How could it happen that a culturally and existentially marginalized artist was commissioned with a project, albeit very small, by the most mainstream institution representing the art canon. It is already part of the art history of this era that György Galántai, the founder of the emblematic Balatonboglár Chapel Studio (1970–73)² and the Artpool Art Research Center (1979),³ was a well-known organizer of the unofficial cultural scene, who had to bear with the disadvantages resulting from his position. The place he occupied in the cultural scene of the socialist regime and its historical accounts was shaped by the discourses of the counterculture and dissident ethics, which, at the same time, is in a dialectic relationship, in certain aspects, with his self-interpretation, self-historicizing, and personal narrative.⁴ Galántai and Júlia Klani-

2 *Törvénytelen avantgárd: Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970–1973* (Illegal avant-garde: The chapel studio of György Galántai in Balatonboglár 1970–1973), eds. Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári (Budapest: Artpool–Balassi Publisher, 2003).

3 About the program and operation of Artpool, jointly established with Júlia Klaniczay, see György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, eds., *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Artpool, 2013).

4 Cf.: Emese Kürti and Zsuzsa László, “‘Engem az információ érdekelt mindig’: évfordulós beszélgetés Galántai Györggyel” (I have always been interested in information, anniversary interview with György Galántai) *Exindex*, 19 September, 2019, <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=hu&page=3&id=1081>.

czay's proactive cultural strategy was aimed at establishing an autonomous institution in Hungary embedded in the that time present reality of contemporary art, which would not take the dissident path of parallel culture, but gradually build itself up by using the mastered liberal methodology of self-management in the loopholes of the changing cultural policy environment.

Thus, in Galántai's case, the term heroic avant-garde, introduced to local discourses in the 1980s, seems both applicable and fit to be demolished since his institution, the Artpool Art Research Center, which has been operating for forty years, can, if you will, be interpreted as the refutation of the failure of the neo-avant-garde conceptual model.⁵ In this study I will put forward an argument supporting Artpool's ambitions pointing beyond the scale of atomized underground initiatives, as well as the acceptance of a marginalized situation and the restricted perspective of local culture; not opposing the early history of the avant-garde, moreover, canonizing it, their objective, already in the 1980s, was to realize a higher level of institutionalization. The strategy Galántai used for his art archive inspired by international examples⁶ can be best described by the term expansive underground, which simultaneously refers to an underground status and the intention to expand and move out of the informality of the underground.

To substantiate the above, I will first show how the privately founded archive was built on premises responding to collective cultural needs and, at the same time, rooted in the self-historicizing practices of the 1970s. This will

5 In his infamous presentation of 1982, recording the avant-garde—postmodern turn, Ákos Birkás sums up the unrealized elements of the avant-garde “bundle of demands,” an important part of which was to operate within an institutional framework, i.e. to create its own institutions, which did not take place in Hungary. “Here, no such thing happened, because it couldn't. What could happen was ... I am not going to look at Galántais, I will look somewhere to the side ... because they are the only ones who handled the question of institute-making with great artistic instinct.” English translation was published: Ákos Birkás, “Death of the Avant-Garde (Excerpts),” in *Art Always Has Its Consequences: Artists' Texts from Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia 1947-2009*, ed. Dóra Hegyi et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press; Budapest: tranzit.hu), 140.

6 In 1972 Galántai hitch-hiked across Western Europe visiting the most important art centers; the documenta in Kassel was one of the most important experiences for him, while a small underground space, the Depot in Cologne, served as an important source of inspiration for his institutionalized archiving project. György Galántai, “Hogyan tudott a művészet az életben elkezdődni? Adalékok a boglári történethez” (How was art able to begin in real life? Supplements to the Balatonboglár story) in *Törvénytelen avant-gárd*, 72.

be followed by a case study detailing the occasional cooperation between the Artpool Art Research Center and the Museum of Fine Arts prior to the political transition in Hungary, which facilitates the interpretation not only of the contemporary dispositions of the archive at the time but also of its current institutional situation.

Figure 7.1: György Galántai's advertising action: tourist sign on the tower of the Balatonboglár Chapel, 1971.



Courtesy of the Artpool Art Research Center and György Galántai

György Galántai's Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár between 1970 and 1973 was an emancipatory attempt taken by members of the unofficial art scene in Hungary at expanding the framework of socialist modernism in an improvisatory way, in accordance with the art practices of the day, and using strategic methods. (fig. 7.1) A unique feature of Galántai's collective initiative, was that it was launched as a kind of socialist community project integrating the entire contemporary art scene without prioritizing between the different aesthetic platforms.⁷ In contrast to the majority of neo-avant-garde artists in Hungary, Galántai reacted to the cultural reality of existing socialism not as an outsider but as a critical participant. He accepted it as a given reality which could be handled by critically adopting the linguistic tools of Marxism and exploring the cracks of technocracy. The four-year operation of the Chapel Studio was made possible by avoiding direct confrontation, while identifying strategic gaps, continuously negotiating with the authorities, escaping by running ahead and practicing proactive self-management.

By establishing an exhibition and events venue as well as a meeting place for the subculture of the times, Galántai modelled the operation of an autonomous intellectual space and provided the thus far missing infrastructure available for underground art groups. The intentions and principles manifest in Galántai's institution-organizing practice had been taking shape from the late 1960s in the criteria of a research approach, communal functions, and the notions of information exchange, and were taken to the next scale with the launch of the Artpool project in 1979. The core material of the Artpool archive, set up in the studio flat of the founders, were the archive documents produced in the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio project, while the archive's collecting policy was defined by the need to document the events of progressive contemporary art and the unofficial cultural scene. The collection was augmented through documents created for the calls, art projects, and exhibitions initiated by Artpool, and the exchange of primarily paper-based works and mail art pieces arriving by post, which were framed by Galántai's active archive⁸

7 Emese Kürti, "Underground Realism: György Galántai's Institutional Strategies," in *Subjective Histories: Self-Historicisation as Artistic Practice in Central-East Europe*, ed. Daniel Grúň (Bratislava: VEDA; SAS Publishing House; Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2020), 23–66.

8 "The idea behind the Artpool project is to create an 'ACTIVE ARCHIVE' built on specific artistic activities. This differs from traditional archival practices in that the 'ACTIVE ARCHIVE' does not only collect material already existing 'out there,' but the way it operates also generates the very material to be archived. By documenting the thoughts

concept, which is still relevant today. As can be read in the diary entries kept by Galántai at the time of Artpool's foundation, he envisioned the long-term preservation of documents belonging to the sphere of collective knowledge within the framework of a museum:

The founding of ARTPOOL, 1979

Primary aims:

1. To collect material for the museum of artistic inventions scheduled to open in 2079.
2. To inspire the founding of the museum.
3. To fill the gap, for the time being, with spaces available periodically.
4. To operate as part of the museum when it is established (according to the original plans).⁹

The museum, therefore, played the conceptual role of a utopian institution in Galántai's developing concept, for which the archival work and the exhibition activity in "periodic spaces,"¹⁰ inspired by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, were part of a preparatory phase and structure. Galántai was not familiar with the theories of museum criticism of the 1960s, which had already been losing their significance by this time, nor was he aware of the overseas concepts institutional critique revived in the 1980s,¹¹ which is why his plans aimed at

circulating within the worldwide network of free and autonomous art, this live archive is brought into being but still remains invisible to profit-oriented art." György Galántai, "Active Archive, 1979–2003," in *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, eds. György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay (Budapest: Artpool, 2013), 15, https://www.artpool.hu/archives_active.html.

- 9 Galántai: *Életmunkák = Galántai: Lifeworks 1968–1993*, exhibition catalog, ed. György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay (Budapest: Artpool; Enciklopédia, 1996), 244.
- 10 The postcard sent by the French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou to Budapest in 1979 inspired Galántai to establish the Artpool Periodical Space (APS), in the spirit of Filliou's "Congenial Republic" (*La république géniale*), which connected exhibitions, events and actions organized and held at various venues, <https://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/Filliou/Fillioucard.html>.
- 11 As Andrea Fraser writes, art that is critical of institutions questions the structure and operational method of museums and galleries; art and artists are antagonistically opposed to the institutions they are presented in, as these institutions merge the originally radical ideas into their entities and turn them into mere products. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zürich: JRP|Ringier, 2006), 127. In this sense Galántai and the Artpool project were not against institutions as they did not concern them-

a museum primarily responded to the needs of the local contemporary art scene. According to the statement of the founders expressed today, Artpool was not conceived in the spirit of denial, i.e. as an expression of dissatisfaction towards the official cultural policy, but it was primarily based on the need for autonomous intellectual operation and the democratization of information and, secondly, it sought to critically respond to the power battles within the Hungarian contemporary cultural scene, as well as to the lack of transparency and knowledge sharing. The foundation of the archive was the clear announcement of an activity that exceeded the former, marginalized positions of neo-avant-garde self-organization and its narrow microcosm. By the mid-1980s Artpool appeared as a private institution carrying out not only the classical duties of archival-documentation but also publishing a samizdat art periodical titled *Artpool Letter* (AL), while nurturing an extended international artist network, organized international exhibitions and operated an underground pseudo-radio by distributing audio cassettes.

The next level of institutionalization would have been an interdisciplinary initiative which Artpool's founders, encouraged by the success of AL, named Contemporary Art Association (KME). The idea of establishing an association as a possible institutional form arose after the Budapest Festival Orchestra was formed as an association; this would have opened the way to legal operation. As recorded in the minutes dated June 1984, the founding members were artists and intellectuals like Ákos Birkás (president), Tamás Ascher, Imre Bak, Dezső Ekler, Péter Forgács, Lóránd Hegyi, György Jovánovics, Péter Nádas, Tibor Szemző, Annamária Szőke (deputy secretary), Anna Wessely, András Wilhelm, and Júlia Klaniczay (executive secretary).¹² According to the ambitious plans, the association was to be the forum of "outstanding and novel initiatives" promoted by publications, events, debates and exhibitions as well as pursuing educational activity. The legalization of the initiative was rejected in July 1985 by deputy minister Dezső Tóth with the following argument: the planned cultural activities are the responsibility of the state, in effect carried out by several head departments and institutions of the ministry, therefore it is not deemed justified that "a new association should seek a role for itself and create functions for itself that belong to the state and to already existing art

selves with the system of state institutions or the critique of the establishment but rather sought to establish a parallel or alternative institution.

- 12 The full documentation on the Contemporary Art Association (Kortárs Művészeti Egyesület) can be found at the Artpool Art Research Center.

societies.”¹³ The letter of the ministry reveals that at that time the state was striving to maintain its cultural hegemony; this intention of theirs, however, was gradually eroded during the end of the decade, primarily due to the operation of the Soros Foundation.¹⁴ Two years later, in 1987, deputy secretary György Vajda himself recommended that the application for the association to be founded should be resubmitted, and although the first steps were taken to this end, the changes in the political system towards democratization and Galántai winning a DAAD scholarship to Berlin finally put paid to the original objectives.

This circumstance indicates that the foundation of Artpool and its first period overlapped with radical changes in aesthetics and politics, the documentation of which was partly carried out by the Artpool Archives. The relationship between art and cultural policy underwent significant change compared to the rather repressive period of the first half of the 1970s, when the conceptual framework of socialist realism still fulfilled some ideological content and the critical intellectuals had not yet left the country. From the early 1980s, however, the state delegated the responsibilities of cultural policy making to people who were not only accepted by a large part of the contemporary art scene but also had a functioning international network. From 1984 the most important exhibition venue for contemporary art, the Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, was directed by Katalin Néray, and from then on the institution gradually resembled a Western European contemporary cultural center, which fit in with the

13 Letter of deputy minister Dezső Tóth to Júlia Klaniczay, July 23, 1985, Artpool Art Research Center. In the background of rejecting the association's official registration was the ongoing surveillance by the secret police (sub-division III/III-4b of the Interior Ministry) of Galántai, under the cover name "Painter" since 1979. The conclusion of the report dated April 16, 1985 states that "some of the persons requesting the registration of the association and intending to join it in the future are involved in dissident activity directed by Galántai targeting the general and cultural policies of the party. Knowing their activities up to now, it is to be expected that the 'Contemporary Art Association' will serve as a platform to form a hostile base active in the area of fine arts, therefore, the rejection of the application is justified," <https://www.galantai.hu/festo/1985/850416S.html>.

14 About the cultural role played by the Soros Foundation, which supported Artpool, among others, see Kristóf Nagy, "From Fringe Interest to Hegemony: The Emergence of the Soros Network in Eastern Europe," in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, eds. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (New York: Routledge, 2018), 53–63.

general trend of “westernization” on the country’s cultural scene.¹⁵ The state virtually gave up controlling the cultural decision-making processes, which contributed to the formerly blacklisted artists gradually being allowed entry to the state institutions. Some of the progressive artists who were marginalized in the 1970s had more and more opportunities to exhibit in prominent state institutions; moreover, in 1986 these artists represented Hungary at the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial.¹⁶

Regarding the situation of György Galántai and Artpool, the uncertainties of the Cold War cultural policy, influenced by the changing trends of the Soviet regime, were balanced by personal relations, semi-legal channels, and curatorial invitations. Already in the mid-1980s Galántai was invited to take part in museum group exhibitions. Included among these was the exhibition titled *Eklektika '85*, organized by Lóránd Hegyi in the Hungarian National Gallery, which provided an overview of progressive trends in painting through the art of several generations and *Digitart*, held in 1986 in the Museum of Fine Arts with Tibor Szentgyörgyi as its curator, which was the first digital art exhibition in Hungary. Moreover, a year later, he already had the opportunity to display his own project, his unique international “artistamp” collection at the Museum of Fine Arts. Like many other Eastern European artists, it was correspondence art and the mail art network where Galántai experienced the mentality that gave him the illusion of solidarity and equality between artists from East and West. He generated an extensive postal activity under the auspices of the Artpool brand and this served as the starting point for his international artistamp project titled *World Art Post*, a collection of the hundreds of artistamps, which he exhibited in 1982 at an exhibition organized at the Fészek Gallery.¹⁷

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- 15 József Mélyi, “Rendszerváltás, 1983: A továbbélő nyolcvanas évek” (Political transition: The eighties living on) in “Lehetetlen realizmus” (Impossible Realism), eds. Emese Kürti, Csilla Markója, and István Bardoly, *Enigma* XXVI, no. 99. (2019 [2020]): 13–21.
 - 16 *Art and Science*, 42nd Venice Biennale, June 29–September 28, 1986. Exhibitors: Imre Bak, Ákos Birkás, Károly Kelemen, István Nádler, national commissioner: Katalin Néray.
 - 17 *Művészbélyegek. Mail art kiállítás Galántai György gyűjteményéből* (Artistamps: Mail art exhibition from György Galántai’s collection), Fészek Gallery, Budapest, April 6–25, 1982.

In 1987, Judit Geskó, who belonged to Miklós Erdély's Indigo Group¹⁸ and was a fledgling curator of the Museum of Fine Arts at the time, launched a series of exhibitions under the title *Contemporary Art in Hungarian Private Collections*. After its show devoted to ex-libris publications, she approached György Galántai in his capacity as an art collector and a mail art networker. It is important to note here that Judit Geskó's invitation took place only three years after Artpool's international mail art exhibition *Hungary Can Be Yours*, held in the Club of Young Artists, which is remembered as the last banned event before the political transition in Hungary. Ironically, the scandal linked to this event overshadowed the older fiasco, that of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio. The curator of the Museum of Fine Arts, who had visited the exhibition at the Club of Young Artists back then, invited not Artpool but György Galántai to work with her on the museum project. This exhibition, titled *Stamp Images*, was the first large-scale project jointly realized by Artpool and the Museum of Fine Arts and the displayed material included works already present in the Artpool Archives as well as those submitted to a call announced specifically for this show. (fig. 7.2) The exhibition was a milestone in the history of Artpool in an infrastructural sense too, since it was the first time that a catalog and poster were made for their project from state funding. An important supplement to the story of cooperation between Artpool and the Museum of Fine Arts is that twenty years later, in 2007, *Stamp Images* was referred to as a precedent for the *ParaStamp* exhibition, which exhibited a new selection from Artpool's continuously expanding, internationally significant artiststamp collection.¹⁹

It can be accurately reconstructed from historical sources what a museum presence meant for Galántai in the 1980s and how his contemporaries in-

18 The Indigo group formed around Miklós Erdély was active from 1978 and 1986 in Budapest. Its name is a shortened form of INterDIszciplináris Gondolkozás (Interdisciplinary Thinking) and at the same time it refers to Miklós Erdély's favourite medium of drawing: carbon paper (*indigo* in Hungarian). The conceptual and intellectual spirit of the group relied on the essential ideas of the neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, the principles of collectivity and creativity. Among the members were artists and filmmakers like András Böröcz, Ildikó Enyedi, László Révész, János Sugár and János Szirtes. See the latest publication on Erdély's art pedagogy in a broader contextual framework: Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, and Franciska Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises: Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond* (Budapest: tranzit. hu; Leipzig: Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020).

19 *ParaStamp: Four Decades of Artiststamps from Fluxus to the Internet*, curator: György Galántai, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, March 23–June 24, 2007.

Figure 7.2: The participants of the “Stamp Images” exhibition with the curator at the colonnade of the Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.



Photo: András Rázsó. Courtesy of the Artpool Art Research Center and György Galántai.

terpreted an underground institution, Artpool, being a partner of the museum system. A primary source in this respect is Galántai's own project, the *Homage to Vera Mukhina* performance (1980) realized in the environment of Museum of Fine Arts, on the Heroes Square during the visit of Italian mail art artist G. A. Cavellini. The performance was continued with a few events being staged in a museum interior, such as the photography action *Confrontation*, a walk through the Csók István Gallery in Székesfehérvár. During the performance Galántai and Klaniczay, “wearing” the history of art inscribed on their white clothes represented the timelessness of universal art contrasted with the restricted timeframe of socialist realism. (fig. 7.3) Compared with this approach, the two prominent institutions on Budapest's Heroes Square—the Museum of Fine Arts and the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle—appeared as the opposite poles of the cultural past and the present in Galántai's concept. The old masters collection of the Museum of Fine Arts provided a kind of discursive distance as well as intellectual-political protection for Galántai against contemporary dilemmas. The spiritual space of the Museum of Fine Arts was

regarded by Galántai as the universal space of immanent culture, just like for some other contemporaries of his, for example Ákos Birkás,²⁰ who also found an intellectual refuge in the museum of international old masters. The museum's space was at times transformed into a venue for contemporary performances, such as in the case of Judit Kele's self-objectifying intervention titled *I Am a Work of Art* (1979–84), which was held in an exhibition hall of the Museum of Fine Arts.²¹

Figure 7.3: György Galántai, "Confrontation," photo action with Júlia Klaniczay at the exhibition titled "Hungarian Art of the Twentieth Century: The Fifties," Csók István Gallery, Székesfehérvár, 1981.



Photo: György Hegedűs. Courtesy of the Artpool Art Research Center and György Galántai.

Although Galántai received the official invitation to the museum as a private individual and out of the curatorial ambition of Judit Geskó, his contem-

20 I am referring to Ákos Birkás' photo series titled *Kép és nézője* (Image and its viewer), 1977–79.

21 Manuscript documentation of Judit Kele's work; it was inserted into the shaping feminist discourses in Hungary by Beáta Hock in connection with the research and exhibition titled, *Agents and Provocateurs* (Contemporary Art Institute, Dunaújváros, October 16–November 20, 2009) and has survived in the Artpool archive.

Figure 7.4: Opening of the “Stamp Images” exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.



Photo: Júlia Klaniczay. Courtesy of the Artpool Art Research Center and György Galántai.

poraries evaluated it as a symbolic turning point that one of the founders of Artpool—whom even his friends from the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio had kept a careful distance from in the past—worked together with an institution at the top of the official hierarchy. (fig. 7.4) In the contemporary art discourse of the day the issue of the avant-garde and post-avant-garde entering the museum space was linked with the issue of rehabilitating the previously marginalized neo-avant-garde artists. The moral dilemma pertaining to this was expounded by Géza Perneczky, a member of the international mail art network living in Cologne, in the foreword to the *Stamp Images* exhibition catalog:

The state of mind of the “exhibiting artists” is ambivalent—one eye is crying, the other smiling. The above-described quasi-ideological background sends the clear message to mail art artists to *avoid* official exhibitions, money-oriented galleries and highly prestigious museums because they pose a threat to their independence. On the other hand, every mail art artist has expe-

rienced the humiliation endowed by the institutionalized art scene upon those stranded outside it.²²

The question was whose practice of legitimization was more effective: has the museum canon been eroded and opened itself up to contemporary art or has contemporary art broken down the walls of traditional institutions? The answer given to this question by contemporary critics was that they regarded Artpool's artiststamp exhibition in the museum as the institution's progressive gesture and the sign of renewal.²³ According to the public consensus, this exhibition confirmed that a collection with a different approach than that of the established institution can positively affect its fixated cultural practice.

The exhibition in 1987 also illustrated the vast conceptual distance that existed in Hungary between the first and second public sphere and that transition between the two was far from being unproblematic. The positions that were accepted in the micro-sphere of the Hungarian underground scene lost their validity in the suddenly expanded publicity, where, due to the decades of marginalization and discontinuities, the achievements demanding great

22 Géza Perneczky, "Művészbélyegek" (Artistamps) in *Bélyegképek* (Stamp Images) exhibition catalog (Budapest: Szépművészeti Múzeum, 1987), 2–19.
<https://artpool.hu/Artistamp/Perneczky.html>.

The exhibition was curated and the catalog compiled by Judit Geskó.

23 "The Museum of Fine Arts is exhibiting artistamps in its Graphic Cabinet with the title Stamp Images. It seems this institution looking back on a long history not only renovated its walls but can now renew its spirit. This is indicated by the display of György Galántai's (Artpool Archives) Stamp Images collection. In the past there was tension between the institutionalized arts and a good part of contemporary art trends, including Fluxus, whose participants chose to disassociate themselves from the former." György Szegő, "Bélyegképtár: Művészbélyegek és borítékok kiállítása" (Stamp library: An exhibition of artistamps and envelopes) *Magyar Nemzet*, July 6, 1987, 4. "Something like this would have been inconceivable in the 1970s. If somebody told me then that the respectfully old (what is more: too old) Museum of Fine Arts would organize an exhibition presenting one of the most recent contemporary art genres, mail art, or postal art, well, I would have wholeheartedly laughed at that person. [...] Of course the Museum of Fine Arts is not exhibiting its own collection but it has given the opportunity to an artist couple (or has it received an opportunity from them?), György and Júlia Galántai, in other words the Artpool 'art reservoir' to showcase some of the material resulting from their extraordinary collecting and documenting activity." György Szemadám, "Sivatagi művészposta: Bélyegképek a Szépművészeti Múzeumban" (Desert art post: Stamp images in the Museum of Fine Arts), *Fotó* 34 (1987): 499.

sacrifice could not be interpreted. Artpool, by then with many years of experience, represented a marginal art for which the mainstream art press did not find secure discursive reference points as they lacked the wide-ranging knowledge of the antecedents, tendencies, and media to help them find the right discursive links; nor were they able to provide critical interpretations for the represented artists' oeuvres. For decades the participants of the dominant mainstream culture lacked (or approached only negatively and/or parodied) those international references (Fluxus, conceptual art, performance art, experimental poetry, mail art, etc.) that meant a shared reference system for the majority of underground artists. The shortcomings of interpretations, which was emphasized by the critics in connection with the artistamp exhibition, reflected this afore-mentioned debt: the non-existent avant-garde canon.²⁴ Artpool's penetration of the museum space did not trigger instant change in the cultural discourse and the critical assessment of neo-avant-garde practices but it highlighted the problem that had prevailed in Hungarian art history practically for decades, even after the political transition.

Approaching the tenth anniversary of its foundation, Artpool's characteristics as an institution and the role it played in contemporary Hungarian culture became increasingly clear along with its binary situation, i.e. it was simultaneously present in the first and second tiers of publicity. When Géza Perneczky discussed the history of Artpool in the year of the political change in Hungary, he quoted the period around 1984 as the time when Artpool's process of institutionalization reached a turning point. In that period the

24 Julianna P. Szűcs, who took a consistently critical approach to the neo-avant-garde in all her critiques on the exhibition, wrote that the "post-modern" generation of the 1980s profited from the relaxed cultural policy and occupied the peak institutions of culture without this being preceded by a critical evaluation of the vanguard of the 1960s and the 1970s. According to her, this is one of the reasons why it was difficult to evaluate Galántai's achievement in 1987, when he leapt from the periphery to "Parnassus": "Something crucially important is missing between the art of the 1960s and 1970s, which was anti-avant-garde in many respects, and the supported art of the 1980s, which can be described in several respects as post-avant-garde art: the objective evaluation of the art trend, its dethronement or rehabilitation, which struggled with breathing problems in the past, for different reasons, and standing on the shoulders of which the 'posts' are so comfortably out of the water now." Julianna P. Szűcs, "Bélyegképek a Szépművészetiben" (Stamp Images in the Museum of Fine Arts) *Népszabadság*, June 30, 1987, 7.

Artpool Letter was already launched and “it was well received not only by alternative movements but became an integral part of the artistic public life in Hungary”²⁵; it informed its readers about the new media, theoretical debates, and microcosm of contemporary art while reconnecting Hungarian art with the international trends. Perneckzy described it as a kind of shift in Artpool’s profile when in the second half of the 1980s the focus of the archive’s collecting changed and greater emphasis was placed on local art events. He attributed it to this shift in focus that Artpool won financial support from the Soros Foundation, which also meant that, although Artpool did not become an official institution, it was one of the accepted semi-official enterprises. He claimed that this new focus helped Artpool’s cooperation with prominent museums, for which he cited the artistamp exhibition of 1987 as an example.²⁶ In the context of Artpool’s current institutional status and its final integration into the Museum of Fine Arts in 2015, Géza Pernecky’s conclusion sound especially prophetic:

For outsiders this whole thing might seem like a strange hobby, an extravagant and curious pursuit. It is not easy to see that a new institution is coming into being and that a cultural institution serving the public interest is waiting to be discovered and taken possession of by society. [...] The collection, once treated as a hobby, has grown beyond its original framework, into an institution, and the day will come when its cataloging and maintenance cannot be funded with private resources.²⁷

Perneckzy’s statement sums up the main motive behind Artpool’s contemporary musealization: initially an underground archive and then, from the 1990s, a non-profit organization has grown beyond its framework and independent (i.e. small and flexible) institutional conditions. With the drastic cut in funds received from city of Budapest from mid-2000s, the operation of the archive with its material having reached more than 300 linear meters by then, became critical and the founders had to make a responsible choice in regard

25 Géza Perneckzy, “Az Art Pool gyűjtemény: Egy magyar művészeti gyűjtemény megszületése” (The Art Pool collection: The birth of a Hungarian art collection) *Művészet* 30 (1989): 8.

26 The first international artist book exhibition was organized in conjunction with Artpool with the title “Surprise... to our readers” between October 18 and December 7 in 1987 at the István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár.

27 Perneckzy, “Az Art Pool,” 5.

to the institution's future. After several years of negotiations, the Artpool Art Research Center first became one of the collection departments of the Museum of Fine Arts and since 2020 it has formed part of the Central European Research Institute for Art History, established within the framework of the museum. As could be seen, the restructuring of the archive was not merely necessitated by the difficulties of its operation and funding but it was also based on Galántai's concepts envisioned about its long-term future.

The most recent turn in Artpool's history has added it to the narrow circle of international art archives that survived the years of the regime changes in Eastern Europe. In this regard, perhaps the closest analogy to Artpool is the artist book collection of Guy Schraenen, a Belgian curator, the founder of the Archive for Small Press & Communication in 1974, which the Weserburg Museum in Bremen bought in 1999. Another example is the archives of the Polish KwieKulik artist couple, which was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2011.²⁸ In both cases it was a crucial criterion of the musealization that the integrity of the collections be safeguarded, their archival profiles consistently confirmed and their autonomy granted in their relationship with the larger institutional framework.

In Artpool's case, the above was complemented with a challenge that was addressed already in 1987: the question of how the archive will be able to shape the museum's operation in a positive and future-oriented way. Moving away from its previous self-historicizing practice, Artpool can benefit from the historical, contextual, and methodological hybridity of the museum's intellectual space, while their cooperation should rest upon the principles and ethical code of knowledge-sharing archives. Besides the collecting and documenting activity in the classical sense, it is important to address the primary social context that surrounds the archive, while retaining the Active Archive concept that will ensure the augmentation of the archive and its presence on the contemporary art scene.

There is no doubt that Artpool's most important intellectual capital is its own past and its future is determined by the experimental and dissident artistic ethos of its legacy along with its continuous collaborations locally and internationally. American correspondence artist Ray Johnson, who was one of

28 For the in-depth discussion of KwieKulik archive, see Tomasz Załuski's chapter in this volume.

the main reference points in Artpool's history,²⁹ introduced the concept of "moticos" in the 1950s (the anagram of osmotic) to denote his irregular ink drawings, newspaper cutouts and collages. In György Galántai's interpretation, the symbolism of "moticos" is that they depict forms that do not resemble anything else but themselves. In the current dynamics and institutional environment of cultural reality, the legacy of the self-management practice of the Artpool-moticos can continue on the basis of collaborative contemporary critical practices.

29 Kornelia Röder, "Ray Johnson and the Mail Art Scene in Eastern Europe," in "Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response" ed. Mateusz Kapustka, special issue, *Kunsttexte.de, Ostblick* (2014/3), <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/8217/roeder.pdf>.