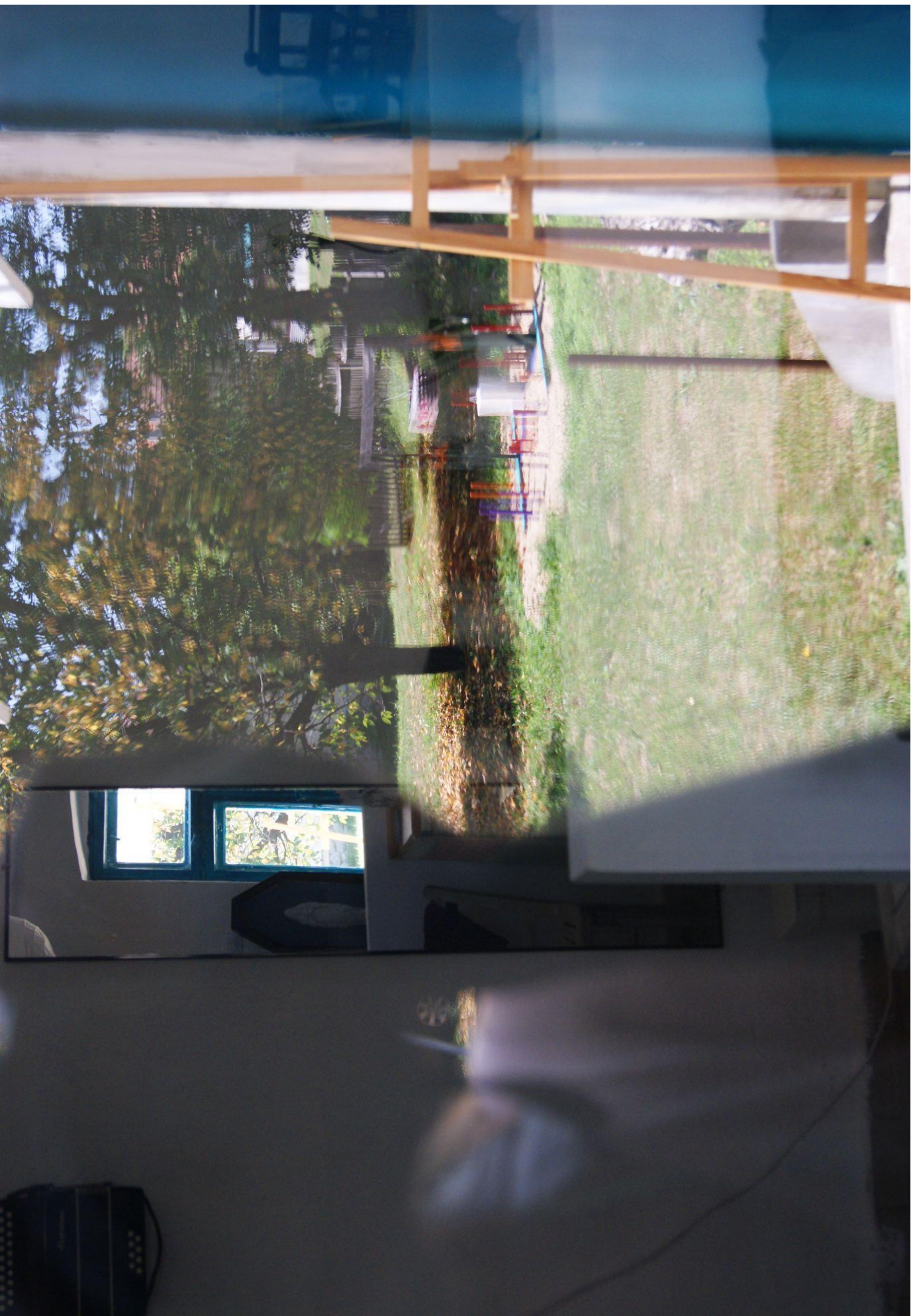




CULTURA ANIMI



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The role of arts and culture in the representation of rural communities and
developing landscapes of belonging

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Introduction

I'm returning to this island of peace in order to figure out why my heart feels at its place spending time there, why art and culture needs to be inclusive, needs to encounter real social problems and needs to cherish our values, our customs, our visual language, our past, we'll carry with us into the future, onto our screens, into AI, into our ethical decisions considering which our heart should feel most at its place.

This is a place where the attitude of people towards a changing time and focus feels bittersweet, teaches you patience and seeks your attention.

We'll need more places like this and more curiosity to understand why it in no case lies in our interest to leave these places behind and why making art feels more honest there. It is a place where it is more about collective sharing than about taking more, where questions are raised out of openness and curiosity and not in order to hear our own voice raising a question.

I want to understand why I'm getting to know myself better by joining a seminar on "Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe" in a foreign country, that I became a citizen of but I still sometimes feel like an alien in, than when I was living in it. I want to understand how closing a chapter with a swift move, closing the books, the folders systematically and putting them on the shelf like an unwanted gift to collect dust without having understood them sickens a whole society through decisions born out of the aggression of repressing the past. Art needs to step out of the bubble of pseudo problems and comfort and raise honest questions out of curiosity. Art will hopefully become a more crucial social function and language starting from the bottom in the future.

(Note, May 2023)

In the search for an artistic research project I've been led back to my roots. The visual language of the Hungarian countryside has shaped how I see beauty and the virtue surrounding it has shaped the person I have become. In order to understand and find peace as a foreigner in Austria for more than 10 years now and having a special interest in bottom-up initiatives with a potential of leading to social awareness in peripheral communities, I went back to a place where art started out for me: in the dusty conversations, intriguing anecdotes and the vibrant presence of the people of Cered and the community around the ArtColony Cered, which has highly contributed to preserving the village's cultural heritage.

The title CULTURA ANIMI, initially coined by Cicero, was meant to describe an agricultural metaphor for the development of a philosophical soul. "The roots of the word 'culture' lie in Cicero's 'colere', the Latin for 'to tend or to cultivate'."¹

A collective cultivation of the soul is what I personally found more in communities outside of the urban art scene and this is the spirit I grew up with. I learned to create 'off-placed' realities, layers in which I can thrive freely without preformulated social constraints. In reflection of this writing, the term 'ANIMI' for me further refers to the immaterial quality of conceptual art practices and their community building function.

The research is based on material collected out of personal curiosity in preparation and reflection of the conversations I've engaged in in Cered. They form the base for my better understanding of correlations around the relevance and example of ArtColony Cered. This material should serve as a conversation-starter in order to further embroider the discursive practice that I have been invited to be part of there.

Photographs and visual materials, if not stated otherwise, are originals by the author.

¹ "So all cultivated minds do not bear fruit. To continue the figure: as a field, though fertile, cannot yield a harvest without cultivation, no more can the mind without learning; thus each is feeble without the other. But philosophy is the culture of the soul. It draws out vices by the root, prepares the mind to receive seed, and commits to it, and, so to speak, sows in it what, when grown, may bear the most abundant fruit." Quote from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, translated by Andrew P. Peabody (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1886), p. 96. quoted in Michałowski, "Arts in Rural Areas," 18.

Creating space for interaction and redefinition inside of a community
creates space outside of it.

Research Questions

My observations based on academic material and my time spent in Cered with the aim of understanding its impact on my artistic practice mainly revolved around the following questions:

How have the meaning of the European countryside and its local perception changed and been affected by a new economic order and institutionalized development strategies?

How have the years of socialism and the democratic transition impacted our current understanding of the rural landscape in postsocialist countries?

How have artistic initiatives outside of the centre of attention that acted as “subcultures” contributed to a transnational conversation and an opening to the West in the years of socialism?

How can art and culture contribute to rural development?

How can our cultural heritage be better preserved in the countryside and gain representation in an international socio-economic discourse?

How can urban political conversations and the focus of social discourse be brought to the countryside?

The aim of this writing is to reflect on reference points I’ve discovered so far in my search for answers for these questions. I’d rather try to engage in a collective discourse practice and provoke further conversations than to pretend to deliver final answers. In the end, this work is about reading different angles of reality.

Writer's and Reader's Manual

Read only between the lines, the lines themselves are
actually irrelevant
always talk in metaphors and leave space for
second-guessing
always assume the truth and also the opposite of
everything
read papers from left to the right like my grandpa did.

‘Neo-rurality’ in the European countryside

The relationship between official discourses and the ways they are understood at different levels of the national community is one of the most intriguing issues in the social sciences.²
(Jaro Stacul)

In order to understand rural realities within Europe and how the “success” of institutionalized rural development strategies could be tracked down, I decided to follow the academic narratives of rural studies and landed in the realm of differently perceived, sometimes even polarizing meanings in the symbolism of everyday life and in a collective struggle for understanding on both ends of the socio-political discourse.

Rural studies have emerged from the study of agricultural history and can be most easily interpreted as opposed to urban. Only if we take a closer look do we recognize how many layers are hiding below, starting with the strong country-related cultural perception of the word agriculture.

In Finno-Ugric languages (like Estonian – põllumajandus and Hungarian – mezőgazdaság) agriculture is literally field-economy or economy of fields (Centeri 2010: 3, Kruse et al. 2010: 100). And landscape itself as a word and concept has various backgrounds that can be understood in respective historic and linguistic contexts (Jones 1991, Palang et al. 2006).

Another challenge of working at the European scale is taking account of national or regional names of landscape types. In various locations across Europe some landscape types are denoted with a term that is rather untranslatable (e.g. the French bocage (see Kruse et al. 2010: 108), the Spanish dehesa (see Kruse et al. 2010: 106-107), or the Portugese montado (see Kruse et al. 2010: 117) or the German Waldhufenflur. (The latter means a special, planned way of creating linear, very regular fields with or without settlement, out of forest.)³

² Stacul, “A ‘private place’? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy,” 29.

³ Printsman, Kruse, Roth, “Introduction for Living in Agricultural Landscapes: Practice, Heritage and Identity,” 90.

Agricultural landscape is the preferred term as opposed to rural area in case of a conscious emphasis on a centuries long practice of cultivating the land and the aspect of similar everyday practices creating a cultural order. Communities defined through agricultural landscapes and communities out of the urban reach have been collectively challenged by redefining themselves alongside a new economic order, changes in the notion, and a new social identity. They provide a colourful landscape for observing the impact and local perception of unified initiatives for rural development on national and international level. “Creating a sense of belonging in the process of a material-semiotic landscape construction”⁴ proves to be a challenge thanks to a missing, long-term discourse between stakeholders and the local community.

In order to promote participatory working meetings in non-urban areas, there is a need for cooperation between the local community and policy measures taking local narratives into account. For me in the context of this writing ‘neo-rurality’ therefore means new ways of understanding new ways of social encounters and their impact in rural communities.

For allowing more space for discourse around the term ‘rural’ I decided to follow the thought line argued by Ruth Liepins defining rural communities by four elements: *people* -considered as part of a specific social construct and reference system-, *meanings*, *practices* and *spaces and structures* in her paper “Exploring rurality through ‘community’: Discourses, practices and spaces shaping Australian and New Zealand rural ‘communities’”.

Ruth Liepins has been widely referred to in recent studies on the influence of art and culture in rural environments as she allowed the concept of community to have its own agency to define itself; she reads community as both “discursive and material phenomenon of social connection and diversity”⁵; a definition that is providing space

⁴ Müller, “Making Landscapes of (Be)Longing. Territorialization in the Context of the EU Development Program LEADER in North Rhine-Westphalia,” 3.

⁵ Liepins, “Exploring rurality through ‘community’: discourses, practices and spaces shaping Australia and New Zealand rural ‘communities’,” 325.

for writing a collective story and listening, a framework for reading communities in both their material, structural and perceived or imagined forms.

Even though imagination plays an important role in reading local realities, ‘community’ is more to be understood as a concept of a hopefully collective social construction embedded in a network of power relations.

“People develop shared meanings about their connectedness in ‘community’ via local narratives and social rituals. Attention to oral narratives and key texts will provide data for reading meanings of ‘community’ through widely held beliefs and expressions of social connection”.⁶ It should be noted though, her terms in reflection of this writing will be interpreted with an “Eastern European twist”, meaning that considering metanarratives as general truths is still to be avoided, though observations on metanarratives should serve as an additional angle to the narrators’ reality for a better understanding and inclusion of their material quality of life in a wider socio-political discourse. Metanarratives are understood by acquiring the local language and by raising questions from a space of honest curiosity.

As Liepins emphasizes considering aspects of otherness within a community, social connection happens in given and created spaces and structures within the community. “In this way the people, meanings and practices which construct a given ‘community’ will take on material and political shape in the form of key sites and organizational spaces”.⁷ How these terms allow a fluid and discursive approach towards bridging the gap of opposing realities can be beautifully seen through research material collected in the fields of rural studies throughout the marginalized rural EU. Moreover, they enhance a layered interpretation of different realities and perception of identity reconstruction aims in postsocialist countries. In the following, these terms will be entangled, reinterpreted, intertwined and understood in different contexts.

⁶ Harvey, “Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference”, 1996 quoted in Liepins, “Exploring rurality through ‘community’: discourses, practices and spaces shaping Australia and New Zealand rural ‘communities’,” 327.

⁷ Liepins, “Exploring rurality through ‘community’: discourses, practices and spaces shaping Australia and New Zealand rural ‘communities’,” 328.

Matters of Belonging

Why even seemingly slight changes in the visibility of a territory can cause a conflict of meanings through a loss of local community practices is shown in the example of Vanoi valley, an Alpine community in the Trentino region of Northern Italy in the article “A ‘private place’? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy” written by Jaro Stacul.

The integrity and ideal autonomy of the community became an issue of heated debate in the early 1990s, when the provincial park, the Parco Naturale Paneveggio Pale di San Martino, established in 1967, gained jurisdiction over a substantial part of the forested area in the upper Vanoi valley. The consolidation of the park was part of an attempt, on the part of the provincial council of Trentino, to implement the 1992 EU Habitats Directive and subsequently designate the area as a Special Area of Conservation.⁸

The reason for choosing Vanoi valley was threefold: “it has never become a ski resort, it didn’t boast ‘authentic’ foodstuff or cultural traditions that can attract mass tourism”⁹, so its distinct biodiversity has turned out to be the best resource for reaching touristic targets. On top, the agenda included an open-air museum on formerly farmed land. The local community “had to come to terms with a vision of the countryside to be communally owned as a source of enjoyment”.¹⁰

⁸ Stacul, “A ‘private place’? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy,” 34.

⁹ Stacul, 34.

¹⁰ Stacul, 34.

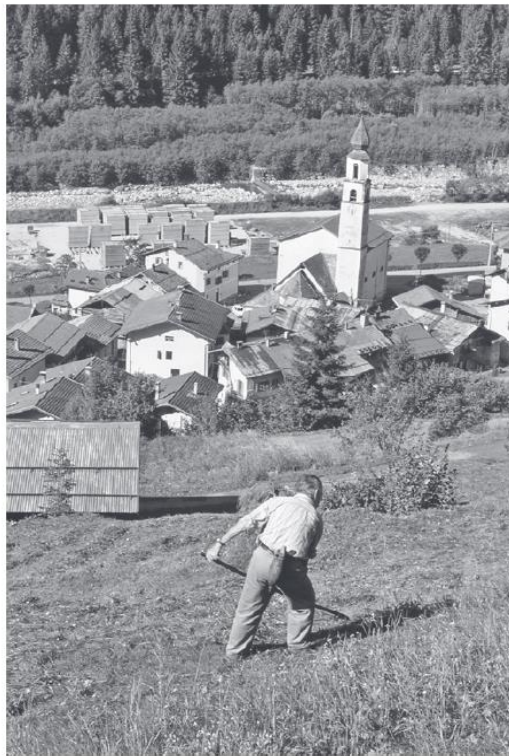


Figure 2.3 The material and symbolic cultivation of landscape: haymaking in Caoria in 1992.

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¹¹ Stacul, "A 'private place'? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy," 38.

The top-down approach on redefining the purpose of the natural territory created discussions around the misconception between the urban perception of rurality and the local community's social practices of rurality.

Cultivating land is a matter of ownership, is part of local everyday practices and symbolizes control over the environment. Footpaths are to build relationships between humans and the natural environment. “Untamed is an image meant for urban taste for wild nature”¹², for the locals it means a loss of their everyday practices.

The everyday practice is what matters more to the local community as opposed to any academic discourse on the semantics or aesthetics of rural landscapes. Reading through a couple of studies reporting on similar cases across the rural EU, for locals, top-down imposed improvement strategies usually mean restraining power on everyday practices that legislation hasn’t had access to before. Cultural misunderstandings on both sides easily lead up to social tension and misunderstood notions easily become victims of political discourse and ideologies. Decisions on changes in meaning and the freedom of interpretation of what a territory is intended for or represents is a matter of belonging.

Matters of belonging and even the visual cultivation of locally owned territories are not allowed to be dependent on economic viability. Besides policy measures targeting the socio-economic and political issues of rural areas, civil mediators become important agents in accessing local communities perception, and being able to communicate needs taking local narratives into consideration.

¹² Stacul, “A ‘private place’? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy,” 38.

LEADER is EU's main local development program that first aimed at involving local residents in development projects and that has been referred to the most in current studies on the long-term social impacts of policy measures in rural development at an EU level. "The LEADER approach is characterized by key features, such as area-based local development strategies, public-private partnerships (Local Action Groups: LAGs), and a bottom-up approach."¹³ Even though the initial concept was well-intended, the unclear definition of participatory ways of enrolling local residents makes participation turn into a performative practice.¹⁴ Moreover, the outcomes highly depend on the specific region's attitude towards authority and historical practices of 'self-efficacy'.

Chatzichristos Georgios and Hennebry Barraí conducted case studies on the success of LAGs in three marginal areas within the EU that counted as rural according to the EU-commission's definition: "they had low population density or less than 300 inhabitants per square kilometer and lacked urban centers with more than 200 000 inhabitants nearby."¹⁵ These areas were Mühlviertel in Austria, Baixo Alentejo in Portugal and Phthiotis in Greece. Georgios and Barraí were examining how governance arrangements enhanced socially innovative governance "through the levels of community empowerment, engagement in the collaborative processes, as well as inclusion of non-traditional, marginalized actors in these regions."¹⁶ The research revealed some extra-local factors that foster socially innovative governance: "a decentralized government framework, advanced interregional networking, a discourse dissemination among the stakeholders and the civil society, as well as an organizational stability of the involved institutions for social innovation to be embedded."¹⁷

¹³ Müller, Sutter, Wohlgemuth, "Learning to LEADER. Ritualised Performances of 'Participation' in Local Arenas of Participatory Rural Governance," 224.

¹⁴ Müller, Sutter, Wohlgemuth, 223.

¹⁵ European Commission, "Rural Development in the EU", Report 2013 quoted in Georgios, Barraí, "Social innovation in rural governance: A comparative case study across the marginalised rural EU," 195.

¹⁶ Georgios, Barraí, "Social innovation in rural governance: A comparative case study across the marginalised rural EU," 197.

¹⁷ Georgios, Barraí, 200.

To be fair, I think initiatives not only need the right conditions but also the right momentum(s) for sustainably thriving, flexible and process-based positive outcomes, but these insights made me understand two things. First, I understood how top-down territorial changes, changes in land ownership, collectivisation, the socialist regime emphasized cultural values impacted and probably still impact the rural realities of postsocialist countries and how institutional development strategies are perceived locally. Even though countries that I used as a reference for my literature review thanks to their geopolitical and historical resemblance to Hungary such as Poland and Czech Republic are already part of the EU, in postsocialist countries even “the distinction between governance and local resource management was not so obvious”¹⁸ before the democratic transition. Thanks to all these factors, accessing local narratives and our understanding of local needs might be more difficult according to the stage of collective historical self-reflection, the level and history of democracy practice, locals’ access to wider perspectives and self-efficacious ways of coping with and rethinking difficulties. Second, I also understood that these circumstances might create an even greater momentum for sustainably present and internationally embedded cultural associations for representing local interests in a more trustworthy manner in postsocialist countries.

Not only status and identity loss, demographic changes, but also freedom for proactive recreation are factors that can shape social memory in the long run and along which rural can be defined as opposed to urban. It takes patient observation and direct encounters to find the right ways.

¹⁸ Kniec, Goszczyński, “Local Horizons of Governance. Social Conditions for Good Governance in Rural Development in Poland,” 28.

For my artistic research, I not only aimed for understanding the meanings of rurality, but also the role that activist forms rooted in artistic practices played in Hungary's and the region's international connectedness in the years of socialism. As I collected most of my observations in the village of Cered, I wished to understand how growing up in a postsocialist climate in the countryside of Hungary shaped my visual culture and my understanding of artistic practice.

Art created in rural areas shows cultural differences, the focus and form of an art piece has the power to question the social identity of a community. Research based art can serve as means of observation on a collective practice of encountering history, to attract the public eye and raise social awareness.

“In recent years there has been an increasing discussion within European arts and culture networks on the resilience, participation and empowerment of rural areas in the context of the arts.”¹⁹ Through initiatives such as Culture Action Europe, a non-academic policy research fund and European Network of Cultural Centers²⁰ research-based art projects become a means of networking, knowledge transfer, activistic and social function.

As it turns out, transnational networking and knowledge transfer strategies had their roots and a social function in artist communities that acted as “subcultures” creating their own peripheral spaces for identity reconstruction before the democratic transition in countries that we now like to call Central European in a geo-political context. Attitudes of self-expression might be traced back to unofficial art practices of the ‘60s and ‘70s in socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc. In order to read local narratives, it is unavoidable to look out for the historic traces of the socialist period in these countries. For a better understanding, László Beke in his writing “Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art” that has been published in 1999 considers Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and East Germany as countries that have been part of his interpretation of conceptual strategies.²¹ Thanks to a self-historicizing, documenting art practice, we now have a better understanding of the long-term social relevance of a transnational social-discourse-based art practice under pressure.

¹⁹ Michałowski, “Arts in Rural Areas”, 22.

²⁰ Michałowski, 22.

²¹ Beke, “Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art,” 41.

Documenting discursive encounters as a form and methodology

The history of a collective formal art practice reaches back to the appearance of the first art colonies. “Stadtflucht”, a romantic desire for idyllic landscapes, the freedom of creation on previously “untouched” ground, sometimes even disillusionment in an academic approach in arts and lower costs of living inspired a lot of artists to join the movement of art colonies from the end of the 19th century. The contributions to the history of art are still preserved in museums, showing how these artist colonies became schools with a significantly identifiable formal character born out of a collective redefinition of landscape and symbolic choice of subject matter. Nina Lübbren in her writing *Rural artists’ colonies in Europe 1870-1910* examined the function of art colonies in exchange with their socio-economic environment and gave examples of art colonies enhancing tourism, local businesses and infrastructural connectedness of peripheral areas.²² In my understanding though, the focus of the artistic discourse was mainly on discovering the palette within the constraints of form and not on the questioning of form or one of the following:

Making the social discourse be the source of formal exchange

Making the form be the base of artistic discourse

Making the discourse be the form of artistic practice

The romantic idea attached to the concept of art colonies in their initial form still exists and now takes shape in art colonies with a workshop format based on mastering one medium. Though the post-war 20th century has become an exciting era for the reinterpretation of the role of art in understanding, expressing, manifesting and archiving different layers of reality, in which discursive art practices like the one at the ArtColony Cered are more rooted in.

²² Lübbren, „Rural artists’ colonies in Europe 1870-1910”

The appearance of conceptual tendencies in „Eastern European” art resulted in an exciting archival moment of artists creating their own spaces for identity reconstruction in form of international artist meetings, networking strategies, mail art and publications reaching beyond national borders through the language of doublespeak. Doublespeak refers to the “iconographic” and linguistic dichotomy between West and East, the search for collisions between the two, the double meanings of words and actions depending on the place of display.²³

The countryside, providing space and structure for a collective practice of redefinition, could become a forum for a transnational artistic discourse through international artist meetings. I believe in society as a living organism and political tension promoting creative ways for understanding nuances. Contemporary studies on the role of arts and creativity in rural development that come from a ‘Western’ point of reference refer to “informal arts” as a key element in growing an arts-active community besides understanding the “underlying social context, social networks, support to infrastructure development and a visionary leader.”²⁴ Even though, on the EU-level as well there is a search for a collective recipe for understanding rural realities, even the word ‘informal’ connotes different artistic practices such as attitudes of resistance in postsocialist countries.

²³ Sasvári, “Autonomy and Doublespeak: Art in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s”, 11.

²⁴ Duxbury, Campbell, “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity: A Literature Review,” 18.

Linguistic and visual nuances are points of reference where artistic and sociological research practices intertwine and can make the real difference for understanding the social context in postsocialist countries.

Generally, all neo-avantgarde tendencies of the 1960s in the “socialist” countries, especially conceptualist art, performed a “linguistic” function in preparation for the political and social transformation of the 1980s – in other words, a genuinely new aesthetic language was not created in the 1990s because this has been accomplished decades before. As used here, *linguistic* refers to the framework through which the methodologies and discourses of the human sciences, philosophy, and art were interrogated and redefined by their own practitioners.²⁵
(László Beke)

The way of archiving reflections on people’s activities and mentalities became the piece of art, the form and hidden references in it became the content allowing artists in a rather narrow public sphere to wink at each other and experience a collective rethinking of the social discourse. László Beke in the same writing described the „Eastern European” in comparison to the “Western notion of conceptual art” as “flexible and elastic, ironic, humorous and ambiguous, nonprofessional, communicable, always ready to become a social activity of a group of young people or even an alternative movement.”²⁶

Expressing and thematizing sometimes utopian layers of reality became part of the artistic practice, both art historians and artists became mediators, active participants and initiators of the artistic discourse in the ‘region’ and their writings now can be considered to be reflections of a then not so obvious reality. Thanks to their conceptual art practices and activism they are now actively shaping our social memory of a time in which their institutional strategies might seem to point into no direction. This secret language of conceptualism could be practiced, interpreted with the risk of marginalization and has taken up different forms like transnational friendships, language courses, manifestos, weather forecasts or even reconstruction of historical events such as László Beke’s *Handshakes, photo-montage of the collective action realized in the Chapel Studio, Balatonboglár, August 26-27, 1972* rethinking and replaying the historical after-effects of the Warsaw Pact’s combined forces’ repression of the Prague Spring.²⁷

²⁵ Beke, “Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art,” 41.

²⁶ Beke, 42.

²⁷ László, “Dictionaries of Friendship: Transnational Artistic Dialogues in First Person Plural,”

Creating discursive encounters and landscapes of belonging...

...as a form and methodology.

As artists' places of display were changing according to the political climate, art took place in 'off-places' and artists reconnected at international artist meetings that were either temporarily tolerated like the one initiated by György Galántai at the Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár, Hungary from 1970 to 1973 or even state funded like the plein-air meetings during the summer holiday in Poland.²⁸ A piece of public sphere with the aim of identity reconstruction has been improvised in peripheral art venues, where international guests were allowed to be invited in the name of art. This is how the performing artists, Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller attended Miatsko '78 in Poland funded by the British Council and in return initiated the "Anglo-Polski, Art and Performance" tour in the UK, during which Andrzej Kostołowski, co-founder of NET, held public lecture performances on Art and Society and presented his Thesis on Art like On a Map of Art as part of the tour catalog:²⁹

²⁸ Kemp-Welch, "Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981," 193.

²⁹ Kemp-Welch, 345.

25 : ON A MAP OF ART

- I A map of art is comprised of two layers:
 - a: the hidden network of vectors, indicating connections and influences - the so called network of induction.
 - b: the field of relations between points described by the names - of styles, tendencies, movements, actions, propositions, projects, people, etc.
- II The hidden net of influence-vectors - network of induction - becomes established as a static pattern.
- III The field of relationships specified by names is a structure submitted to permanent transformations.
- IV A map of art develops further when new regions of art are opened up.
- V To locate any articulation of art with the help of a map of art, we should:
 - a: find the appropriate place in the field of names.
 - b: determine the adequate context of relationships.
- VI A map of art is a picture of art which has been submitted to logical analysis in the same way as are other maps.
- VII Logical analysis of a map of art - including a calculation of influences and relationships - may provide methodological foundations for a science of art, catalogues of art, etc.: operating according to the rules of that analysis.
- VIII Logical analysis provides us with the most fundamental, least illusory theory to afford possibilities for a map of art, to help in our work on the systems of art.

Andrzej Kostołowski,

“Theses on Art. 25: On a Map of Art”, 1973, Courtesy of the Artist³⁰

³⁰ Kemp-Welch, “Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981,” 348.

Even today, creating a “map of art” requires conscious and consistent presence in specific social contexts and is a crucial part of institutional strategies of artist collectives and cultural associations exploring projects on the merge of art and society.

NET started around the same time György Galántai started to organize International Artist Meetings after successfully negotiating a 15-year-old lease on an abandoned Roman Catholic chapel in Balatonboglár³¹ with the aim of organizing an artist colony there. NET was founded by Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski with the intention to connect points of the NET, an open and uncommercial network manifesting as mailing list, where ideas are shared instead of objects, a generative principle to connect individuals that were part of the NET through a dialogue and to promote an East-East and East-West exchange.³² In this sense networking strategies and social innovation already were self-organizing artistic practices before the democratic transition and long before European cultural networks.

At the same time... an important and Beke's reporter on the Czechoslovak scene, Tomáš Štraus wrote “Art as anticipation of social reality”...³³ The Mexican émigré artists, Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion moved to the rural Devon, England, founded “The Press” with a collective of artists who had come together there and in collaboration with David Mayor, who got access to the NET, devoted two issues of their magazine *Schmuck* to Eastern Europe.”³⁴... Klaus Groh organized the exhibition “Sechs ungarische Künstler” at the Oldenburger Kunstverein³⁵... György Galántai organized international artist meetings at the Chapel Studio, in Balatonboglár, for which invitations have been sent out through already extensive mailing lists partly thanks to the NET and the circles got wider and closer and closed with time.

³¹ Kemp-Welch, “Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981,” 193.

³² Kemp-Welch, 97.

³³ László, “Dictionaries of Friendship: Transnational Artistic Dialogues in First Person Plural,” *ARTMargins Online: Special Issue*: <https://artmargins.com/dictionaries-of-friendship/>

³⁴ Kemp-Welch, 115.

³⁵ Kemp-Welch, 130.

The Balatonboglár Chapel Studio was a place where Hungarian literature has been rethought, historical events have been reconstructed, legislation has been replayed and addressed to Hungarian society. The meaning of private art got questioned, manifestos got written but ideas didn't get lost in translation and everything happened with the aim of conscious self-historicization, documenting discursive encounters. Later in the '70s György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczai founded Artpool that already before its time was defined as a conceptual art project and archive at the same time and till today contributes to our understanding of an artistic practice under socialist conditions.

Events and artistic practices were so densely connected and intertwined that they made me understand the power that a discursive artistic practice and international networking strategies can have, especially if they are documented and in form of catalogs and international collaborations show imprints of the social context the artistic practice is taking place in. It becomes a fluid system of taking and sharing, in which boundaries can no longer be stated. Miklós Erdély, one of the most important figures of the Hungarian neo-avantgarde and member of the Chapel Studio meetings, in his writing "Poetry as a Self-Assembling System" used poetry as a metaphor for a self-organizing institutional model with an ability to mold obstructing elements over time and create something formal and conceptual, hence poetic out of them.³⁶

³⁶ Erdély, "Poetry as a Self-Assembling System," Balatonboglár:1973 quoted in Kürti, "Underground Realism. György Galántai's Institutional Strategies," 38.

I believe that “making poetry” is a matter of practice, a language once picked up that can be saved and carried around as a tool to see hidden layers.

The Case of ArtColony Cered

Reference to things other than “high art” is a conscious creative work, and can also be construed as a new cultural practice, a suggestion to an anthropological art concept. If so, and the memory of textile and homespun can be recalled, and former creators can also be recalled, you can understand and experience the objects in their own meaning.

Dr Katalin Keserü, art historian, returning participant at the ArtColony Cered³⁷

(Katalin Keserü)

At Cered it became clear to me that I found all my reference points that I gathered to research on the roots of my artistic interest, in the natural gardens filled with aesthetically thought-provoking art pieces that stay for view for the local community throughout the year. From an artistic practice point of view, there is no centre and periphery there, though there is a collective practice of thinking with senses, sharing something personal, putting it into the public sphere and letting people be curious enough to start a conversation.

However, through having created an open atmosphere, the almost 30-year-old practice unavoidably molded the surrounding realities into a collective language, through which realities are more bearable and through which the locals open up. Artists gained an informal presence in the rural landscape, art shows itself in active engagement with the local community rethinking happenings of everyday life there. It's a practice of collective, associative reinterpretation of art and society that has a visual reflection in art and conversations. In Cered, there is a spontaneous and irrational sequence of happenings, spun around by warm-hearted conversations held in the local “tasty dialect”, as we say it in Hungarian. The dialect is by the way one of the ‘palóc’ people. Cered is located in the North-Eastern part of Hungary, in the county of Nógrád, just at the Slovakian border. In fact, Slovakia is just a couple of steps away from the main “gate” of the gardens of the art colony.

³⁷ Keserü, “Art Colony Cered 1996-2010,” 42.

Driving across the region and talking to Hungarian people on the Slovakian side, looking at the circumstances they are living under, opens gates to new ways of understanding that social connection overrules created spaces and structures, the latter might only serve to bring in new layers, impulses of understanding. In the end, it's impossible to unsee the poor circumstances people are living under on both sides of the border.

“Spatial and settlement development is a consciously reasoned and continuous intervention into the economic, environmental, social and built-up elements of a given settlement or region.”³⁸ What happens inside these spatial settlements is a question of creativity and sometimes they become a playful space of identity reconstruction like in the case of the ArtColony Cered. Spatial redefinition becomes a multi-actor activity, in which roles of the artists, the local community and settlement development workers collide. The work environment creates additional space for connection and trust.

The summer of 2023 I returned again after a visit in 2017 and spent two months there being part of the yearly symposium, artistic practice and institutional project of taking over the building that housed offices of one of the biggest farmers' collective of the region in socialist times. The team of the art colony with great contribution from the local ethnographic collector, “Vili”, rearranged the offices of the farmers' collective according to what they looked like back in the days. We carried newspapers, rugs, etchings showing historic events, plenty of Lenin sculptures and honours from socialist times. Next to these offices we arranged and equipped a graphic studio so that the building can host international artists and let them get inspired by the intertwined historic symbolism of the art colony, the local surroundings and the unexpected density of the ‘social-realistically’ arranged rooms. The upper floor of the building hosts a contemporary gallery now, where in the summer of 2023 I assisted in the realization of the graphic exhibition that opened on the last day of the yearly symposium.

³⁸ Bujdosó, Benkő, Patkós, “The role of art colonies in local development through the example of Cered Art Colony,” 1.

Hanging works by Ilona Keserü and Dezső Korniss in the gallery in Cered I realized how the circle closed with me attending the seminar on “Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe”, discovering a new artistic language and subculture I have not encountered before, deciding to return to Cered, initially only wanting to write about the socio-economic aspects of an art colony in a rural environment. I landed in a peripheral community, documenting an international artist meeting coming together every year with the aim of collective reflection, having strong collaboration with Polish, Czech, Slovakian, Austrian artists, universities, and cultural institutions. At nightly conversations we laugh at understanding each other’s jokes in languages we don’t understand. Subject of the meeting is the meeting.

I tell you the stories that I encountered using art as a way of research, living the ‘off-placed’ rural life. Listening closely, raising questions from a place of honest curiosity, paying attention to nuances and learning the local language with patience. I poured them into an archive of memories molding references from this writing and visual-narrative realities of the local community of Cered.

According to Ruth Liepins “conceptual choices in analyzing people’s involvement in a ‘community’ are as varied as social theories generally.”³⁹ Mine was through understanding layers of reality through conceptual art practices, through engaging in conversations, considering the creation of encounters a self-historicizing act to then further provoke a discourse around the necessity of a discourse based artistic practice. Through this practice I’m considering art as a social function, a movement, a look into the future inspired, understood and reflected by art. The collective conceptual practice hopefully patiently contributes to the international connectedness of the local community in Cered and at least with time the values the little village holds and creates space for will be acknowledged as part of our cultural heritage.

³⁹ Liepins, “New energies for an old idea: Reworking approaches to ‘community’ in contemporary rural studies,” 30.



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