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A Farewell to Private Photography

I began researching private photography in 1982. Let me list a few features of the intellectual and spiritual climate in Hungary during the late Kádár era that determined shaped this research. The concepts of forced modernization were becoming deflated by the 1980s: the fellow-feeling of West European communist parties had faded away, local strategies of consumption as a form of opposition were emerging, and art no longer authenticated the power of the state sufficiently, as a result of the Helsinki process. While in the 1960s some elements of the utopia could be clearly felt behind the state's efforts in arts and education, by the 1970s, a shadow of suspicion came to linger on all autonomous initiatives and endeavors, be they amateur theater, university gallery, beat mass, or dance house. In this spiritual and intellectual climate, sophisticated techniques of "reading between the lines" and the networks of alternative initiatives appeared. The Central European practices of making contacts in the field of arts froze due to the political events in Czechoslovakia and Poland. But due primarily to the activity of the Soros Foundation, and also to slight changes in the practices of many institutions of art mediation orientation towards the West became more intensive.¹

I was motivated by two factors at the start of my research. One was that I followed the changes of the late modernist changes of art in that period with a kind of skepticism; and the other was that during a long journey to America, I had discovered the discipline of visual anthropology. This mixture of skepticism and revelation flared up in the form of the highly intense research that took place in the Education Research Institute. During the research process, nearly 100,000 photographs and about 100 life interviews were archived; dialogue began with experts of related sciences who were very important for us; publications appeared; and intense international correspondence began. In the beginning, my research partner, filmmaker and visual artist Péter Forgács, was more interested in the visual characteristics of the private image, while my aim was to explore the modes of using images.²

The Horus Archives and its founder, Sándor Kardos, followed by film directors András Jeles and Gábor Bódy, certainly played a significant part in that. So too did the change of the conceptualist approach to art, as well as the emergence of the new world of photography in the 1980s—primarily in the photos of Lenke Szilágyi.³ But in addition to all these, our research had a part (a part that we did not yet understand then but practiced anyway) that was

closely related to the forced modernization that took place during the Kádár era. The politics of the period was embarrassed about the past; it had a bad conscience because of the past and because that past was so hard to shape. The family legendry, the telling of personal stories, was also surrounded by suspicion. The discursive space of public history could be changed somewhat by narratives of the “workers’ movement,” but private history resisted such changes. By collecting family stories of nameless people and archiving their personal photos, we unknowingly attempted alternative historiography and social research. At the same time, in our research we strove to define new frames of thinking rather than attempting meticulous classification and archiving. Later, when the archive was lost without a trace, this methodological mistake turned out to be a benefit.

Our research of private photography became less intense in the second half of the 1980s, as Forgács’s attention focused on making the *Privát Magyarország* (Private Hungary) film series,⁴ while I made considerable efforts to publish the photos we had collected—unfortunately with little result. In 1989 I exhibited the collection at the Tölgyfa Gallery in Budapest.⁵ This exhibition seemed to mark the beginning of a new and methodologically better grounded phase in our research. However, it was just then that, with the collapse of the Education Research Institute headed by Iván Vitányi, the entire archive got lost.

Despite the loss of 100,000 photographs and several linear meters of written documents, the benefits and legacy of the research are significant. One of the benefits was that it opened new horizons regarding the concept of the image as such for many colleagues we cooperated with, including László Beke, Lajos Boglár, Elemér Hankiss, Özséb Horányi, Ernő Kunt, Géza Perneczky, Lajos Pressing, György Szegő, Rudolf Ungváry, and Anna Wessely. Another benefit was that, even though most of the publications we had planned remained unpublished, the five collections that came out can still serve as resources for social theory, as well as for art theory. The works that were prepared but never published were a reader edited by László Beke titled *Privát fotó kutatás Európában* (The Research of Private Photography in Europe); a major collection of essays and studies compiled partly of manuscripts that I had edited by the authors mentioned above; a sizeable selection of resources; translations; and a very important volume of essays by Richard Chalfen, which got to the stage of printer’s proof at the Múzsák Publishing House.⁷ Ultimately, it is also certainly a benefit that just when the concepts of the teaching of cultural anthropology were being shaped at the universities of Budapest and Miskolc, the methodological arsenal evidently came to include the use of the camera, and the analysis of film and photography.

In retrospect, it is clear that our research was motivated by the political and social-historical context, and was also swept away by

the major change of that context around 1989 and 1990. The transformation of Central Europe, the search for its own history on many levels, in many forms and with much controversy, was only one element of this change. In fact, this type of publication and research became scarce in other countries of Europe and in America as well. A long list can be compiled of the *Formato famiglia—una ricerca sull'immagine* type of publications in many languages, and also of small monographs presenting small-town photo studios as well as of personal accounts using photographs as a surface of projection, like Catherine Hanf Noren's magnificent volume entitled *The Camera of My Family*. Nevertheless, only a few of these social history projects became resources of data for research (*Turning Leaves* by Richard Chalfen, analyzing the story of two Japanese-American families, is one of the rare examples).⁸ The research of private photography does not seem to have found its place and justification in the attention of the ever-changing disciplines engaged in the study of the image, primarily in that of "visual culture."⁹ Meanwhile, the use of the Internet, building databases, and digital photography became widespread in the past decade—and this is no coincidence.

By the end of the 1980s, I reached the same point as Michael Lesy, the famous vagabond of Atlanta, who wrote: "I've looked at hundreds of thousands of snapshots and listened to a lot of stories over the past ten years. I can read a picture the way some people can read the palm of a hand."¹⁰ I never saw any of the photos

that Lesy stole by the kilo from Technicolor Photo. However, I find it noteworthy that all the photos he saw led him to the same conclusion as the ones that I had seen, collected, or taken away from one of the photo company led me to. Wherever I opened a publication that contained family photos, I always found additional evidence that there was a kind of global "Kodak culture."¹² The Polaroid people—who regard photography as an integral part of their family life, family memory, and legend—record their family relations and emotional ties in quite a uniform manner; they take photos of events that are significant to them (or have such photos taken) according to quite similar scenarios. This is why many of our colleagues have used the methods of folklore research to study photographs.

Lesy continues his argument: "By itself, an ordinary snapshot is no less banal than the *petite madeleine* described in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. By itself, it is as bland and common as a tea biscuit; but as a goad to memory, it is often the first integer in a sequence of recollections that has the power to deny time for the sake of love. In Proust's novel, the discovery of the magical properties of the *madeleine* was fortuitous, but such denials and affirmations through the use of things seen or eaten, built or burnt, buried or unearthed, also characterize religious rituals of renewal and recapitulation. Snapshots may not have the numinous power of Communion wafers, Sabbath candles, nor Eleusinian sheaves—but they are often used as relics in private ceremonies to

reveal to children the mysteries of the incomprehensible world that existed before love and fate conjoined to breathe them into life.”¹³

We have witnessed fundamental changes since those days. A desire for the lost naivety, directness prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s, and such figures as Utrillo, Rousseau, the customs officer, Lartigue, Atget, or Cheval the postman were held in high esteem. However, in our times, permeated with the media, “indigenous documents,” whether close or distant, cannot find their place. Korrektor: Most of the names here are unfamiliar to me. That in itself is not a problem. But even from the context I can't figure out what these figures have in common - what their significance is to the argument. I don't understand the passage. What is "lost primariness"? "Indigenous documents"? Saying farewell to the innocent eye, we witness in an elegiac mood that the type of the image described above becomes ennobled and more and more distant from us. We feel less and less the disgust that the snapshot—the photos of the *other*—once evoked. It was probably Medusa who was most responsible for this disgust—Medusa, that is, the petrification that comes with the fulfillment of “destiny” and with growing up, the lack of ease, the fact that the everyday is doomed to this complexity, density. The snapshot could not create a distance, it could not speak in images about petrification, it did not know dreams. We might as well say that, by its intention, the snapshot was incapable of making an image. Nor was it capable of accuracy because it had no draft, and it used the “visual

language” indolently. At the same time, it was unintentionally dense and complex, and, by its existence, it served as a counterpoint to public history. And this is what made it, again and again, a hinterland of fine art, which had been deprived of all of its other hinterlands.

The rhetoric of the snapshot belongs to a period that is already fading away. Earlier, when the limits of symbolism in images were set by norms, or at least by strong patterns, meanings that could be handled in collective memory emerged. With the mediatization of the everyday—in which private photography had a significant role—networks of the individual, local, spectacular, and virtual meanings emerged in which the researcher attempting systematization will unavoidably become tangled up. New images—the terms “private photo” or “snapshot” are no longer adequate—the megapixels, the images from Web cameras and mobile phones have crossed a whole range of the limits of objectivity, locality, finite cardinality, and ritualized use. Due to the immediate feedback inherent in the use of these devices, the miraculous accidents that the Horus Archives could count on were no longer there. Increasingly, new images are produced because the possibility is there, and not because they are needed. The new images have redrawn the limits of the personal, and contemporary art is still only in the process of assessing the consequences. As Tibor Szűcs commented: “Art is said to be one of the forms of living that are very close to the freedom of the soul. And indeed, I studied art in order to achieve a certain

level of freedom. ...I gave up practicing art because the circumstances created by this practice limited my freedom.”¹⁴

The shocking number of photographs and the complexity of the relations among images and memories created a difficult situation for researchers of the private sphere and of private photo archives. Instead of systematic analysis and publications, they predominantly chose to limit their research to case studies that demonstrated certain rules. However, the new image has created a hopeless situation for researchers. As they hold the new photos in their hands, their first thought is to give up on scholarly terminology and discourse, for the best option is to indulge in hermeneutical-poetic adventures, and for that, they find and analyze “heavy images.”¹⁵

But perhaps this is not the only possible method. When gaining firsthand experience of the world of optical-chemical photography, we thought it was infinite. We cared only about a very few photos, because tens of thousands of new photographs were generated every second, in an unstoppable flood. The old story has ended before our eyes: the images enlarged in dark rooms on photographic paper have become antiques, or will be by tomorrow. In this sense, photo-museology is beginning today; we are coming to evaluate photography from our own point of view, as a poetic object, a historical resource, as a fading memory of lives, emotions, desires and personality, further and further behind us in time.

If we were to establish the archives of the private sphere today, obviously, we would try to include in the collection as many of these images and memories as possible, to save them from being lost forever. However, such an immense archive of important, one-time, unique, and personal memories would probably not let us see the history that we share, the characteristic great narratives of our age.

The new, immaterialized images live their lives in their immediate communicative space, and if that is so, maybe the researcher should also enter that space. If I had to think about the research of new private images today, I would never consider filing cabinets, cardboard boxes, or folders for storage, and would not invent interview guidelines. Mostly, I would not need to leave my desk for participatory observation. I believe that the researcher of private photography, sitting in front of a computer monitor studying old and new photographs, may have the role of the initiator who catalyzes the process where images and commentaries come to match spontaneously and self-sufficiently, finding their contexts, their interpersonal and interdisciplinary relationships on their own. And this method would do more than just keep old images alive: it would make traceable numerous lines of their complex relations and include them in new contexts of interpretation. Developing this type of research attitude and strategy is our imminent task.

¹ Literature on the period has grown fast recently. Works that are closely related to my subject are: Sándor Révész, *Aczél és korunk* [Aczél and our age] (Budapest: Sík, 1997); Gábor András, Gábor Pataki, György Szűcs, and András Zwick, *Magyar képzőművészet a 20. században* [Hungarian art in the 20th century] (Budapest: Corvina, 1999); Hans Knoll, ed., *A második nyilvánosság. XX. századi magyar művészet* [Secondary publicity. 20th-century Hungarian art] (Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó, 2002); Tamás Szőnyi, *Nyilván tartottak. Titkos szolgák a magyar rock körül 1960–1990* [You were in their files. Secret agents in the Hungarian rock music scene, 1960–1990] (Budapest: Magyar Narancs–Tihany-Rév, 2005).

² See András Bán and Péter Forgács, "Privát kép és érték" [Private image and value], in *Értékek és változások* [Values and changes], eds. Mihály Hoppál and Tamás Szecskő (Budapest: Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont [Center for Mass Media Research], 1987), vol. 2, 79–88.

³ About Sándor Kardos's filmmaking career, see www.filmunio.hu/object.7594e576-f680-4101-8be1-08c7de8c5698.ivy. About the Horus (also known as Hórusz) Archives, see László Haris (ed.), *Hórusz Archivum* (Budapest: Magyar Fotóművészek Szövetsége [Association of Hungarian Photographers], 2004). Of Jeles's films I refer here primarily to *A kis Valentinó* [Little Valentino] (1979), whose director of photography was Sándor Kardos. About Gábor Bódy, see www.bodygabor.hu, www.c3.hu/collection/videomuveszet/muveszek/Body/cv.html. Of his films, the one related directly to the subject is *Privát történelem* [Private history] (1978), directed jointly with Péter Tímár. Sándor Kardos was also the director of photography of *Egészséges erotika* [Healthy erotica] (1985), directed by Péter Tímár. This film drew significantly on forms of the private image. The significance of Lenke Szilágyi can hardly be demonstrated clearly by the books compiled of her photographs. An authentic monograph of her career has yet to be written. Her most important collections of photographs are *Fotóbrancs* [Photo gang] (Budapest: Budapest Galéria, 1994) (exhibition catalog); *Látókép megállóhely* [Vision halt] (Budapest: Magvető, 1998); and *Fényképmoly* [Photoworm] (Budapest: Ernst Múzeum, 2004) (exhibition catalog).

⁴ About Péter Forgács, see www.filmunio.hu/object.e44d3b11-7793-4497-bad2-48eedda0c9f7.ivy; a few important studies representing the Hungarian reception of the film series *Privát Magyarország* [Private Hungary] in Hungarian: Miklós Peteránk, "Privát Magyarország," in *Belvedere* 3, no. 1 (1991): 40–42; Ágnes Gyetvai, "Privát Forgács. Beszélgetés Forgács Péterrel" [Private Forgács. In conversation with Péter Forgács], *Új Művészet* 2, no. 9 (1991): 63–66; Péter Balassa, "Forgács Péter: Privát Magyarország," *Kritika* 21, no. 2 (1992): 36–37; J.A. Tillman, "'Az én munkám a szemlélődés.' Beszélgetés Forgács Péterrel" [My job is contemplation. In conversation with Péter Forgács], *Magyar Narancs* 7, no. 20 (1994): 30–31; Gusztáv Schubert, "A démon fényképezői. Privát Magyarország" [Photographers of the Demon. Private Hungary], *Filmvilág* 40, no. 8 (1997): 4–5; András Forgács, "Zárt kertek pusztulása. Forgács Péter és a film" [The decay of close gardens. Péter Forgács and the film], *Metropolis* 3, no. 2 (1999): 58–74.

⁵ *Lapok a családi albumból* [Pages of a family album], Budapest, Tölgyfa Gallery, September 11–October 27, 1989; and András Bán: "Lapok a családi albumból" [Pages of a family album], in Gera Mihály, ed., *A fénykép varázsa* [The magic of the photograph] (Budapest: Múcsarnok, 1989), 371–382 (exhibition catalog).

⁷ Of the studies commissioned during the research, those that were published include György Somogyi, "Műbíráló" [Art review], in *Fotóművészet* 33, nos. 3–4 (1990): 83–88; and György Szegő, *Privátfotó szimbólumszótár* [A dictionary of symbols in private photographs] (Budapest: Theater Art Fotó, 1998).

⁸ Antonella Ottai and Valentina Valentini, *Formato famiglia* (Rome: Paese Sera, 1981); Catherine Hanf Noren, *The Camera of My Family* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Richard M. Chalfen, *Turning*

Leaves: The Photograph Collections of Two Japanese American Families (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

⁹ See, for example, the two conferences entitled *Vizuális kultúra* (Visual culture), organized by Zsolt Bátorfi and Attila Horányi (Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem [then Hungarian University of Applied Arts, today Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design], May and November 2004); *Enigma* 11, no. 41 (2004), a special issue entitled *Vizuális kultúra* (Visual culture), edited by Zsófia Bán; or the Visual Culture section of www.m-e-m.hu, edited by Sándor Hornyik. A counterexample: *Ex-Symposion* 9, no. 32–33 (2000), a special issue entitled *Dokumentum* [Document], edited by Attila Horányi, Antal Jokesz, and Katalin Tímár.

¹⁰ Michael Lesy, *Time Frames: The Meaning of Family Pictures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

¹² The term was invented by Richard Chalfen. See his *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

¹³ Lesy, *Time Frames*.

¹⁴ Tibor Szűcs, "[Statement]," in *Sajátfotó. Képnapló* [Own photograph: Picture diary], ed. Barnabás Bencsik (Budapest: Trafó, 2000), 20.

¹⁵ András Bán and Gábor Biczó, "Kutató tekintet" [Searching gaze], *Magyar Lettre Internationale* 9, no. 38 (Autumn 2000): 25–27.