

# Beautiful Past Awaits Us: Time and Individual Memory in Contemporary Art

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## Abstract

Grasping the concept of transience or time has been a basic theme in art; hence it is no surprise that Proust also tried to search for the lost time. However, many people try the impossible: to capture the ephemeral. In any case, transience is a fundamental theme of art, although its representability is always questionable. As Jauss (1952/1996) writes, “time has a special relationship with narrative art” (p. 5). However, the notion of time is inherently difficult to define. As St. Augustine’s saying goes—which now has become a catchphrase—“What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know” (Augustine, 2006, p. 242). According to Henri Bergson (1889) time is the central question of metaphysics. If this puzzle were solved, everything would be solved. Time is perceived only in its transience. Borges wrote “time is the substance I am made of” (1956–1960/1964, p. 234). The static nature of visual art—prevalent until videos and video installations emerged—makes it particularly problematic to show a phenomenon that can only be perceived in its transience. The great challenge for art is how to depict this elusiveness. The eternal question is how we can be the same and yet different. What remains is memory. Memories are partly individual, and it is largely memories that constitute us. Thus, the topic of my paper is the representation of time, more precisely that of the passing of time, and of memories in contemporary art and the possible attitudes of the artists to stop the past, since remembering is also a rewriting and reinterpretation of the past.

**Keywords:** time, transience, memory, rewriting, contemporary art

Very deep is the well of the past Should we not call it bottomless. Bottomless indeed, if—and perhaps only if—the past we mean is the past merely of the life of mankind, that riddling essence of which our own normally unsatisfied and quite abnormally wretched existences form a part, whose mystery, of course, includes our own and is the alpha

and omega of all our questions, lending burning immediacy to all we say, and significance to all our striving. For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

—Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933–1943/1959, p. 3)

## Introduction

Plotinus says there are three times (Bene, 2011; Plótinus, 2010), and all three are present times:

1. The actual present, the moment in which I spoke, and which moment is the past.
2. The present of the past, which we call memory.
3. And the present of the future, that is, what our hope or fear imagines.

Perhaps the most significant, but certainly the most quoted author on the subject of remembrance is Jan Assmann, who builds on the work of his predecessors. His studies deal with the triad of memory (i.e., the relation to the past), identity, and cultural continuity (i.e., the creation of tradition). Assmann distinguishes different types of memory: cultural memory, which forges individuals into “we.” It relies on shared rules and values, on the one hand, and, on the other, the memory of a shared past (Assmann, 1992/2013). The next is mimetic memory, where memory is created and realized through action. Assmann also distinguishes between the memory of objects, communicative memory (speech and communication), and cultural memory (the transmission of the meaning). Overall, the culture of remembrance is about what we must not forget.

In contemporary art, many artists are interested in collective memory, especially in relation to the socialist system. However, I am more interested in personal memory precisely due to its total subjectivity.

I've always liked novels, films, etc., where we can see the same event from the point of view of several characters. The ones that capture the complex relationship of each person to history, to their past, to their present, and to other people. Those that can show the tragic–comic, the exciting–boring, the particularistic–voluptuous, the lifelike, the realistic side of this tangled ‘reality.’ Those that—without the danger of total relativism, without the lack of values—can give legitimacy to the diversity that exists side by side, after the other. (Bordács, 2011)

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man," Heraclitus famously said (Graham, 2021). The question "why not" arises. Not only because the water of the river flows on, but because we—ourselves—change, just as Borges famously says "Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river" (Borges, 1956–1960/1964, p. 234). Events of the past have multiple readings at the moment they happen, so in retrospect, family stories are always rewritten. In addition, the perception of time also involves subjective time, which we have read about from St. Augustine before Bergson, which is the alternative interpretation of time. St. Augustine was the first to raise the subjective nature of the perception of the past, present, and future. The creative perception of time is also common in the works of the artists under study: for the viewer, the certainty of a predictable succession of events disappears, and the time planes merge.

One of the strong strands of contemporary art that deals with personal memory is mostly "time travel," in which the artist confronts his childhood memories with his present-day adult personality. The big question is how to visualise memory. Mostly this is done by merging images of the past and present.

Although this theme appears in international art in a very diverse way, in the current study, I narrowed down these examples and illustrated them through works of contemporary Hungarian artists. In addition—with the exception of Miklós Erdély (Erdély, n.d., 1978/1984; Erdély, Miklós: *Memory-Model*, n.d.), the starting point and origin of these themes—I narrowed down the illustrative examples to the works of artists who lived through the regime change in 1989. Perhaps it is no coincidence that personal memory takes such a dominant role in the work of this generation.

I examine the topic according to 3 main aspects:

1. How does the past affect the present, the continuing impact of transgenerational themes and experiences?
2. How can time be stopped? The fixation of impermanence;
3. Although the article deals with personal memory, in certain historical situations and in the case of certain people, personal memory is closely intertwined with collective memory.

Moreover, I elaborate on the works that showcase this specific theme and the bibliographies of artists in detail.

## Miklós Erdély<sup>1</sup> and Time-travel

The starting point for all this is Miklós Erdély's series of photographs entitled *Time Lock* (1976) and *Time Travel* (1976), in which he applies his adult photograph to his childhood pictures. This way, with adult intelligence, he relives his childhood experiences and meets his father, who is already dead. Memory, thus, becomes active. Moreover, since he is older than his father in the photo, is included in the story as an all-knowing character. Erdély, even before this, addresses the return of time to itself in his writing entitled *Time-Mobius*.

1. What will be and will be able to react is there.
2. What reacts to oneself defines oneself as a cause.
3. Only one who turns around and acts as a cause can shape himself.
4. He who acts as a cause for himself is already what he wants to transform himself into.
5. However, it could not have been what it would have been if it had not transformed itself into what it was, even though it had transformed itself into what it had become.
6. The more advanced reaches back to be more advanced.
7. Thus, it mutually defines itself (back and forth).
8. Thus, freedom is a double determination in time.
9. If you live in the knowledge that you can return to every moment, you are enclosed by your own salvation.
10. Man is, therefore, subject to someone who knows him best: himself.
11. Fear yourself.
12. You are done.<sup>2</sup> (my translation)

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<sup>1</sup> A short biography of the artists discussed in the paper is presented in Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>

1. Ami lesz és visszahatni képes, az van.
2. Ami önmagára visszahat, az önmagát okként határozza meg.
3. Csak az képes magát alakítani, aki visszafordul és magára okként hat.
4. Aki magára okként hat, az már olyan, amilyenné magát alakítani kívánja.
5. Azonban mégsem lehetett volna olyan amilyen, ha nem alakította volna olyanná amilyen, jöllehet azzal a magával alakította magát olyanná amilyen, amilyenné alakult.
6. A fejlettebb visszanyúl, hogy fejlettebb legyen.
7. Így önmagát (oda-vissza) kölcsönösen meghatározza.
8. Ekként a szabadság kétszeres meghatározottság az időben.
9. Ha annak tudatában élsz, hogy minden pillanatodhoz vissza (meg)térhetsz, saját megváltásodtól vagy bekerített.
10. Az ember tehát alávétett valakinek, aki legjobban ismeri: önmagának.
11. Tarts önmagadtól.
12. Kész van, ami készül. (Erdély, 1983, p. 61)

Time and memory were also theoretical concerns of Miklós Erdély, as is evident from his study entitled *The Memory Model* (Erdély, n.d., 1978/1984; Erdély, Miklós: *Memory-Model*, n.d.). Memory, according to him, is made possible by the spiral structure of “private” time, where the

In the mind the distance of temporal points is not determined lineally, but they are copied on each other and on the totality of future time by the memory. And everything what will happen in the future appears like new layers on the ‘happened.’ Moving ‘forwards’ in time, the image of an event becomes less and less clear and strong what makes possible to register always new images without the disturbing effect of their equal value.

A quantity of lineal events like one week of performances can be an ideal model to examine the action of remembering. When I proposed to make a special documentation of the actions, I intended to show the process, how the events write themselves in the mind of participants one after the other, how they cover, disturb, rhythm each other (Erdély, Miklós: *Memory-Model*, n.d.).

Later on, when artists travel through time, they prefer to use the device of transparency, which seems to be the most appropriate way to blend past and present. However, this can also make it very easy to become tiresome. I will examine the revival and reworking of the past through the works of Mariann Imre, Ágnes Uray-Szépfolvi, Marianne Csáky, Zsolt Asztalos, Karina Horitz, Luca Gőbölös, and Marcell Esterházy.

### **Past in the Present**

There are many ways in which different moments from the past can be evoked. For example, different memories may be recalled at the same time. This is difficult to do visually, but one excellent way is through the *Lenticular* images of Luca Gőbölös (2007). The series of works explore, among other things, how the same situation is interpreted by factual history and, for example, by children’s memory.

The reconstruction of the personal past is mainly concerned with family history, so Ágnes Szépfolvi rewrote her own personal history based on the diary of her grandmother, which she found and was so important to her that she even changed her name to Agnes von Uray. Her name today is Ágnes Uray-Szépfolvi.

After the death of her grandparents, Karina Horitz received the little-known grandparents’ photos from her separated father. In her Hybrid Memory project, she tried to connect with them afterwards by placing herself in their enlarged photos, replicating their postures

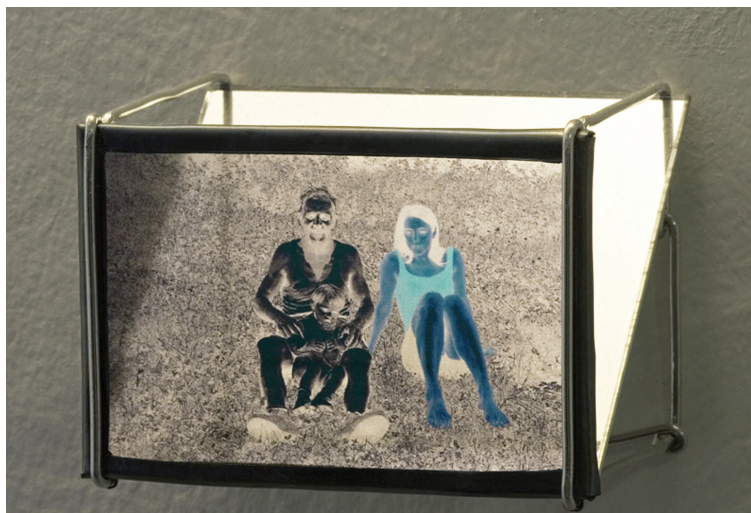
and thus connecting with them. This is particularly important because kinetic memory is the deepest and most persistent in Proustian involuntary memory. By projecting old family photos onto herself, the artist became part of the stories herself, reinterpreting the narrative of the old photographs.

Marianne Csáky also focuses on family, in addition to the passage of time. Marianne Csáky deals with her own past in a very special way in her *Time Leap* series (2008). She has superimposed negatives of her adult photographs on negatives of her childhood pictures. The resulting works are unique in their colors and their interpretation of the past. Even more thought-provoking are the artist's larger images, in which she has superimposed silhouettes of her past onto nude photographs of herself. She has embroidered present-day figures onto family photographs that can be drawn on certain art historical types (e.g., images of the Madonna). The uncertain identity and out-of-context placement of the faceless shadows create serious tension in the room. At the same time, Csáky is interested in time and space in general, and her recent multi-layered works on paper cut-outs reflect this approach to reconstructing the phases of time and space.

In another series by Mariann Csáky, *Time Tunnel* (2016), the works are born from the basic experience that the place where something important happened to her preserves these events, and their imprint remains even if the people and the situation are no longer there. The subjective changes of space also refer to the flow of time.

### **Image 1**

Marianne Csáky, *Time Leap Summer Series*, Lightbox (2007)





### **Image 2**

Marianne Csáky,  
*Time Tunnel* (2016)

The physical realization of this experience, by the way, was exactly the same as with all her other works, simply that one morning she saw the image in front of her with the phases of movement layered on top of each other. She then took countless photos of herself with a self-timer, from which she selected the three images that made up the three pictures in the series. Following this, she used a video camera to take countless small videos of her moving around in space. She drew the layers of the collage that suggest movement based on the frames of the videos. The space, the studio kitchen, is the everyday site of her life—but that is not the only reason it became an important place. Every morning, and every afternoon, she is amazed by the light effects produced by its position, its relationship to the reflecting fire walls and the sun.

Luca Gőbölös is also recurrently preoccupied with transience. On the one hand, family past appears in her pictures of *Lenticular* (2007); on the other hand, she is also preoccupied with time as “decay.” In this, the female aspect prevails, as in the traditional interpretation the essence of a woman is a young attractive body and fertility. However, time does not spare the human body. This experience, which is particularly distressing for women in most cases, is captured in her exhibition at the Társaskör Gallery in Óbuda, Budapest. It was here, that she first exhibited her Plexiglas works, in which an attractive body was suddenly affected by aging. These works have since been exhibited on their own, but at the time, in 2000, they were part of a large installation where the elderly female body was a central theme (Bordács, 2000).





**Image 3**

Gőbolyös Luca, *Lenticular Images* (2007)

Zsolt Asztalos went even further in capturing subjective time. In his *Mirror Portraits* (2006), the piece is actually created when the viewer's own face merges with the photograph on the reflective surface. The static portraits and the ever-changing reflections create an exciting interplay of impermanence and transience. Seeing the mirror portraits of Zsolt Asztalos, or more precisely, meeting ourselves in them, merging with the faces looking at us from behind the mirrors, can naturally give us a sense of *déjà vu* in terms of content and genre (Asztalos, 2006).

Closely related to this is that our present identity is influenced by the unravelling of family history (Karina Horitz, Marianne Csáky). Our ancestors, even if unknown to us, influence our lives; they are not just a moment in the here and now, but we carry the experiences, values and mistakes of our ancestors. Indeed, some moments in history are experienced subjectively in a different way than the way they occur objectively and factually. However, it is not only the various experiences and interpretations that take place at the same time that alter. We ourselves are born and constantly change within the web of our past, our ancestors, the experiences that have affected us. Each individual, no matter how individualistic the reality we live in is, carries the influence of many, many other individuals unconsciously.



### **Mariann Imre and *The Fixation Transitoire***

Mariann Imre's main art project revolves around the traces of memory (Bordács, 2014; Nagy, 2014). In practice, she wants to stop time. The traces usually erased are instead captured, embroidered—thus recording transience. In the meantime, of course, she does not stop the sun from transitioning in the sky, nor does she get carried away by the intoxication of transience (Khajjám, ca. 1120/1979, 1997).

In the visual arts, this is a particularly challenging task—it is the photograph that has become capable of capturing the fleeting moment, and it is this vision that Impressionism has embraced. In that case, however, it was an attempt to capture and record the change of landscape and natural conditions, rather than to confront the finite nature of life, experience, and memory.

The title *The Fixation Transitoire* is itself an oxymoron—as is the artist's previous exhibition title, *Silent Sounds*—and so is the special technique employed, embroidered concrete. The weight and drama of life is precisely that of passing, of death, and Mariann Imre makes us aware of this tragedy with incredible sensitivity and subtlety.

For her, the past is also embodied in the most ordinary things: the hand and footprints left behind, the fallen pine needles and flower petals, the pollen that covers the table. In fact, her gentle yet tenacious confrontation with time had already begun in her earlier works, and concrete embroidery can be interpreted from this perspective as the hard concrete yields to the thread while protecting the fragile embroidery. Her work *Vegetation*, made for the 1999 Venice Biennale and embedded in the entrance to the Hungarian Pavilion, was doomed to destruction by the spectators' walking over it, its destruction being part of the work. Just as she became an important representative of domestic women's art in the late 1990s through her relationship to the world as expressed in embroidery, she has retained her female sites, problematics and solutions to this day.

*The Fixation Transitoire* project was an attempt to capture transience in the mystical church space of the Kiscelli Museum. The site is a communal, public space—an exhibition space that cannot be separated from its original sacral function. At the same time, however, the artist has set herself the goal of literally creating a personal space in this medium. She has evoked a 1:1 scale replica of her room, stripped down to the bare bones. Thus, one views a personal space without personal objects but with only traces of its occupant(s): dirt, the remains of cat's feet and tapestries, inscriptions on the wall.

The recording of small things is both playful and melancholic because with these “sweet little nothings,” the all-encompassing passing of time can perhaps be captured even better. She does not stop time but catches it in the act of passing. For, in order to enter into any relationship with the past,

the latter must become conscious of it as such. There are two conditions for this. First, the Past cannot disappear without a trace, there must be evidence of it. Secondly, the evidence must show a distinctive difference from the Present. (Assmann, 1992/2013, p. 32)

The exhibition focuses on the range from the macro world to the micro one. The room—as the site of personal living space—dominates the place with its traces. Apparently, it is empty, or more accurately, devoid of objects, with only fragments of objects and memories. In another, a smaller part of the space, a table, the place of communal meals, tells a story through the fallen petals and pollen, or rather their embroidered imitation. We see traces, dirt, what we throw away, clean up, and paint, which disturb the order, but which make our environment personal, homely, and signs of life, but at the same time, they are what we remove in the name of tidying up.

In the even smaller, almost unnoticeable space of the exhibition,<sup>3</sup> on a smaller table, or more precisely on a reading table, her diary and diary drawings can be read like a codex, which, unlike the codex, is as personal as possible. While the room and the table are not only the space of the self, but also of us, the diary is exclusively a document of the self, and this intimate location makes this even more apparent.

Marianne Imre is not fundamentally interested in memory at the level of cultural memory but only at the level of personal history. Her attachment to the past is limited to the recent past and only to the narrow family circle, the micro-environment—at least in the exhibition space.

In fact, however, the artist presents us with a deceptive situation since it is not only personal space that is shown, although that would be enough. Marianne Imre’s studio in Dráva Street is in itself a space of remembrance, and cultural remembrance at that, as it was once home to Ödön Márffy, later Vilmos Perlott-Csaba and subsequently Tibor Csernus. Of course, it is an open question to what extent this latter fact, which is only a footnote to the exhibition, actually influences the work and its reception. In any case, it seems that in Marianne Imre’s oeuvre memory appears as resistance. Not a strident, radical, but certainly a consistent resistance to transience.

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<sup>3</sup> She had previously exhibited her piece, *The Lungs* in this part of the Kiscelli Museum



**Image 4**

Imre Mariann,  
*Recording the Transience* (2014)

**Karina Horitz and the Means of Remembering**

Karina Horitz's work is equally concerned with memory, the past, identity and forgetting, absence, shadow, and the present-not-being. The oscillation between opposites is the "field" of her work. These are not contradictory, as Borges' "The Library of Babel" says: "forgetting is a form of memory, a spacious cellar, the other, secret side of the coin" (Borges, as cited in Weinrich, 1997/2004, p. 211).

Karina Horitz's piece, *Hybrid Memories* should be placed low, at eye level, at a human scale, so that the spectator can enter into a direct, almost personal relationship with the characters in the images. The location is always a decisive factor in the installation of the work, which could be seen at Somorja prior to the exhibition *A Beautiful Past Awaits Us* at the Csikász Gallery in Veszprém. The exhibition space of the At Home Gallery at Somorja, the Synagogue Square, is evocative of the past, both historically and aesthetically: on the one hand, due to the history of the Jewish community of Somorja; on the other hand, due to the beauty of decay on the walls of the synagogue, which is a defining feature. The mystical atmosphere of the place made a journey into the past seem like an obvious theme. The only question was whom this journey affected. As the descendants of the Jews who once lived here have largely dispersed the most certain and already constant theme

remained: the journey into one's own past (*The Self of Memory*, 2000; *Visible Distance*, 2006) and into a white spot of it, the episode of the spiritual encounter with the almost unknown paternal grandparents.

As she delves into, not only her own past, but that of her grandparents, she takes an almost Dantean journey into the realm of the dead. And as Dante (1308–1320/1867) uses a mnemotechnical device to avert the threat to memory: he calls upon the muses, the nine daughters of Mnémosyne, the goddess of memory.

In recent years, contemporary art has produced a large number of works in search of identity, although many of these deal with gender, race and social and historical issues. Particularly exciting are those works where this is a question of one's own family affiliation and personal history. Such works are mainly by artists from areas where the ancestors were forced by history to migrate or were subjected to voluntary emigration, for example, a common theme among artists from Central Europe. At the same time, the subjective processing of the past is also frequent in the work of Sophie Calle and Tracey Moffat. Although, on reflection, the ancestors in almost everyone's family have different origins, and accounts of the past are also subject to constant and changing re-telling and re-writing, in which facts are beneficially mixed with subjective memory, creating different variations of the past.

In practice, Karina Horitz also uses Clio, Thalia and Melpomene (how grotesque that the visual arts have no muse!) to try to bring back memories, or rather, since there are none, to reconstruct them. Projecting old family photos onto her own body, she tries to become one character or another. Through the projected images, she not only merges with the chosen characters, but also identifies with them through posture and facial expressions.

Contrary to the common belief that our facial features reflect our inner state of mind, social psychologists believe that the opposite is also true, that is, that facial expression, movement and posture of facial muscles, also affects our mood. This is the basis of empathy: when we look at another person, we involuntarily adopt their facial expressions and thus their state of mind (Zajonc et al., 1989). According to the great master of memory, Marcel Proust, volitional memory (*mémoire volontaire*) is the memory of the intellect and as such is of no interest to art, unlike unconscious memory (*mémoire involontaire*), since our senses (especially in reverse order to their canonical hierarchy) are better able to serve memory. For Proust, smell, taste, touch, even kinetic memory, and bodily movement, are the true guardians of the past (Proust, 1913–1927/1999).

Karina Horitz effectively reverses Proustian memory theory and applies it in reverse. It is not today's movement and posture that recalls the experience of something from years ago, but rather the imitation of posture that is intended to create and recall the old experience, thus, creating memories of the non-existent. Karina photographs the life-size images projected onto her body, then prints the whole thing onto a large translucent canvas so that the figures in the work are life-size. In addition to the ten life-size canvases, a video film and two portraits are also part of the project, in the same spirit. Just as the "Horitzian physics" on the canvas creates a meeting of two layers of time, the slow-motion image on the video shows that the time of the work is not the present or the past, but a time of remembrance.

The narrative storyline is drawn through the frozen moments, but the transparent medium is also a means of not only being present but also of disappearing, of being-not-present. On the vast, translucent canvas, life-size figures from the depths of the past are literally brought to life, providing even more of an opportunity for momentary identification. It is not only the artist's identification but now also the viewer's, who peers into the lives of others as a third actor, almost as a voyeur. As the 10<sup>th</sup> daughter of Mnémosyne, Karina Horitz uses visuality and the visual arts as a means of remembering.



**Image 5**

Karina Horitz,  
*Hybrid Memory* (2008)

## **Ágnes Uray-Szépfalvy and Restart**

Ágnes Uray-Szépfalvi was also inspired by one of her grandparents' memories, more precisely, her grandmother's diary, to create a special project: "I write, she writes, we write." (Muladi, 2011) The question of the I's identity arises due to Agnes von Uray, the artist recently known as Ágnes Uray-Szépfalvi. However, that is just a name, or rather a name change, which is perhaps no coincidence. There are practical reasons, of course, but also psychological ones. However, it still does not answer the question, and she might as well say: "I know death whence can no man fly;/ All things except myself I know" (Villon, 15<sup>th</sup> century/1906).

The exhibition of this project also opened the week of her birthday, more precisely, the week of her rebirth as Agnes Uray-Szépfalvi. It is partly a retrospective exhibition anyway, so it is the best time to ask the question again since the middle period of human life is often a time of introspection.

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.  
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say  
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,  
Which in the very thought renews the fear. (Dante, 1308–1320/1867, p. 1)

This is the time, halfway through a person's life, when they have a rich past full of experiences and failures, and a future full of opportunities, new goals, and new pitfalls.

The lady in question is her great-grandmother, Frau Wilhelm Uray, or Memci, as she appears in these diaries. She documented the events surrounding Agnes from her birth until the age of 14, a period in which objective descriptions alternate with subjective impressions. This diary did not come out of the blue since it was known to exist, but it is perhaps no coincidence that the moment in Ágnes's life when she began to study it more closely came at this time. Moreover, it is no surprise that the name change is also linked to Memci.

Diaries may confuse a reader. Reading them makes one feel awkward and voyeuristic. However, with this project, we are confronted with a different kind of diary, not so much personal and confessional but more descriptive and contemplative. Although there are no intimate details, it is strange to see Agnes von Uray from the point of view of both a critic and a great-grandmother. As a child, the latter had been in a lot of fights, had been beaten up, hit by a motorbike, or ran away from kindergarten.

While time is more of an ally of forgetting, the diary is a bastion of remembrance. The successful preservation of memories depends, therefore, mainly on the strength of those memories. Looking back and taking stocktaking is a way of redefining identity, accepting that certain possibilities have diminished but also being aware of the challenges that still lie ahead. One then creates, in Levinson's (1978) terminology, new structures of life.

The new structures are the artist and her great-grandmother—more broadly, her great-grandmother's direct, present-day impressions, both objective and subjective—the personal memory of the artist, who was prompted by the diary to delve a little deeper into her past and to relive or reinterpret it. As in the exhibition space, the handwritten text of the diary can be seen, with the red transcriptions functioning as both proofreading and highlighting of meaning.

The drawings accompanying the text are not illustrations but rather images inspired by the diary. In contrast to the soft charcoal drawings and pen-and-ink works of the past, these are pen drawings that scratch, almost engrave, the memories onto the paper. A pen is a tool for writing rather than drawing. What we see here may be sculpture. In the drawings, as in the text, details are highlighted in red. In this way, the relationship of content is made visually apparent. We write, or more precisely, they both write with pens, but one writes words, the other pictures, thus rewriting the past together. In any case, in Ágnes von Uray's work, the interplay of image and text plays an important role, as her storyboards show. One sees the creation of a work of art that is a shared work, interwoven through the experiences of several people.

However, perhaps more importantly, the transcription of the writing evokes the movement that created the writing itself, and this creates the possibility of identification with the great-grandmother. Just as Karina Horitz's posture serves to remember, Agnes von Uray's somatic memory is manifested in handwriting—similarly to the way we carry our memories on our shoulders and arms, as we often cannot recall a pin code but our hands still instinctively remember it, or as people with amnesia often retain the ability to sign. Individual memory is not always specific to the individual in question, but is shaped by many components of social memory, such as family, place of origin, occupation, religion. In addition, generational change is always accompanied by a crisis of memory and offers the possibility of forgetting.

This whole exhibition was about rewriting the personal past, and even more so, the present. The scratchiness of the pen-and-ink drawings of the past is contrasted with colourful paintings of her daughters, whose idealised world hovers like a wishful dream above the facts of reality. Her own past is a tissue of facts and multiple subjective memories, but what she wants to offer her children is again a subjective image, or rather a hope.



Not only do the different experiences and interpretations take place at the same time, but we ourselves are born and change in the web of our past, our ancestors, and the experiences that have affected us. Our ancestors, even if unknown, influence our lives, which are not just a moment in the here and now, but we carry within us the experiences, values, and mistakes of our ancestors. These thoughts are reflected in the poem “By the Danube”:

One moment, and fulfilled all time appears  
In a hundred thousand forbears’ eyes and mine...  
We know each other as sorrow and delight.  
I, in the past, they in the present live. (József, 1936/1966)

### **Image 6**

Ágnes Uray-Szépfalvi, *I write, She Writes, We Write* (2010)



### **Mária Chilf and Marcell Esterházy—Personal and Collective Memory**

A very particular mixture of personal and collective history is revealed in the work of Mária Chilf and Marcell Esterházy. In Mária Chilf’s art, personal experiences and personal memories often appear. On the one hand, family photographs are the basis of her *Family Album* series, and on the other hand, in her *Díszmagyar* (Hungarian traditional clothing) project.

Chilf, while tracing her family’s history, links the stories of World War II with the events of today, finding parallels between the past and the present, between personal stories and history. The methodology of memory, collective and individual memory, their inter-

connections and divergences, the differences between their forms of expression and propaganda speech. Mária Chilf was approached by an art historian about depositing a Hungarian costume in the Hungarian National Museum, which belonged to Mrs Miklós Chilf from Târgu Mureş in the 1940s and of which she is now the heir. From a photograph, Chilf learned that it was her grandmother's ceremonial dress, thought to be missing. Other items in the photograph have also been found in recent times, including the tapestry in the photo—which was passed down to her from her grandfather's second family after his death—and the Turkish ring with glasses, which was passed down to her by her step-grandfather. The objects in the photo are now assembled and in their places.

In Marcell Esterházy's work, collective and personal memory intertwine too. The Esterházy family is an influential figure in Hungarian history, but for Marcell Esterházy, it is also part of his personal history and identity. This state of affairs triggers the question of what an artist can do if he has famous ancestry. As a first reaction, distancing himself from the burden of family fame, his main motivation may be to become successful and famous by virtue of his own talent and strength. However, once this is in place, it is confidently possible, even obligatory, to deal with this baggage. Both attitudes are also a question of identity—of distancing, independence, and confrontation (Bordács, 2013).

In the last decade, Marcell Esterházy has come to reflect not only on the stories of his own family, but the entire Esterházy family. These stories are not just the stories of any family but of one that played an important role in Hungarian history, events that are, thus, placed in an even wider context. Interestingly, however, it was not through his own family that he came to these family stories, but through photographs he had found and started collecting on the streets of Paris. The photographs of other families eventually inspired him to research his own past, aided by a collection of nearly 600 family photographs from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the family's life in Majk and Csákvár, some of which he sometimes uses as found objects in his work.

He started processing the past as early as 2005 with a video of his maternal grandfather. The family past presented to the viewer is not a document but a series of stories rewritten by the artist from real stories or read from a different perspective. The most typical example being the video loop *On the Same Day*, in which the parallel fates of his grandfather's sister, Mónika Esterházy, and a Roma woman, a woman living at two extremes of society, are interwoven.

In the process of constructing and processing the past, "personal identity is both a consciousness of oneself and a consciousness of the expectations of others, of the expect-

tations of others towards us and the responsibility that this entails" (Assmann, 1992/2013, p. 134). Perhaps one of his most striking pieces is a photograph of his relative, who incidentally also goes by the name of Marcell Esterházy (1920–1945)—although we know that Proust was a greater inspiration than the family thread in the artist's name. In addition to the ancestor evoked, this work also visually expresses Marcell Esterházy's creative attitude by riding the horse the other way round, that is, showing the back of things with a kind of sloppy elegance. This impression is also due to the fact that the photographic enlargement ultimately involves a change of medium, as it appears to us as a lightbox (Esterházy, 2013).

The enlarged drawing of Péter Esterházy, his father, is lit up like a neon portrait. This work, too, evokes two figures—father and grandfather at the same time—but without nostalgia, because it is an amateur caricature that can be turned off if one would like to. The father and grandfather also appear before us through their typewriters in the pictures of *Hermes and Erika*. Peter Esterházy wrote his novels by hand, but his feuilletons were written on Erika, while Hermes was used to write translations and reports for the State Security Department of the Ministry of Interior for the grandfather. A different, and even bizarre, way of looking at the past and the name is presented in the video *Four movements for five M*, where he recalls the name of his brother Miklós.

The portraits of pomp-loving Miklós Esterházy—who was also a patron of Haydn and the Kismarton orchestra—are echoed on Miklós's drum kit, showing that the two Miklós share not only their names but also their love of music. The fact that this family history is not only about the distant past is indicated by the circular work *The circle is not round* (2012), in which he has collected and scanned objects from the past ten years, thus preserving the spatial and temporal. The objects (milk tooth, railway sign, wedding ring, etc.) come from the most diverse situations in life. There is also a sense of reckoning here since these objects are relics of a closed past while they also point to the future through children's toys.

The object entitled *We will not take back the Land!*, which became a catchphrase from Péter Esterházy around the time of the regime change, in connection with reparations, is related to the family past in a different way. Nationalization also affected the properties taken from the Esterházy family. It rhymes with the left-wing phrase "We will not give back the land" of 1946. The object itself is exhibited in a space that functions as a kind of conservatory, and despite the inscription, the box contains the very land taken back from the Majki estate, with a few plants that, according to the instructions, not only have to be tended but no new ones can be planted. This increases the responsibility

for the piece of land and the plants on it since the plants cannot be replaced by people—so the responsibility is on the people living on this piece of land, who cannot be replaced. Marcell Esterházy, in his 2013 exhibition at the acb Gallery, foreshadows with the title *Vesd össze* (*Take it together*) that the works are public footnotes, bearers of family histories, and art historical connections. They are constructed imprints of his micro and macro environment, his past and present, filtered through his personal identity.



### **Image 7**

Marcell Esterházy,  
*Directions* (2013)  
Duratrans, Lightbox,  
100 x 60 cm

## **Conclusion**

Typically, these artists illustrate the relationship between personal and objective history, past and present, and the continuous interaction of people in the present. At the same time, the visual realization of this train of thought is often achieved in a variety of ways, although the phenomenon of transitions and transparency is common to all of them.

Through these works, artists reinterpret, reconstruct their past, the past with their present consciousness, but obviously this new reconstruction is, in fact, just as much a construction. Furthermore, due to the personal involvement, they are both closer and farther from the truth. However, it is questionable whether there is any truth at all without subjective experiences.

Memories and our past are an integral part of our identity. Therefore we cannot imagine how terrible it must be when we find out that our memories are false memories, like *Blade Runner* Rachele's experience when she realises that all her childhood memories are part of an agenda (Scott, 1982).

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## Appendix

### Short Biography of Artists

Zsolt ASZTALOS: (Budapest, 1974). His works cover two main topics: the position of ordinary people in consumer society and the relationship with the past, memory. His works, organized around the issues of history, past, memory, and forgetting, bear witness to the experience of history and past arising from postmodern thinking and approach, which emphasizes the relativity of the historical narrative. In 2013, he represented Hungary at the Venice Biennale of Fine Arts with his work *Kilőtték, de nem robbant fel* [Fired but Unexploded]. Munkácsy Award winner, artist of the Kisterem Gallery.

Mária CHILF (Târgu Mureș, 1966). Her works can be outlined in the genres of drawing, graphics, painting, installation, and media art. She creates both watercolors and installations, using practically the same method and style. Her drawings and watercolors have a meticulous, detailed illustrative nature, but they are only apparently narrative, there is no logical or easily verbalized connection between their components. Its sometimes alphabetic, sometimes mechanical or biological motifs reminiscent of illustrations in anatomy or natural history books allow us to associate it with guts and wires, while they are supplemented with details referring to internal landscapes. In one of her most exciting works, she unravels the complicated threads of her own family history in connection with an unexpectedly found female Hungarian dress. Munkácsy award winner, artist of the Inda Gallery.

Marianne CSÁKY: (Budapest, 1959, lives in Brussels) is a Hungarian writer and sculptor. Trained in arts as well as ethnography and philosophy, she started to exhibit her work in Budapest in 1989. Since the very start of her career, Csáky has been known for her non-mainstream forms of expression and her unconventional and provocative images. Marianne Csáky works with various media: photography, painting, sculpture, embroidery, video, and installation. In her juvenile works, she exclusively used leather for her sculptures and 3D objects. In her early works—sculptures made out of pieces of waste wood and plaster—language, desire, subjectivity, and the androgynous nature of soul and mind were the focus of her interest. In 2000, her interest turned toward personal and small community history. These series of works (*My Skins*, 2005; *Time Leap*, 2007–8) are the appropriation of her family's past, an experiment with the nature of memory, and post memory work. Artist of the Inda Gallery.

Miklós ERDÉLY: (Budapest, 1928–Budapest, 1986) architect, writer, poet, visual artist, film director, theorist. He took a job at Budapesti Építőanyagipari Vállalat, and developed the technique of photo mosaics, which from then on ensured his livelihood through his



small business called MURUS. In addition to traditional fine art genres, he is a significant representative of action art, environment and concept art. As a theoretically oriented avant-garde artist, film director and writer, he dealt with the new possibilities of expression of these different art forms, as well as the artistic activity itself and its analysis. In 1977, he started the FAFEJ (Imagination Development Exercises) course, and in 1978 the INDIGO (Interdisciplinary Thinking) course, where Eastern philosophy and contemporary art were emphasized. A new generation of artists emerged from these groups.

Marcell ESTERHÁZY (Budapest, 1977). He graduated from the Department of Intermedia at the University of Fine Arts in 2003. He started working in photography in Paris as a student of Lucien Hervé, then lived and worked in France for more than a decade. In his photographs, installations, and video works, Esterházy directs attention to the personal and universal, often contradictory nature of our relationship to history by placing found objects and typical pictorial representations in a new context. Artist of acb Gallery.

Luca GÖBÖLYÖS: (Budapest, 1969–) photographer, a university lecturer.

In 1994, her series of portraits of the actors of the domestic homosexual subculture, going beyond the distanced approach of the sociophoto, portrays the life of a marginalized minority with deep empathy and brings into the artistic theme a social and aesthetic phenomenon that was previously treated as a taboo. From then on, in her works, she is primarily concerned with the problems of the relationship with sexual identity, the social representation of the body, and the pictorial stereotypes of gender roles. (Bencsik, n.d.).

She almost also made a series of another marginalized group, overweight people. Over time, she became preoccupied with questions about her body, relationship, and personal past. She is mostly concerned with the image of women in the media, the taboo of an old female body, and social expectations regarding women. Balogh Rudolf Prize winner.

Karina HORITZ: (London, 1969). Today she lives and works in Budapest. She deals with the recycling of pictures and works partly from family pictures. She is interested in the contemporary life of old pictures. The main topics she deals with are our constantly evolving cultural identity from the exploration of the family, national or global narrative. She presents these through the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life, driven by radical technological advances, our relationship with the environment, climate change, and how these topics affect our future, mental health, and lifestyle.

Mariann IMRE: (Medgyesegyháza, 1968). In her works, she works on classical themes (landscapes, saints) with an unusual range of tools and materials, with a lot of invention and sensitivity: she created the image created by the light-sensitive emulsion applied to the wall and the combination of wood and concrete elements. Her installations and works consist of embroidered concrete forms. She merges concrete with organic materials (textiles, thread, grass) and colorful, often flower-shaped embroidered motifs appearing on the gray surface. Space and light also play a major role in her concrete embroideries: her works create a subtle, organic, and spiritual aura around them through the thread threads leading from the concrete forms into the space, forming a transparent structure (St. Cecilia, 1997). The theme of memory also plays a major role in her work. In 1999, she was one of the exhibitors of the Hungarian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Munkácsy Award winner, artist of the Horizont Gallery.

Ágnes URAY-SZÉPFALVI: (Budapest, 1965) The source of her works is the media: she selects her motifs from advertisements, films and magazines centered on one or more female figures. Maintaining the stereotypes characteristic of the media's imagery, she transfers the iconographic types of the male–female relationship and the femme fatale into the painting. In addition to relationship themes, family relationships also regularly appear in her works. She sometimes animates her pictures, and in addition to paintings, she also creates animations and artistic gifs. Artist of the Inda Gallery.