

Thesis Statement

Introduction

My dissertation analyzes the question of autonomy through the concept of the trap in a contemporary art context. My point of departure is both personal and professional: the intermedial reinterpretation of the material and intellectual heritage of peasant culture, as well as an artistic practice embedded within the institutional framework of the doctoral school. Over the course of my research, I have found that the creation, interpretation, and institutional management of artistic projects often generate “trap situations” that operate simultaneously at the levels of discourse (ideological and socio-political), institutional functioning, affective dynamics, and interpretative strategies (paranoid reading).

My aim is to develop and apply a metacritical framework—the trap model—that functions both as a diagnostic and as a design tool. With the help of the model’s minimal definition (camouflage, mediation of relations, transformation, constructedness, hierarchical structure), I identify the excessive determinations in my projects (and in the discourse surrounding them), and demonstrate how these can be creatively transformed. The antecedent and foundation of this approach was my master’s work *All Paths Narrowed to the Hollow* (*Az üregig szűkült minden ösvény*), a research-based artwork that led to the recognition of the trap as a super-metaphor, which later became the interpretative model of my entire research. Since the application of models involves stakes of self-knowledge, I apply it exclusively to the analysis of my own works. I test the model on three case studies: *Peasants in Atmosphere* (*Parasztok Atmoszférában*, 2016–2020), a conceptual band and research-based project; “Don’t Lay Him On Me...” (*Ne tegyétek reám...*, 2020), an exhibition; and *Power Must Grow, If It Doesn’t Grow, It Rots* (2020), a body of works centered on a turn toward intuitive painting.

My motivation is twofold: on the one hand, I seek a methodological response to the question of how aesthetic primacy can be maintained within an art world burdened by cultural polarization and identity-political conflicts; on the other, I investigate the personal practical conditions of artistic autonomy within the institutional spaces of the doctoral school and the museum. The main thesis of the dissertation is that autonomy is not the absence of determinations but the capacity to recognize and retune them. Somatic-intuitive painting and the artwork understood as a “thought-trap” offer two possible ways of negotiating these determinations while maintaining the aesthetic primacy of the work.

Literature Review (Overview of the Five Levels)

The purpose of the literature review is to situate the trap model across five interconnected levels (**4 + 1 control level**): **(1) ideological, (2) socio-political, (3) institutional, (4) affective, (+1) paranoid**. This chapter summarizes the key theoretical positions, related debates, and methodological responses corresponding to each level.

I. Ideological Level

In this chapter I examine the relationship between ideology and art from theoretical, historical, and critical perspectives. I trace the development of the concept of ideology critique from the theories of Marx and Adorno, through Foucault's discourse critique and feminist epistemology, up to the contemporary perspectives of Fraser, Žižek, and Latour. I typologize art along four ideological positions (propagandistic, resistant, autonomous, unconsciously ideological), which I analyze through the trap model (camouflage, mediation, transformation, constructedness, hierarchy). I discuss in detail the different meanings of autonomy in art—at the levels of form, authorship, institution, and reception. I distinguish between the concepts of autonomy (the work's relational state), the good work (which actualizes this as a real effect), and the good trap (the mechanism through which this happens in the encounter with the viewer), emphasizing that the autonomous/good work cannot be described through trap-features, since it exceeds the very framework of categorization. Through Dean Kissick's essay *The Painted Protest* and the debates surrounding it, I show how the question of autonomy has once again become central in contemporary Western art. Finally, I explain how the autonomous artwork can be interpreted as a productive thought-trap. Referenced authors:

Referenced authors (selection): Marx, Engels, Adorno, Bourdieu, Foucault, Laclau, Mouffe, Haraway, Harding, Jameson, Žižek, Fraser, Brown, Latour, Barthes, Rancière, Bishop, Kissick, Steyerl, Sarapik, Ventsel, Greenberg, Fried, Lukács, Schiller, Baudelaire, Bürger, Wikström, Lütticken, Kant, Gadamer, Bourriaud, Rebentisch, Gell, Danto, Benjamin, Lyotard, Viveros-Fauné, Ostrow, Fields, Davis.

II. Socio-Political Level

Here I address the concept of the culture war in historical and theoretical context, as well as within the contemporary Hungarian cultural field, focusing in particular on conflicts surrounding folk culture and feminism. Starting from Gramsci's theory of hegemony and building on the insights of Márk Áron Éber, I analyze how the culture war becomes a discursive and institutional strategy serving political ends, with special attention to the Hungarian context.

Through the media reception of my own exhibition, I show how artistic expression can be framed as an ideological stance, and how the culture war functions as a trap. By applying the trap model, I argue that the culture war is a *par excellence* trap; I then examine what strategies might enable self-reflection and the preservation of artistic autonomy in a polarized public sphere.

Referenced authors (selection): Bismarck, Gramsci, Laclau, Mouffe, Fisher, Nagle, Fraser, Éber, Kristóf, Konkol, Békés, Taylor, Szarvas, Fábián, Klaniczay, Szilvay, Gottfried, Peterson, Thiel, Yarvin, Träbert.

III. Institutional Level

I examine how the museum has been transformed into a social, discursive, and knowledge-producing space, and what role artistic interventions and institutional critique play in this transformation. I investigate how critique becomes institutionalized, while art is often reduced to a form of cultural service, particularly in participatory projects and research-based art.

I present Hungarian examples of the “open museum” and reflect on new, situated, collective forms of knowledge production, while also analyzing the theoretical and institutional tensions that threaten artistic autonomy. Subsequently, I introduce the concept of artistic research, its origins and institutionalization, and the methodological and aesthetic debates surrounding it. I outline how it emerged from the reflexive tradition of conceptual art, its interactions with the social sciences, and higher education reforms, then present various definitions (Boeck, Tepe, Klein, Ehn).

I analyze in detail critiques emphasizing institutional constraints, genealogical gaps, and epistemological uncertainty (Holert, Miles, Steyerl, Borgdorff). Particular attention is given to Claire Bishop’s analysis of how research-based art has increasingly become a practice of data and image aggregation, often lacking a clear research question or aesthetic synthesis. I conclude by interpreting the institutional frameworks and inner workings of artistic research through the trap model.

Referenced authors (selection): Bishop, Deliss, Fejős, Frazon, Fraser, Haacke, Asher, Broodthaers, Sholette, Kwon, Geismar, Marstine, Foster, Bruguera, Benjamin, Seregi, Nelund, Machlup, Gibbons, Agamben, Damisch, Boeck, Tepe, Klein, Ehn, Dombois, Mareis, Bauer, Albert, Lázár, Máté, Nagy, Holert, Miles, Steyerl, Borgdorff, Steinweg, Adorno, Polányi, Haraway.

IV. Affective Level

I examine the historical and contemporary interpretations of trauma and their artistic and cultural implications. I trace the concept from 19th-century theories of nervous system injury, through psychoanalysis, war neurosis, and the Holocaust, to feminist and affect theory turns.

I analyze the relationship between aura (Benjamin) and trauma, focusing on the presence of the artwork and the dynamics of perception and affect. Using Mária Chliff’s “zoom in – zoom out” model and the five trap-features, I show how trauma itself constitutes a *par excellence* trap structure, and how artistic processing can also become a trap when reflexive distance is lacking.

In contemporary culture, trauma has become a key concept in identity politics, mediated publicity, and cultural memory; one consequence is the valorization of victimhood, which can lead to performative and competitive logics in art and society alike. I interpret this phenomenon through the trap model, addressing the dilemmas of representing victimhood and the possibilities of assuming responsibility for perpetrators (Dominic Thorpe).

Referenced authors (selection): Janet, Freud, Breuer, Adorno, Lanzmann, LaCapra, Felman, Caruth, Lacan, Alexander, Danto, Gell, Benjamin, Foster, Delbo, Bennett, Ettinger, Pintér, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Haslam, Fassin, Rechtman, Horwitz, Nietzsche, Volkan, Vollhardt, László, Christie, Sontag, Khammas, Levinas.

V. Paranoid Reading Level

I examine the frameworks and dilemmas of paranoid reading. Beginning with Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" and the Marxist, Freudian, and Nietzschean traditions, I turn to Sedgwick's analyses, which argue that paranoia has become the dominant structure of contemporary critical theory.

I outline the main features of paranoid reading—anticipation, reflexivity, strong affect theory, the dominance of negative emotions—and show how unveiling itself may become trap-like, overestimating the power of critique. Following Sedgwick, I describe the possibility of reparative reading, which opens new critical perspectives through positive affects, hope, and aesthetic pleasure. I also present Klein's depressive position, Tomkins's affect theory, and critiques of the reparative (Tedder, Love, Wilson), which highlight its contradictions and the radical potential of negativity.

The aim is to demonstrate that the paranoid–reparative dynamic itself may become a trap, and that critical practice unfolds within oscillation, ambivalence, and affective complexity.

Referenced authors: Ricoeur, Sedgwick, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Tomkins, Klein, Tedder, Love, Wilson, Tímár.

Applied Methods

- **Intermedial, research-based practice:** collaborative creation, participant observation, intimate insider method, and fieldwork in ethnographic collections.
- **Somatic practice:** intuitive painting methods that are simultaneously conceptual and material-centered; activating the body as mediator (after Simone Weil) as a source of critique; dismantling trauma identity.
- **Metacritical analysis:** applying the trap model across the five layers of embeddedness in artworks; mapping the interferences among these layers; developing strategies of escape.

Case Studies and Results

VII/1. *Peasants in Atmosphere* – Research Findings

This project explored the contemporary reinterpretation of peasant culture, drawing on both the tradition-preserving discourse of the *táncház* movement and the critical attitude of the historical avant-garde. By creating a conceptual band, I established a collaborative space where artists from diverse backgrounds (folk musicians, experimental musicians, feminist punk performers, etc.) worked together in dialogue.

The main finding was the discovery of the plurality of relations to tradition: folk culture is not only preservable, but also re-thinkable through critical and avant-garde legacies. At the same time, it became clear that the interpretation of peasant heritage is always mediated by political and ideological frameworks, into which even critical positions inevitably inscribe themselves.

Lessons of the trap model:

- **Ideological traps:** although the project sought autonomy, it remained partly bound within ideological frameworks—as “resistant art” and as an avant-garde leftist position.
- **Culture war traps:** despite aiming to transcend dichotomies, it was inevitably read within the progressive vs. conservative polarization of the cultural field.

In sum: the project’s research result was a new, critical, and interdisciplinary interpretation of tradition, while the trap model revealed the structural frameworks within which even autonomy remains partly ideologically determined.

VII. “*Don’t Lay Him On Me...*” – Research Findings

The exhibition at Trafó in 2020 was the first *Hungarofeminist* project, reinterpreting peasant traditions through a radical feminist lens. Its point of departure was Olga Nagy’s research, which, through peasant women’s life stories, illuminated body-related traumas.

The main finding was that addressing female experiences of peasant culture in a contemporary art context can open new spaces for the reinterpretation of tradition. The exhibition’s three blocks (the peasant woman’s body, the female folk dancer’s body, the fetishized body) explored the intersections of the female body and tradition across three temporal layers, thematizing possibilities of norm-breaking and offering transgressive readings.

Lessons of the trap model:

- **Ideological level:** the radical feminist position was more nuanced in the works than in the reception, which framed it as “resistant art”—marginal and attackable.
- **Culture war level:** the reception read the project along political divides, overshadowing the works’ complexity.
- **Institutional level:** ethnographic and academic framing reinforced researcher–informant hierarchies and raised ethical dilemmas concerning authority.
- **Affective level:** trauma narratives tied the exhibition to victimhood, while repetition and over-identification lacked sufficient reflexive distance.

In sum: the project critically reinterpreted peasant women’s experiences, while the trap model revealed how feminist positioning, institutional embeddedness, and trauma processing could both open new perspectives and generate trap-like situations.

VIII. “Power Must Grow, if it Doesn’t Grow, it Rots” – Research Findings

This project was conceived as a reflexive response to the traps of “*Don’t Lay Him On Me...*” Its innovation was to shift focus from the external structures of trauma and ideology to the inner, intuitive functioning of the body and subject, pointing toward liberation in both methodology and creation.

The female body and agency—two central terrains of feminist discourse—were here mobilized to form a subjective stance on feminism itself. This was achieved by activating bodily intelligence through intuitive painting as a somatic practice in Simone Weil’s sense.

Lessons of the trap model:

- **Ideological level:** the project represented an attempt to move beyond the trap of “resistant art,” as it did not serve a political ideology but instead foregrounded personal reflection. Autonomy manifested itself here in confronting and critically reassessing dogmatic feminist rhetoric.
- **Culture war level:** the project did not align with the dichotomies of the culture war, but rather reflected on them. By addressing contradictions within feminism, it sought to pluralize the discourse, although its critical tone partly reproduced hierarchical logics.
- **Affective level:** somatic practice enabled a liberating transformation: rather than the identity-forming logics of trauma and ideology, self-reflection and bodily intelligence became

the primary sources of the work. This made possible an attempt to move beyond the trap of victimhood and trauma identity.

In sum: the project constituted a reflexive artistic response to the recognition of ideological and affective traps. Somatic practice did not guarantee the definitive overcoming of these determinations, but opened an alternative register of reflection in which my previous position and its contradictions could themselves become objects of inquiry. The project can thus be understood not as the elimination of these traps, but as an attempt to recognize and retune them.

Theses

The “trap” as a metacritical framework and five-layered model (ideological; socio-political; institutional; affective; paranoid reading) is suitable not only for describing the determinations that shape contemporary artistic practice but also for transforming them into a reflexive method. The case studies demonstrate that autonomy lies in the capacity to retune overlapping layers of determination; in this process, intuitive painting—following Simone Weil’s somatic practice—and the auratic “thought-trap” together mark methods of escaping traps while preserving the aesthetic primacy of the artwork.

Applications

- **Project design:** early application of the trap model helps prevent ideological and institutional overloading of concepts; useful for both curators and artists.
- **Critical analysis:** a protocol for analyzing reception and media discourse, capable of transforming irreconcilable culture war dichotomies into manageable conflicts.
- **Somatic workshops:** the use of intuitive painting and body-centered methods in contexts prone to trauma repetition, adaptable also in educational settings.
- **Institutional self-reflection:** for doctoral programs and museums, the model offers evaluative criteria that, alongside knowledge transmission, also safeguard aesthetic primacy.

Concluding Remark

The trap model is not designed to eliminate determinations, but to provide a framework for negotiating them competently. Autonomy, in this sense, is not a fixed state but an ongoing practice: a continuous process of adjustment and fine-tuning carried out through artistic work.