# RURAL RESILIENCE

Photographic Representation of Resourcefulness
in Hungary's Smallest Villages

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## Photographic Representation of Resourcefulness in Hungary's Smallest Villages

This book was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of PhD in the Arts and Doctor of Liberal Arts.

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# ABSTRACT

In the smallest villages of Hungary, communities are adapting in the face of socio-economic change. This artistic research seeks to understand how resourcefulness and resilience are performed, negotiated, and represented in everyday rural life, and how these practices are shaped by the wider socio-political and economic landscape. It combines theoretical inquiry and photographic fieldwork conducted in settlements of less than one hundred inhabitants.

Grounded in the phenomenological concept of 'lifeworld', the study examines the rural experience through three interrelated lenses: the elements of contemporary rural identity in Eastern Europe, the manifestation of practical ingenuity in everyday life, and the capacity of documentary photography to capture these circumstances.

Employing slow, observational photography with walking as an artistic practice, interviews, cultural probes and media experiments, this research is a theoretically informed, reflective visual examination of rural conditions in Hungary. Through sustained engagement and critical interpretation, the resulting artistic projects and the masterwork *Falu* represent the visible markers of rural life: the lived experiences and the felt realities.

The dissertation complements the artistic masterwork, aiming to stimulate discourse and contribute new insights into the complex and often overlooked world of rural resourcefulness in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: documentary photography, resourcefulness, everyday problem-solving, ingenuity, survival strategies, Eastern Europe, Hungary, village, rural

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# PREFACE

This dissertation is part of a joint doctorate in the arts at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design (2019 – 2025) and KU Leuven / LUCA School of Arts (2021 – 2025). The text reflects on the various influences, challenges, motivations, dialogues, ideas, references and concepts that have shaped my creative practice, and resulted in the following recognitions, artistic exhibitions and academic publications:

Awards

**Esterházy Art Award 2019**
Shortlist, top 25 contemporary artists

**Budapest Photography Prize 2019**
Grand prize, fellowship for one year

**Robert Capa Photography Prize 2020**
Fellowship for one year

Art Projects

**Falu** (2018–2025)
Photobook (edition of 10)
Exhibition at 2B Gallery, Budapest, Hungary

**You Were Never Really Here** (2018–2022)
Artist book (edition of 5)
Exhibition at Ludwig Museum Budapest
Exhibition at Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest
Exhibition at Aurora Community Gallery, Budapest, Hungary
Exhibition at BAC Art Lab, Leuven, Belgium
Exhibition at Három Holló, Budapest, Hungary

**Borderland** (2019–2020)
Photobook (edition of 100)
Exhibition at Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Hungary
Exhibition at the Corinthian International Photography Festival, Greece
Exhibition at Három Holló, Budapest, Hungary

**We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human** (2022–2023)
Exhibition at Három Holló, Budapest, Hungary

Academic Appearances

**Ingenuity in Spatially Peripheral Situations**
Peer-reviewed paper accepted to Cumulus Antwerp 2023 Conference

**Beautiful Suffering: Responsibility in Contemporary Photography**
Artist presentation / exhibition at MOME Work-in-Context Symposium 3 in 2023

**Resourcefulness on the Periphery: Representing the Village Through Photographic Practice**
Artist presentation at MOME Doktori Agora 2022

**Találékonyság térbeli perifériás helyzetekben:**
**a zsákfalutól az űrállomásig**
Paper published in Kultúra és Közösség (Culture and Community) 2021/3



# FOREWORD

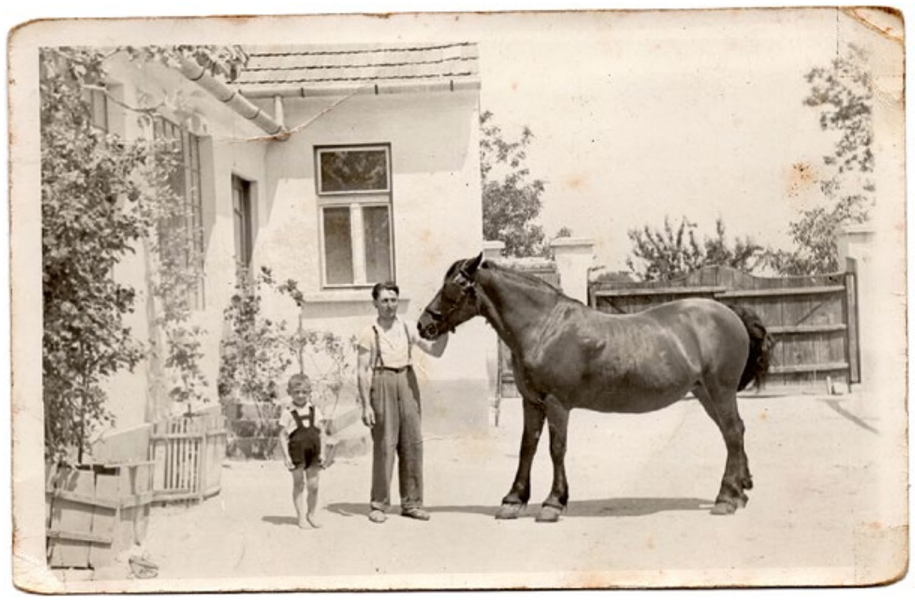
The following pages contain a diverse set of thoughts and observations written in the course of my doctorate journey, which began in 2019 at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest. My initial motivation for pursuing a practice-based artistic research was that it would allow me to build theoretical layers around, and expand the horizons of the photographic project I began in late 2018, visiting the smallest villages of Hungary. The new layers introduced over the past years included critical ideas concerning artistic research, the socio-anthropological aspects of the rural in Eastern Europe, the manifestation of resourcefulness and ingenuity in peripheral situations, the post-structuralist / humanist critique of documentary photography and experimental presentation methods.

The years since 2019 have been turbulent both from a personal and global perspective. I won the Robert Capa Photography Fellowship and the Budapest Photography Prize, was selected for the Esterhazy Art Award at the Ludwig Museum Budapest, started teaching photography at the Eszterházy Károly University in Hungary, experienced the first COVID-19 lockdowns, moved to Brussels with my partner, was accepted to the PhD in the Arts program at KU Leuven – LUCA School of Arts, married in Hungary, moved to Paris, moved to Vienna, started teaching at the Central European University and our son was born. The intensity of these years has only sharpened my interest in the rural, which links back to my personal history.

As a young child growing up behind the Iron Curtain in Hungary, summers were synonymous with adventures in the countryside. One year my parents decided to change the pattern and go to Greece for the holidays. This would have sounded like great to any boy in the Eastern bloc, but I refused, choosing to spend time in the village of my grandparents instead, helping with the animals, visiting neighbors and doing other seemingly mundane activities that instilled in me a deep appreciation for the ingenuity, resilience, and rhythms of rural life.

Years later, I often regretted this choice, when looking through the family photo archive, which became a regular, exciting, and important event, where we set up a projection screen and looked at the analog slides and recited stories. Today, as an artist grappling with the complexities of our changing world, I find myself drawn back to those early summers.

What I gained from living in a Hungarian village that summer of 1985 (and many others that followed) was a sense of being a village child who knew how to talk to the elders, how to tend the crops, catch the chickens, and give injections to sick pigs, as well as how to get things from the grocery store, visit neighbors for favors, or attend Sunday mass. In short, how to live a self-sustaining community life. This personal connection motivates my research and informs my artistic practice. Now, as I write these lines in Vienna (and other sections in Brussels, Paris and Budapest), I feel that it is important to put an imprint of this changing world on the shelf of our shared imaginary archive, so that others will be able to follow in these footsteps, if they so desire.



*My grandfather in the village of Barbacs, 1950s*

# 1 INTRODUCTION: THE RURAL, THE EVERYDAY & THE DOCUMENTARY

## 1.1 Locating the Research and Relevance of the Topic

This practice-based research, situated in Hungary, examines the visual representation, life strategies and resourcefulness in villages with fewer than 100 inhabitants. Based on fieldwork in the smallest villages, it offers personal insights into rural ingenuity through the lens of photography. I visited more than eighty such settlements, interviewing local residents and photographing the built environment, interiors, and inhabitants.

In parallel, I conducted a comprehensive survey of relevant local and international artistic projects, alongside critical and methodological literature. This review aimed to understand current approaches, trends and debates concerning the representation of rurality and the study of resourcefulness, ingenuity, inventiveness. I looked for points of reference that could be well applied within the Hungarian context.

Through an artistic methodology informed by reflexive, semi-autobiographical (or rather, self-centered (Mullaney & Rea, 2022)) principles, I investigate how photographic practices could contribute towards more nuanced, inclusive representations of these communities, challenging preconceptions linked to peripheral situations.

In the dissertation, I examine how existing materials and shared experiences are employed to solve challenging situations in remote environments. How does resourcefulness manifest itself in the lives of people living on the periphery? To what extent are adhocism, bricolage, constant improvisation, and the innovative use of limited resources evident in these rural contexts? How can a critical, observational photographic methodology be combined with methods like cultural probing and media such as digital storytelling and computer interaction to articulate the findings?

Why should we research villages? While urban centers are undeniably growing, Rem Koolhaas predicted in his 2021 exhibition at the Guggenheim, that by 2030, two-thirds of humanity will live in cities, on just 2% of the Earth's land area. Put slightly differently, people living in the countryside will be responsible for cultivating 98% of the land. It is of particular importance to research the current, transitional situation, which is one of the reasons I began focusing on the smallest Hungarian villages in late 2018, an interest that gradually evolved into this doctoral research.



The rural is a complex and often contested space that defies easy and uniform definition, yet it is important for understanding contemporary issues such as food security, climate change adaptation, and cultural preservation. Rural research can reveal the diversity of rural spaces by shedding light on differing, even conflicting, perspectives, such as traditional/backward, idyllic/deprived, close to nature/low health. As Keith Halfacree (2006) argues, rural space has a three-fold structure: (1) encompassing the material realities of rural localities, (2) formal representations that frame the rural within wider capitalist processes, and (3) the everyday lives of rural residents. Studying the rural environment allows us to probe into the processes that shape physical environments and socio-cultural aspects within.

Hungary can be considered a rural country, with two thirds of the area classified as rural (Eurostat, 2022), and half of the population living in rural conditions (Kovách, 2022). This distribution of the population suggests a host of socio-economic issues. Villages are confronted with living conditions that do not exist elsewhere: improving infrastructural circumstances (water, sewage, electricity, gas, phone networks) paralleled by grinding poverty, a lack of opportunities and the fading pride of the remaining local population.

Such challenging situations often drive people to solve seemingly impossible tasks with resourcefulness and unconventional thinking. Due to the scarcity economy, people in post-socialist countries had to resort to the few resources they already had at their disposal to solve everyday problems. A substantial number of surprising solutions surfaced in the face of such constraints, using a technique that anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) coined bricolage, and architects Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver (2013) adhocism.

At the heart of bricolage is a phenomenon, in which previously manufactured, used objects and parts are assembled into a completely new whole, a system that is significantly different from the original one. In other words, bricolage is intentionally or unintentionally inventing new functions for materials, objects, and phenomena originally used for another purpose, reinterpreting their usage out of necessity or scarcity.

Similarly, adhocism is an approach or mindset that emphasizes finding practical solutions to immediate problems through improvisation and resourcefulness, often without adhering to established rules or formal systems. It refers to a willingness to tackle challenges using whatever means are available at hand, without necessarily

following a predetermined plan or relying on specialized tools or expertise. Adhocism is arranging immediately available materials, elements, or objects into novel, previously unseen structures.

During the past 30 years, there has been increasing interest in these activities from the artistic field as well. The Cuban artist-researcher-author Ernesto Oroza, known for his work in the field of architecture and design, calls such items "objects of necessity" and coined the phenomenon "technological disobedience", which according to his definition involves the use of everyday materials and found objects in creative and unconventional ways (Rognoli, 2018).

Oroza's interest often centers on the concept of "adaptive reuse", and involves the repurposing of existing objects and materials to create something new and useful. He started collecting solutions that break aesthetic, legal, and economic limitations in 1994. Since the same year, in another post-socialist context, numerous remarkable physical, material examples of such solutions have been collected by Vladimir Arkhipov in Russia (and subsequently over the entire continent). His project called 'The People's Museum of Home-Made Objects' now counts over one thousand unique, repurposed everyday items (Arkhipov, 2022).

Historically, village peasantry had a certain level of independence, having the authority to determine their farming methods and take measures to safeguard themselves against natural or societal calamities. The traditional peasantry also possessed significant social and cultural attributes that enabled them to adapt and protect themselves. They functioned within communities where individual actions were governed by communal interests. However, following the collapse of the socialist system around 1990, traditional peasantry completely disappeared.

In almost one thousand settlements, which corresponds to one third of all settlements in Hungary, residents have to live without access to a local grocery store (Mezei & Farkas, 2021), and in numerous instances, lacking other essential community amenities such as educational institutions, pubs, and churches. Despite the absence of these fundamental infrastructures, it is customary in these locales to sit outdoors on a bench observing the limited activities transpiring on the streets. Employment opportunities are scarce, and recreational activities are practically nonexistent. Frequently, the sole individual serving as a conduit between the residents of these isolated regions and the outside world is the mobile food merchant. Such a collapse of rural life accelerated after 1989 in East-Central Europe with the break-up of the collective farms, the influx of Western agricultural products and finally the integration into the European Union in 2004. In Hungary rural areas are particularly peripheral: a single city, Budapest, accounts for more than 36% of national income (HCSO - Stadat 21.1.2.2., 2024).

According to 2022 data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, there were a total of 3155 settlements in the country. It is notable that over one third of the settlements had a population below 500, yet less than 3 per cent of the total population inhabited them. This discrepancy shows that there are serious tensions in the settlement system and thus between the organization and operation of public and private sectors in municipalities. A crucial point to mention in parentheses is that the population figure used to create the table does not accurately represent the actual situation. In the field, I have consistently observed significant disparities between the registered population and the real population numbers.

| Population | number of settlements | % | cumulative % | people | % | cumulative % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 100 | 166 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 10527 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| 100-199 | 266 | 8.4 | 13.7 | 40250 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| 200-499 | 711 | 22.5 | 36.2 | 234364 | 2.4 | 2.9 |
| 500-999 | 671 | 21.3 | 57.5 | 489929 | 5.1 | 8.0 |
| 1000-5000 | 1069 | 33.9 | 91.4 | 2293720 | 23.7 | 31.7 |
| 5000-9999 | 129 | 4.1 | 95.5 | 886777 | 9.2 | 40.8 |
| 10000-99999 | 135 | 4.3 | 99.7 | 3027146 | 31.2 | 72.1 |
| Over 100000 | 8 | 0.3 | 100.0 | 2706297 | 27.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 3155 | 100.0 | | 9689010 | 100.0 | |

*Table 1: Population data for various settlement sizes in Hungary*

*Based on data from Hungarian Central Statistical Office HCSO - HNT, 2022*

Over 40 percent of Hungary's population resides outside of cities (in Hungarian law cities are defined as settlements with more than ten thousand inhabitants), but this phenomenon is not confined to this region: in recent decades, an increasing proportion of the world's population has been living in cities and rural areas have been depopulating. According to UN data, this proportion is already averaging only 20 percent in developed countries, and is expected to decrease drastically in the coming years at the global level (World Urbanization Prospects, 2019). Despite the fact that the population employed full time in agriculture has drastically decreased after 1990, the non-city population ratio has remained constant between 1980 and 2024 (HCSO - Stadat 22.1.2.4., 2024).

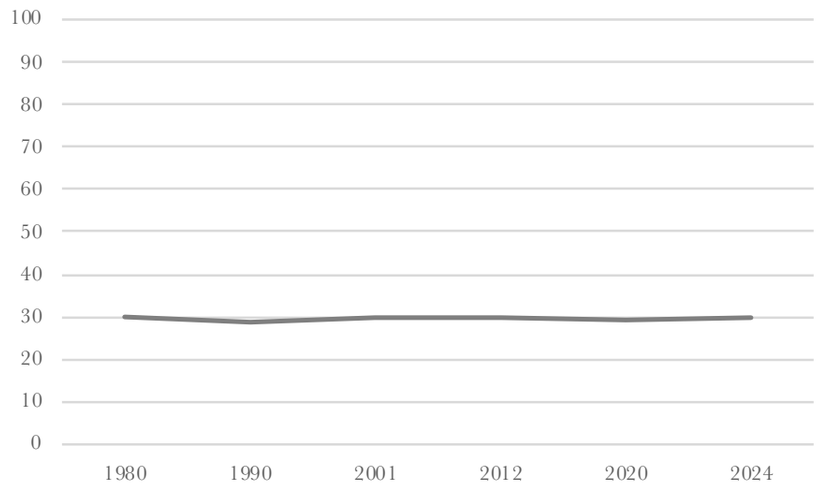



*Figure 1: Percentage of rural vs urban population in Hungary*
*Based on data from HCSO - Stadat 22.1.2.4., 2024*

The discrepancy between the various figures (30 vs 40 per cent living in rural conditions) stems from definitional, interpretational and historical factors. On one hand, the legislation on municipalities did not have a fixed population figure for defining cities before 2013, resulting in 206 settlements receiving this title up to day, despite having less than ten thousand inhabitants. Depending if the figure is based on legal categories or population data, this naturally influences the result. Further, as Imre Kovách (2022) argues, realistically around half of the population of Hungary can be considered rural, since a relatively large number of people living on the fringes of small and medium-sized towns also live in conditions that can hardly be described as urbanized.



## 1.2 Personal Connection

My personal interest in observing the peculiarities of rural life stems from spending a significant amount of my childhood in the countryside myself, experiencing rural life with my grandparents as a toddler while my mother studied for a postgraduate degree, and later taking every opportunity to be in their village, constantly surrounded by people, animals and nature. It could be said that besides exploring resourcefulness on the periphery, sharing perspectives and creating connections between us, the research is also aimed at better understanding who I am. Coincidentally, the chain of events that lead to the slow and gradual transformation of the Hungarian countryside started in the year I was born. Hungary is the only country in Europe that has experienced a continuous population decline since 1981 (Eurostat_demo_pjan dataset, 2024), meaning the recent history of the villages coincides with my life.

*With my sister in the village of Barbacs, 1983*

## 1.3 Contents and Structure of the Dissertation

Three central keywords helped me to pinpoint the main pillars of the research: the rural, the everyday, and the documentary. Coincidentally, these keywords correspond to three anthology volumes in the Documents of Contemporary Art series published by MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery. Each of the following chapters builds upon these concepts, offering an in-depth exploration of rural resourcefulness first through theoretical and eventually photographical lenses. The text is divided into eight chapters, each of which provides connections to the next, yet can be read and understood independently.

In this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), I began by first framing the research and locating it in the field, describing the personal connection to the topic, followed by setting out the content and structure of the dissertation. Chapter 2 then outlines the theoretical framework and key concepts used throughout the text.

The first part of Chapter 3 studies the macro-social rural context and offers a birds-eye view of the lives of people living in small settlements globally, as well as on a narrower Eastern European and a specific Hungarian frame of reference.

In the second part of Chapter 3, I outline the typology of small villages, which helps to efficiently systematize and understand processes by outlining a handful of categories and classifications. According to the forms of subsistence, the lack of services, the infrastructural embeddedness, the distance from the city, the demographic composition and many other aspects, we will be able to get a more accurate picture of the situation of small villages in Hungary. The scope focuses on settlements with a population below one hundred people, examined using both qualitative and quantitative methods. According to the latest available figures (2023), there are currently 169 such settlements in the country (up from 155 in 2018 when the research began).

Chapter 4 examines existing studies on the ingenuity of the everyday in both academic literature and contemporary artistic projects. First, it investigates studies of spatially contrived, extreme situations, such as remote research stations, the International Space Station, and the isolation experienced during the pandemic lockdowns are explored. Second, artistic investigations will be analyzed, with reference to works by the Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza, the Russian Vladimir Arkhipov and Hungarian projects by Endre Koronczi, András Szalai and the PAD group.

Chapter 5 outlines the critique of documentary practices and provides an overview of influential Eastern European and Hungarian documentary photography artists who have dealt with the rural condition.

Chapter 6 briefly outlines the methodology of the research, with particular attention to the various collection methods ranging from literature review to empirical field methods and the processing approaches such as photographic tools and interactive storytelling.

The last two chapters conclude the dissertation with reflections on the art projects realized during the research years and reflections on the findings, and contemplate further research possibilities for the future.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Family, 2010*

# 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation examines the intersection of rurality, resourcefulness, everyday ingenuity, and documentary photography, focusing specifically on Hungary's hinterland, the smallest villages within its rural space. It is inspired by the phenomenological concept of 'Lebenswelt' (lifeworld) of Husserl, representing the pre-theoretical, pre-scientific world of everyday lived experience. The three principal objectives in the following chapters are to examine how the rural is conceptualized in contemporary Eastern Europe, to investigate how individuals navigate everyday challenges through resourcefulness, and to analyze how these dynamics are represented in documentary practices.

The theoretical framework is primarily interpretive, employing a constructivist epistemology and a relativist ontology, with 'Lebenswelt' providing a lens for understanding rural life as an embodied experience. This position serves as the base for this interdisciplinary study, linking the core concepts with empirical reality and guiding the methodological choices. Recognizing that rural communities have multiple interpretations of reality, which are socially and culturally constructed, the theories are used to help to comprehend the lived experiences. The framework aims to connect theoretical insights, empirical observations and artistic research, to provide a structured understanding of rural Hungarian life through documentary photography.

## 2.1 Conceptualizing the Rural

The concept of rurality in this research is approached through relational rural theory, as proposed by scholars Michael Woods (2007, 2011) and Keith Halfacree (2006). The notion of the "global countryside" moves beyond the traditional urban-rural binary interpretation, viewing rural spaces as dynamic and interconnected with global processes, while being characterized by local specificities. Woods (2007) argues that rural places are actively reconstituted through their engagement processes beyond their borders, challenging ideas of rural isolation and backwardness. This relational view allows rural Hungary to be examined not as a static, bounded entity, but as a space continually shaped by transnational forces, such as European Union policies, global economic trends, and local realities.

Furthermore, rural restructuring, as explored by Marsden et al. (1990), is conducive for deciphering the ongoing changes in rural spaces, including shifts in agricultural activities and demographics, some of the main challenges faced by rural Hungarian communities. This allows us to trace the historical trajectories of change and to situate current conditions within longer-term processes of rural transformation.



## 2.2 Everyday Ingenuity & Survival Strategies

In thinking about resourcefulness and ingenuity in everyday life, I draw on Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practices and a number of post-socialist artistic projects collecting examples of said practices. De Certeau's (2011) distinction between the strategies of institutions and structures of power, and the tactics employed by individuals in their everyday lives can be paralleled with how rural inhabitants navigate and sometimes subvert structural constraints. This focus allows to recognize and analyze the creative adaptations and resilience that may not be immediately apparent, but which play a crucial role in shaping rural life on the peripheries.

Everyday problem-solving here refers to the creative ways people deal with challenges in their daily lives. In the context of small villages with limited resources, ingenuity and resourcefulness are used somewhat interchangibly, referring to the innovative ways inhabitants overcome obstacles. This could involve finding novel income sources, devising alternative uses for materials, or adapting traditional practices to contemporary circumstances. While ingenuity usually emphasizes mental acuity, and resourcefulness focuses on material adaptation, in rural settings the concepts are closely related and intertwined in practice.

The case studies on the role of spatially peripheral environments enriches this analysis by drawing attention to the discourses and practices that take place on the extremes. The everyday problem-solving of villagers demonstrates remarkable resilience, flexibility and inventiveness in the face of adversity (De Certeau, 2011). This is inspiring for untangling how the smallest rural communities, often marginalized in societal discourses, might develop forms of resilience, even resistance and alternative survival strategies that are not immediately visible.

The concept of survival strategies, as a reaction to adversity, can be interpreted in a number of ways, therefore requires a careful definition. On one hand, strategy might be associated with conscious calculations and deliberate choices, while the reality in deprived situations such as those present in these communities is oftentimes different. Furthermore, it is important to note that household structures and family dynamics, rather than individual residents, play a significant role in shaping and driving these strategies, as evidenced by research conducted in Latin America (Chant, 2002, De La Rocha, 2001).

The examination of rural European household survival strategies through existing literature reveals that both rural sociologists and social geographers have frequently concentrated on agricultural practices, such as exploring new opportunities within the rural economy or generating multiple streams of income from various economic activities (Eikeland & Lie, 1999, Schulman et al., 1994). In consequence, there is an acute lack of studies on non-agricultural survival methods in rural European settings.

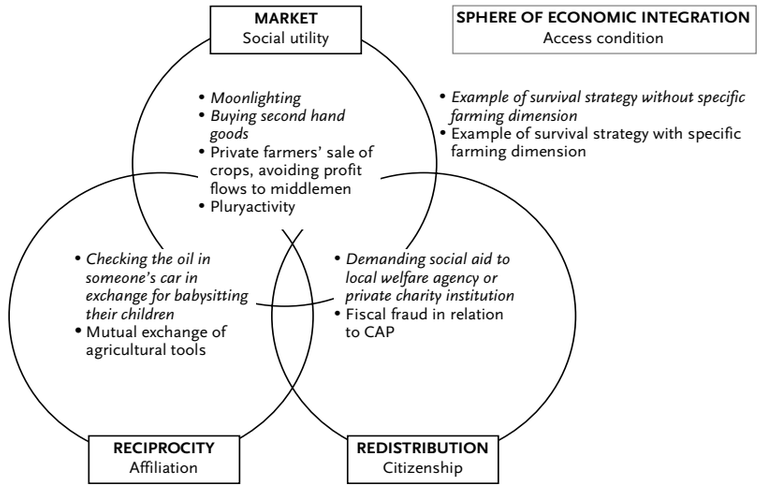



*Figure 2: Rural poverty, spheres of economic integration and some examples of household survival strategies*
*Source: Meert, 2000*

Taking inspiration from Karl Polanyi's three "forms of integration" (redistribution, reciprocity, and exchange), which the Hungarian-born anthropologist theorized about in 1944, Meert (2000) argues that these modes of economic activities can be interpreted from the perspective of individuals' and households' survival strategies. Subsequently, he draws up an intersecting web of spheres with examples of non-agrarian strategies in a rural Belgian context. In Chapter 3, I will adapt this visual tool to Hungarian village typologies.

Meert's research offers valuable insights into the importance of reciprocal actions in rural communities, and how these actions can help households gain access to food, consumer durables, and domestic tasks. While these observations could potentially be applied to rural communities in Eastern Europe as well, this is only historically true, as Bea Vidács's findings suggest. In her fieldwork carried out between 1980-81 and 2009-2010, she notes that while reciprocity existed in the form of mutual help during socialism, following 1989 these patterns have disappeared and have been replaced by a monetary, capitalistic system (Vidács, 2015).

Cultural probes are a key method used to gain insight into these survival strategies and everyday practices. Probes are packages of creative, playful activities left with people to allow them to record specific events, feelings or interactions (Gaver et al., 1999). They can contain cameras, diaries, maps and other materials that help villagers document and reflect on their daily problem-solving tactics. The contents are left purposefully open, giving people the flexibility to capture what is meaningful and relevant to them (Mattelmäki, 2006). The probes become vessels for people to tell their own stories, providing a rich qualitative insight into their lived experiences (Graham & Rouncefield, 2008).

## 2.3 Documentary Representation

Documentary photography is used to visually supplement the cultural probe findings. Photographs of the physical environment, portraits of residents and candid shots of daily activities all work together to create a visual narrative (Becker, 1974), providing an immediacy and resonance that words cannot always convey (Sontag, 1977). Together with the probe results, the images create a layered representation of the cultural context and collective resourcefulness found within small rural villages (Harper, 2002).

This guides the research methodology, allowing everyday resourcefulness and ingenuity to be accessed, documented and understood through creative, participatory and visual methods. The cultural probes and documentary photography provide complementary perspectives on the improvised problem-solving tactics that enable survival in marginalized communities (Pink, 2007).

Critical perspectives from visual culture studies and more recent developments in participatory and ethical documentary work are also considered. The politics of representation by scholars like John Tagg (1988) and Martha Rosler (1981) lets us examine how documentary photography is embedded in and potentially reproduces power relations. This perspective is essential for maintaining a reflexive stance towards the practice of documentary production in rural communities, acknowledging the potential for both empowerment and exploitation.

Ariella Azoulay's (2008) thoughts on the "civil contract of photography" positions the medium as a channel for ethical engagement and political action. This perspective encourages us to view the photographic act not as a unilateral imposition of the photographer's gaze, but as a negotiated space of civic engagement involving photographer, subject, and viewer. When working with marginalized communities, this approach can be particularly relevant, as it emphasizes the agency of photographic subjects and the potential for photography to serve as a tool for social dialogue and change.

## 2.4 Integration of Theories and Methodological Implications

By integrating theories from rural studies, sociology, and visual culture studies, we can get a more complete understanding of the resourcefulness inherent in rural Hungarian life as seen through documentary photography. Relational rurality theory helps us understand the larger context in which everyday ingenuity takes place, while de Certeau's theory gives us tools to analyze these practices. Critical approaches to documentary work help us understand how these realities are captured and shared visually, in parallel to helping avoid romanticizing rural ingenuity by emphasizing the power dynamics involved in representation.

In alignment with this theoretical foundation, the methodological approach (detailed in Chapter 6) is qualitative and interpretive, utilizing ethnographic methods (prolonged engagement, observation, interviews), visual analysis, and participatory techniques (cultural probes). Reflexive visual methods aim to ensure sensitivity to the complexities of rural experiences, grounded in an ethical framework that respects the 'Lebenswelt' of these communities.

*Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, 1565*

# 3 THE STATE OF THE RURAL

## 3.1 Macro Perspective

Rural areas are characterized by a multitude of meanings: they function as the primary global source of food, water, energy and minerals, their natural environments are regarded for their biodiversity, they host a majority of the planet's flora and fauna. Often defined in contrast to urban regions, some believe that rurality embodies traditional pre-industrial ways life and is preserving national heritage from the forces of globalization. People frequently perceive rural localities negatively, viewing them as areas lagging behind, poor, underdeveloped and deeply conservative. The above diverse perspectives result in a complex and contested notion of the rural, seemingly defying a uniform definition (Woods, 2011, Csurgó, 2013).

As Michael Woods noted in his seminal volume on rural geography: "[…] there are many different ways in which the rural can be imagined, described, performed and materialized, and as such, arguably many different rurals. The rural is conceived of variously as a resource to be exploited for economic gain, a site of consumption through tourism and recreation, a place to live, and as a vulnerable environment in need of protection. Neither is there a single author of the rural. The state, the media, corporations, farmers, rural residents, academic researchers, tourists and day-visitors, pressure groups and NGOs, development agencies, investors and speculators and a host of non-human actors - among others - are actively engaged in the production and reproduction of the rural on an everyday basis." (Woods, 2011, p265)

Similarly, Kovács (2013) argues that rurality as a concept has not had a dominant discourse for a long time: neither in the profession nor in the wider public. Although contradicting ontologies compete to create contexts for rural existence and push theoretical thinking in the direction of hermeneutics, she argues for a phenomenological approach. In her view, the village should be understood as a social, political, economic and ideological communication network that encourages its members to social unity and conformity to local norms and formal structures.

With these thoughts in mind, approaching the villages of the countryside, I invite you, dear reader, to a game of imagination to paint a more vivid picture of the economic, demographic, and historical trends these regions have experienced in the past decades. Presuming to be on a spaceship from a different galaxy, let us gradually zoom in on these settlements, first scanning the wider, European-scale macro conditions, then going on to observe the surroundings from a regional, satellite view and then a birds' eye perspective, to understand how the building blocks are interrelated, how the bigger picture looks like, until we finally descend and land on the ground in the following chapters. It is also worth playing with an imaginary time machine to see the history of the countryside, as the past continues to have a significant impact on the daily lives of its inhabitants.

| | | Urban Population | | Level of Urbanization | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total Population (millions) | Millions | Annual Variation (%) | % of Total Population | Annual Variation (%) |
| 1700 | 102 | 12.6 | — | 12.3 | — |
| 1750 | 120 | 14.7 | 0.3 | 12.2 | 0.0 |
| 1800 | 154 | 18.6 | 0.5 | 12.1 | 0.0 |
| 1850 | 203 | 38.3 | 1.5 | 18.9 | 0.9 |
| 1880 | 243 | 71.4 | 2.1 | 29.3 | 1.5 |
| 1900 | 285 | 108.3 | 2.1 | 37.9 | 1.3 |
| 1910 | 312 | 127.1 | 1.6 | 40.8 | 0.7 |
| 1930 | 333 | 159.7 | 1.1 | 47.9 | 0.8 |
| 1950 | 367 | 186.0 | 0.8 | 50.7 | 0.3 |
| 1970 | 427 | 271.8 | 1.9 | 63.7 | 1.2 |
| 1980 | 453 | 301.0 | 1.0 | 66.5 | 0.4 |

*Table 2: Growth of the urban population and levels of urbanization in Europe (except Russia)*

*Source: Bairoch, 1988, Cities and Economic Development, p216*

In the five years preceding 2023, 88 per cent, or almost 9 out of 10 of predominantly rural regions reported a population decline in the European Union. While constituting 45% of the EU's area, only 21% of the population lived in these regions according to the most recent Eurostat figures from 2021 (URT_PJANGRP3 dataset), down from 49.3% in 1950 (Bairoch, 1988). This can be correlated with the most recent data of the 38 OECD countries. Although using a slightly different typological classification, the OECD database shows that predominantly rural regions accounted for more than a quarter of the population and more than 80% of the land area. Specifically in Hungary, the proportion of the national population in rural regions was more than twice the OECD average. In nearly all nations, predominantly rural regions experienced a population decline, except for Ireland, the United States, Chile, Switzerland, and Belgium (OECD Regions at a Glance, 2016).

Rural areas that are losing population have different temporal dynamics. Rural depopulation was particularly severe in Western Europe (including the Mediterranean and Scandinavian regions) in the 1960s and 1970s, while the process varied in time from country to country in Eastern Europe. Across the entire continent, rural depopulation accelerated in the 2000s. In Hungary, uniquely in Europe, rural population decline has been a continuous process since 1981 (TARKI, 2022) and specifically, the percentage of rural population has only increased slightly in the decade following the optimism of the collapse of the Soviet bloc as evidenced by World Bank data.

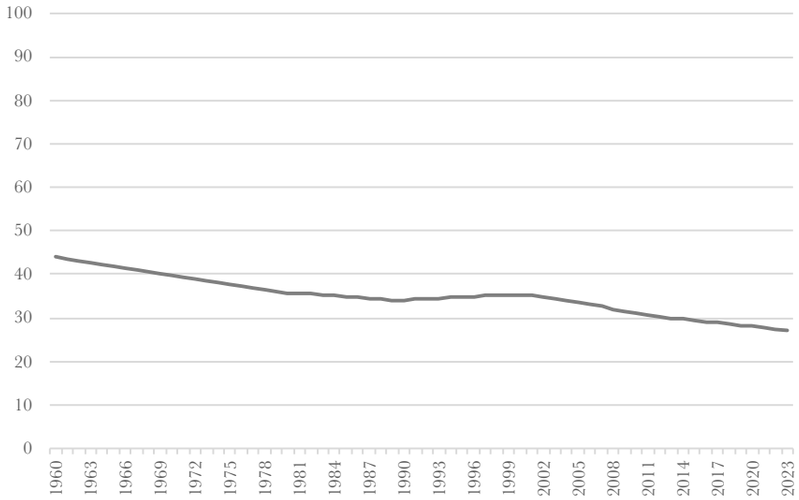



*Figure 3: Hungary's rural population (% of total population). Source: World Bank SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS*

Eurostat projections show that in the period between 2019 and 2050, only four EU countries will have a higher overall rural population (Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium). On the other end of the spectrum, rural populations across 20 member states are expected to decrease in a range from -43.5% in Lithuania to -0.6% in Austria. Hungary stands in the middle with a projected decrease of -14.1% (Eurostat, Europop2019, proj_19rdbi3 dataset).



*3.1.1 The Village as a Contemporary Eastern European Phenomenon*

The settlement structure of Hungary today has been influenced by natural geography, historical events, and economic processes throughout different periods. This section reviews the evolution of Hungarian villages within the broader context of Eastern Europe, considering how historical events, socio-economic changes, and EU policies have influenced the development and challenges of rural areas in Hungary.

Initially, natural conditions played a significant role in determining the location and size of settlements. In regions characterized by hills and marshes, limited opportunities for expansion resulted in the formation of small communities. However, historical events like the Tatar/Mongol invasion in the 13th century and the Turkish occupation (16th – late 17th century) caused considerable damage to the existing structures and settlements (Beluszky & Sikos, 2007; Dövényi, 2003).

During the era of urbanization, feudal restrictions on villages gradually diminished, leading to the emergence of towns with organized councils, which contributed to the initial stages of municipal autonomy. The integration of advancements from industrialization and urbanization into the economy introduced new factors that influenced settlement patterns, including the establishment of railways, trade routes, industrial activities, and intensive agriculture practices by large landowners. These factors played a crucial role in the development of settlements (Hann, 2015; Brown & Kulcsár, 2001).

Following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which marked the end of the First World War and for Hungary resulted in the loss of approximately two-thirds of its former territory and inhabitants, several socio-economic, ethnic, and infrastructural connections that had been established and functioned effectively were severed. This disruption led to the breakdown of internal markets, leaving regional centers without a hinterland, and transforming them into peripheral settlements with limited transportation links. Furthermore, the structure of Hungarian settlements was significantly influenced by the forced industrialization and collectivization efforts that took place after the Second World War (Swain, 1992).

Emerging as a product of the Yalta Conference of 1945, the concept of 'Eastern Europe' is not merely geographical or social; it is primarily economic and political. The region between Germany and Russia was subjected to the influence of the

Soviet Union, leading to isolation from the rest of the world and political homogenization (Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002).

After four decades of state socialism, in more recent decades, Eastern European countries, including Hungary, have undergone a transition from socialist systems to functioning market economies. The pattern described by Kristen Ghodsee (2011) is typically applicable, where the author observed the sad irony of the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and the moment of transitioning to a functioning market economy. Coinciding with the harsh reality of widespread rural unemployment and its dire consequences, many families have been forced to shift to subsistence agriculture as a means of survival. "The growing choice of new goods was always contrasted to the shrinking number of people in the country that could afford to buy them […] Most Bulgarians experienced extreme inequality for the first time" (Ghodsee, 2011). Similarly, all over the region and also in Russia, wealthy urban populations started to purchase houses in the countryside to be used as holiday properties, resulting in some villages becoming holiday homes or dachas.

The rapid reforms after 1989 primarily involved the adaptation of Western European (and to some extent North American) economic and political standards and institutions. As G. M. Tamás duly observed in 1992, governments "have been desperately trying to please what they imagine to be the Western boss." (G. M. Tamás, 1992). For many, this felt similar to how the Soviet domination meant a centralization of institutions, a fast-paced, forced collectivization of farms, massive modernization and other economic and social measures. Between 1989 and 1993, the Hungarian economy, and in particular the rural economy, experienced a deeper crisis than during the 'Great Depression' of 1929-1933 (Ladányi et. al., 2005).

The most striking phenomena and processes described above exhibit common features in the post-socialist countries of the Eastern European region, for instance rural areas in Poland comprise 93% of the country's territory, where 40% of the population resides (Heffner and Twardzik, 2022). However, despite these statistics, rural regions often lack sufficient focus and attention. "The countryside is less and less often a promise of autonomy and escape from the city, and more and more often a storage space, a place for ring roads, production halls, farms, all the infrastructure without which life in large agglomerations would be impossible. This is primarily due to the convictions that the countryside is there to serve, acting as support facilities for the cities." pronounced Robert Witczak of the curatorial team of the Polish Pavilion of the 2020 Architecture Biennale in Venice (Trouble in Paradise, 2020).



The villages of Western Europe follow a significantly different path, even though the East and West were both characterized by large-scale farming before 1990. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) established in 1962 by the European Union increased agricultural productivity and incentivized development. In contrast, central planning and collectivization of agriculture in the Eastern side of the continent resulted in inefficiency and disconnection from the realities of the market. It is interesting to observe that while the United Kingdom and southern European areas experienced depopulation patterns (although partly compensated in some regions by migration from third countries and in others by northern landowners), the Benelux countries have evolved slightly differently. They developed a network of infrastructure and a settlement pattern that is interconnected with cities, coined conurbation, i.e. contiguous built-up areas, blurring the physical boundaries of settlements.

### *3.1.2 Demographic & Economic Trends of the Rural in Hungary*

Looking back at the history of the development of the villages, it is obvious that agricultural technology, which was typically rudimentary until the end of the Middle Ages, played a key role in their creation. Simple, traditional tools and transportation difficulties limited the area cultivated and thus the size of the settlements. Put another way, the distance between the place of residence and the land cultivated for farming would have made it unreasonably time-consuming to travel to work above a certain limit. Farming tools and transport facilities have ceased to exist as conditions for the development of villages, and industrialization has reduced the share of agricultural activity in general. Moreover, in recent decades only a minority of people in the villages make their living from farming (Kiss, 2008).

After the collectivization of agriculture in the 1950s, the population began to leave the villages, which in the case of the smallest villages accelerated into an exodus (Kovács, 2013). From the 1960s to the regime change in 1989, village populations declined further due to the planned economy, centralization, and industrial development policies that drew people to the cities. In the name of rationalization, cooperatives, councils and schools were merged, making it clear to the inhabitants that independent rural life had no perspective. These socio-economic processes were reinforced by the differentiated development concepts, such as the 1971 government decree, the National Concept for the Development of Settlement Networks (trans. Országos Településhálózat-fejlesztési Koncepció). Two types of migration occurred:

labor migration for livelihood and educational migration of the youth. This resulted not only in population decline, but also in a transformation of the social structure of the settlements.

After the regime change, migration dynamics slowed but underlying social changes continued based on earlier population shifts. The outmigration of younger and more educated residents led to aging populations in the villages and in some cases, the vacated properties attracted poorer residents, creating a downward spiral. Further, the proximity to national borders impacted village development, negatively when borders hardened during the cold war and positively after joining the European Union (Kovács, 2013).

At this point, it is important to highlight the consequences and impacts of the spread of modern, urban lifestyles: the need for utilities (water, sewage, gas, electricity), roads, broadband internet, kindergartens, schools, clinics, post offices, shops, etc., makes it difficult for villages to survive because of the prohibitive costs per capita. It is precisely the embeddedness, or lack of it, in urban infrastructure that is one of the most striking differences in the standard of living between small villages in Eastern and Western Europe.

It is difficult to argue with Erika Faludi, whose assessment from 2004 feels still relevant twenty years later: "The past decade and a half has also seen significant changes in the fortunes of these villages. The drinking water supply and telephone networks have been fully developed, and sewage and gas networks are now being built in many small villages, but public transport and access to jobs and agricultural production are radically deteriorating. Livelihood conditions are steadily declining, while the stagnation, ageing and decline of the population mean that villages are unable to maintain the existing network of institutions (schools, nurseries, shops, post offices, basic health and social services, etc.).

The absurd situation is that the inhabitants of these villages live in a well-kept, prosperous environment with an improving network infrastructure, but with shrinking livelihood opportunities, with no prospects, 'written off' from those who are trying to compete for the future, with a feeling of inadequacy, depressed, because they have no work, they cannot support their families and, in the best case, they are taught in the retraining courses of the employment center (in addition to the vocational retraining, which is impossible to convert into a livelihood in this situation) to sell their houses and move to [the regional center] into a rental. 'Fortunately', the properties have no market value at all, so this great method of self-fulfillment is not feasible" (Faludi, 2004, as cited in Kemény, 2005).

The structure of contemporary Hungarian society could be compared to a water droplet, argues sociologist Áron Márk Éber (2020) in his recent volume, a shape that has widened over the past four decades. The gap between the top and the bottom, between the dominant and the subordinate, between those living on capital income and the working class has grown.

The question rightly arises: if there has been such a trend towards decline for at least a hundred years, why do small villages still exist today, when the evidence seems to indicate the opposite? Tibor Kuczi (2012) concludes that during this period there has been an almost continuous turnover of population, in one direction: small villages attract young families and the penniless who cannot survive in the city, while pushing out the more affluent upwardly mobile, resulting in contra-selection. There are, of course, exceptions: in some regions (e.g. Lake Balaton), there is a vacationing, intellectual presence alongside the often closed community of better-off elderly people who are stuck in the countryside for one reason or another, or pensioners who have moved in from abroad. Yet the general consensus is that "small villages are kept alive by disadvantaged social groups" (Kuczi, 2012). According to him, the people who are now moving to villages are those who cannot find a livelihood elsewhere, people who are unemployed, people with low education levels, or who are tied to "bad investments": hard-working people who want to grow, who have spent decades of work and savings on constantly upgrading and improving their family home; they are forced to stay even if their jobs are lost because their property is worth less than half or a third of the price of urban housing. "So they do not choose to live in small villages, they prefer to live there for lack of a better life, except for the better-off city dwellers and foreigners who move there." (Kuczi, 2012, 155) Of course, not all villages are in decline, there are exceptions. In these cases, the rule is that it is not the number of inhabitants but the characteristics of the area, i.e. the age distribution, employment opportunities and transport network, that are decisive (Kovács, 2009).

Since joining the European Union in 2004, the economic development of the villages has been linked to several long-term EU-funded government programs. The EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) was introduced in 1962 with the aim of supporting farmers and increasing food production, however, already by the turn of the same decade, due to rapid advancement in technology in the sector and higher

yields, it was leading to overproduction and food waste. A series of reforms have seen it turn into direct payments to farmers, currently accounting for one-third of the EU budget, mainly benefitting big landowners and creating a new, modern twist on the feudal system in the form of 'internal neo-colonialism' by 'suitcase farmers' (Biczkowski et al., 2022).

Besides subsidizing agriculture, the second main pillar of CAP has been the support of rural development. Here it is perhaps interesting to point out that some scholars have found a possible correlation between rural policies and political party preference both historically and in contemporary society. For instance, the Catholics among the Belgian leading class saw the strengthening connections between 'red' urban centers and the countryside as a threat leading to an increasing dissemination of socialist ideas across villages. As a consequence, the Belgian Farmers Union was founded in 1890 to take control of rural development (Meert, 2000). The 1920s and 30s have brought a similar and profoundly heated debate in Hungary between the urban and the rural/national ideologies that encompassed artistic, literary, academic and political discussions of the time and some might argue even influence politics today and explain the high ratio of government supporting votes coming from the poor countryside and the urban centers showing more opposition voters (Kolosi & Szelenyi, 2022).

In the Hungarian frame of reference, the CAP was implemented in the so-called New Hungary Rural Development Programmes (2007- 2013, 2014-2020) and more recently the Hungarian Villages Programme. Initiated by the prime minister in 2018, he personally greets visitors of the official website with the following message: "We are not far away from being able to say that today you can have the same quality of life in a Hungarian village as in the capital." The priority of the program is to strengthen and develop small villages with a population of less than 5,000, to improve the quality of life and to stop the population from migrating (magyarfaluprogram.hu). It is running in parallel with the Emerging Settlements Programme, which aims to facilitate the development of the 300 most disadvantaged settlements in Hungary, overseen by the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta.

The challenges facing Hungarian villages today are multifaceted. The need for modern utilities, infrastructure, and access to essential services makes it difficult for villages to compete with urban areas. The embeddedness in urban infrastructure is one of the most significant differences in the standard of living between small villages in Eastern and Western Europe. It is important to note that while many small villages in Hungary have faced a trend of decline for decades, they still exist today, primarily attracting those who cannot find livelihood opportunities elsewhere. This has led to contra-selection, where young families and those with limited financial resources are drawn to villages, while more affluent individuals seek opportunities in urban centers.

The development of Hungarian villages reflects a complex interplay of historical events, socio-economic changes, and EU policies. While challenges remain, various government programs aim to revitalize these areas and improve the quality of life for rural residents. The contrasting trends between Eastern and Western European villages underscore the unique challenges faced by Eastern European rural regions. A somewhat positive example within the context of rural development in Hungary is the Koppányvölgy NGO. This organization has implemented a number of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for rural residents. Through its work, Koppányvölgy has demonstrated the potential for positive change, offering practical solutions that address the unique challenges faced by small communities. Unfortunately, the driving forces behind the initiative seem to have lasted only about a decade, and the work around the organization seems to have stalled.

The development and transformation of Hungarian villages provides valuable insights into the broader socio-economic dynamics of Eastern Europe. Further research and policy efforts are essential to address the specific challenges faced by these communities and to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas in the region.

## 3.2 Villages With Under 100 Inhabitants: Micro Perspectives

> *"By way of explanation, it should also be added that when locals say village, they do not simply mean a place with a geographical name. They are using the word in the world sense, as the French do when they say tout le monde. A village is the same as everyone, and those who live outside the circle are of course not counted as everyone. They are a bit like the Spartans, the Lesbos, the Athenians and all the other Greeks, when they considered everyone but themselves as barbarians. Or, at least, an animal being who does not know and respect their gods, who does not use their language with decency, in short, who is not human." (Péter Nádas, excerpt from Hátországi napló (trans. Hinterland diary), 2010, translated by Daniel Halasz)*

Narrowing the perspective from the European level, the macro scale, this chapter specifically examines Hungarian villages with less than 100 inhabitants. These often-overlooked micro-communities harbor stories and challenges that deserve further exploration. In order to better understand these small communities, I focus on their unique characteristics and challenges using a micro perspective and typologies.


*Figure 4: Villages with less than 100 inhabitants. Based on data from HCSO - HNT, 2018*

The use of typologies was inspired by and recommended by professors Ágnes and Gábor Kapitány after some consultations, as their use can be valuable in studying villages and help to classify and compare distinct types based on physical, social, economic, and cultural characteristics. They can reveal patterns and trends in the spatial distribution, morphology, function, and development of villages over time and across regions. Instead of strictly defining typological categories, I present a framework that highlights the different characteristics and challenges these villages face, to able to gain a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of these settlements and their interactions with urban areas. This approach allows me to analyze and compare the villages based on multiple dimensions without necessarily fitting them into rigid categories. The characteristics used in this research include geographic regions, infrastructure, economic situation, livelihoods, presence of intellectuals, community life, settlers, visual image, conflicts, historical aspects, dominant individuals, and cultural activities.

While working with typologies, it is useful to remember the thoughts of Foucault (who in turn was inspired by Borges), who challenges the idea that our rational, academic systems of classification are universal, neutral and ahistorical. He opens his book, The Order of Things, with a passage discussing a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' by Jorge Luis Borges. In this fictional encyclopedia, animals are classified into seemingly absurd and arbitrary categories, such as: "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies". This example is used to illustrate how our systems of thought that are taken for granted are rather products of a particular time and place (Foucault, 1970).

The smallest villages offer a microcosm of the transformations that have swept through Hungary in recent decades. As an introduction to typologies, it is important to clarify some basic processes, concepts and phenomena, thus helping to draw a more accurate picture of the tiniest Hungarian villages. Once vibrant hubs of agricultural life, they have faced a constant decline due to factors like depopulation, economic restructuring, and the centralization of services. Today, many villages lack essential amenities like shops, schools, and healthcare facilities, leading to a diminished quality of life for their inhabitants.

By examining the wider historical and specific Eastern European context and then looking at the typologies of the smallest Hungarian villages, I am to counter the observation of Szabó, who poignantly wrote thirteen years ago: "The presentation of the situation of the Hungarian countryside today, particularly the difficulties of the most endangered small rural areas, is a very dangerous field even within the framework of a professional audience, because the problem is quite complex, while

the researchers dealing with the topic examine only small parts of it, and thus [...] they cannot even sketch a proper picture of the situation. […] Somehow, one gets the feeling that even the researchers have failed to grasp the fundamental problem of today's Hungarian countryside: nowadays, even the rural population lives an urban (or more precisely, urbanized) lifestyle, or at least strives to do so. The rural way of life (closeness to nature, cohesive local communities, peace and quiet, local economy based on agricultural production, etc.) that people still have in mind is not only disappearing, but has disappeared." (Szabó, 2011)

A study on the village types of Hungary by Beluszky and Sikos, published in 1982 with data from 1970 (which was later repeated by the authors with data from 2001 and published in 2007), identified seven main village types, mainly based on statistical data. As the authors also pointed out, the overall state of a settlement is strongly influenced by other factors, such as environmental conditions, the history of the settlement and the development of social relations. As a result of these factors and characteristics, it was proclaimed that "each village has an unrepeatable individuality". One of the seven village types were described as "tiny villages with a rapidly declining population, poor living conditions and no basic services" (Beluszky and Sikos, 1982, in Szabó 2011, Vidéki térségek).

Small villages were included in the list of settlements to be abandoned in the 1960s and their liquidation was accelerated until the 1990s (Beluszky and Sikos, 1982). Even though the 1963 document titled "Study Plan for the Development of Settlement Networks in Hungary", which indicated that settlements with a population below 3,000 would not get any development funds, was not signed into law, it provided a glimpse into the future development of small settlements and outlined the trajectory of differentiation. In the 1970s, there was a phase of zoning and the dismantling of the institutional framework of 'other' villages, yet despite these changes, the majority of villages did not completely disappear (Józsa, 2014).

In the last thirty years, similar to the overall population of Hungary, there has been a decline in the number of people residing in rural areas, leading to demographic erosion. However, during this time, there has been a parallel increase in the number of small settlements. In contrast to the trend of the 1960s and 1970s, where income inequalities between urban and rural areas were narrowing and almost non-existent, there has been a reversal in recent decades. This has resulted in a substantial increase in the disparities, particularly affecting those living in the researched areas.



Similar patterns have been observed by researchers of the post-World War II period in Poland, where small villages of less than 100 inhabitants have experienced the most pronounced demographic decline. Factors behind the disappearance of small villages include limited attractiveness due to low living standards, limited income from agricultural activity, and poor infrastructure. The demographic profile of disappearing small villages is also becoming increasingly skewed in terms of gender structure, with young women representing the first cohort to leave these communities.. However, some disappearing small villages are experiencing the development of 'hobby farming' and 'second homes' as city dwellers are attracted by low prices, the rural landscape, and traditional architecture (Bański and Wesołowska, 2020).

In his 1982 inaugural speech to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, György Enyedi revealed that many Hungarian villages experience significant declines in population, abandonment of institutions, and weakened economic bases. He noted that this pattern aligns with broader trends seen during global urbanization phases, although unique factors exist in the Hungarian case. For instance, compared to similarly situated developed industrial nations, Hungary maintains a larger rural population due to its agricultural history and the sustenance capabilities of large-scale farming. The nationwide decrease in population has resulted in diminished populations across most municipalities and the limited access to high-quality infrastructure further complicates connections between villages and cities (Enyedi, 1982).

By way of illustration, while villages received 22% of central resources in 1968, this figure dropped to 10% in 1980 despite nearly half of the country's residents living in these areas then. During the 1970s, substantial centralizing forces impacted governance and supply organizations independently from urban policies, leaving numerous communities devoid of local leadership. As a consequence, the dissolution of town councils, community hubs, cooperatives, and educational facilities significantly undermined municipality vitality. In 1960, approximately 94% of municipalities boasted individual councils, however, by 1981, only 679 self-governing and 715 combined councils remained—a reduction of over 1600 municipalities or 53%. Similarly, between 1974 and 1977 alone, roughly 40% of all schools were closed, and the number of general trading enterprises plummeted by 80% between 1960 and 1980 due to consolidations (Enyedi, 1982).

The 1990s saw the detrimental consequences that occurred after a change in regime, such as the decline of local services and job opportunities with the agricultural sector undergoing a transformation, experiencing a significant decrease in its dominant

position. Concurrently, the services sector has gained prominence both in terms of production value and occupational structure. Finally, the process of globalization has contributed to the standardization of consumer habits and behavioral patterns, leading to an erosion of social ties, and the disintegration of local communities. Despite all of these factors, traces of a vanishing way of life are still visible.

In general terms, the basic problem is the following: "before the 18th century, the 'basic services' used by the majority of the population in the villages - except for the priest - did not exist in Hungary, so their absence did not affect the life of the villages. However, from that time onwards, services such as elementary schools, midwives and doctors, some craftsmen, pubs, fairs, local administration, and from the 20th century onwards, shops, post offices, modern transport, etc., became an indispensable part of everyday life. In villages of a few hundred inhabitants, these were never economically viable, and the problematic nature of this became increasingly apparent to the people concerned over the next two hundred years (Beluszky-Sikos, 2007). Thus, by the 20th century, the most intrinsic problem of small villages was the availability of basic services and the availability of services that were lacking locally." (Kiss, 2008a)

In contrast to Michael Wood's views described in the previous chapter, Hungarian scholar Bernadett Csurgo argues that there are two main ways of looking at the countryside. The first is an idyllic, experience-centered image of the countryside, in which the image elements conveyed by tourism and the village as a depository of national culture are the most prominent. The other, critical vision, is problem-centered, focusing on the state of the countryside and the living conditions of the rural population. Overall, then, the image of the countryside is one of fiction triumphs over reality (Csurgo, 2013).

Despite the many challenges facing Hungarian villages with less than 100 inhabitants, they remain an enduring part of the social landscape. By understanding their unique characteristics and the factors that shape their development, we can better grasp the practices of ingenuity as part of these communities' survival strategies.



### *3.2.1 Geographic and Economic Factors*

#### 3.2.1.1 Regions and Geography

The distribution of these villages may seem scattered, nevertheless, by plotting the their locations on a map, a regional pattern of their layout can be observed. The classic north-south and east-west axes of the center and periphery model, the civilization slope is less apparent here, instead, they are mainly confined to mountainous and hilly areas and are located in the outer peripheries of the country (Borsod, Baranya, Zala, Vas counties). They are not evenly distributed within these counties and only form coherent clusters in the southern and western Transdanubian areas (Makra et al., 2018).

The reasons for this are that the topography did not allow for the development of larger settlements in these areas, and agricultural production was less conducive to the development of large, coherent farms. This later also caused the transport infrastructure in these landscapes to be less developed, leading to further marginalization. Thirdly, the peripherality, the distance from major urban centers and the proximity to the (former) iron curtain did not make the development of these villages a political priority.


*Figure 5: Hungary and Transylvania in 1629. Source: Pallas Nagy Lexikona, 1896*

Another reason for this geographical distribution has its roots in the 16th-17th centuries when the Turkish occupation took place. Small villages were the usual settlements in the Carpathian Basin at that time and played a significant role in the medieval Hungarian settlement system. However, during the almost two centuries of Ottoman rule, demographic growth was hindered, and the population became highly fragmented. In particular in the Great Hungarian Plain (Alföld), extensive settlements took precedence, while small villages persisted mainly in regions unaffected by the conquest (northeastern and southwestern Hungary).

The most recent statistical data on various economic and social conditions (material deprivation, employment data, age distribution, number of facilities, etc.) mostly correspond to the spatial distribution of the studies villages and show a higher concentration of affected settlements on the northeastern and southwestern periphery of the country. Share of the middle class by geographical region is the lowest in the North-Eastern and South-Western area of the country. In these areas, the ratio of households considered wealth-less is around 70 per cent (Kolosi and Fabian, 2016).




*Figure 6: Relative income poverty rate by district (%). Source: Tatrai, 2022*

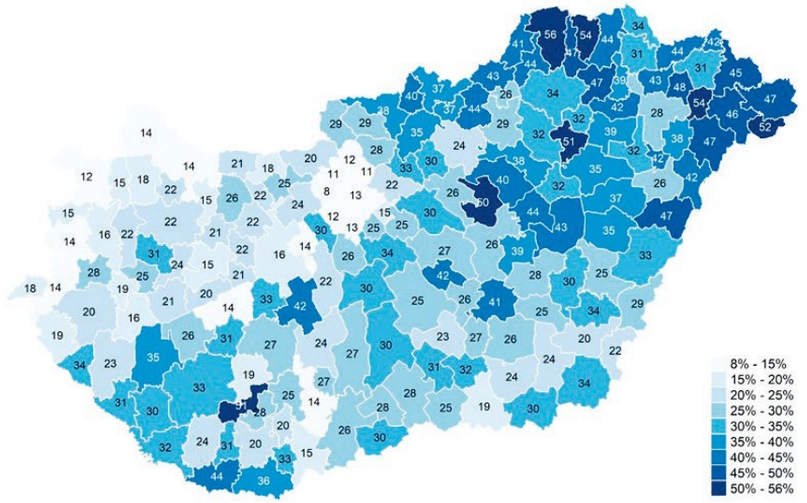



*Figure 7: Percentage of people living in severe material deprivation by district (%). Source: Tatrai, 2022*

One of the key indicators of economic hardship in these regions is the prevalence of severe material deprivation. Severe material deprivation is originally identified as a household's inability to afford at least four of the following nine items: (1) paying rent, mortgage or utility bills; (2) maintaining an adequate level of warmth in the home; (3) regular consumption of meat or fish; (4) unexpected expenses; (5) taking a one-week holiday away from home; (6) color television; (7) washing machine; (8) telephone; (9) car (European Commission - Eurostat, 2010, Tatrai, 2022).

### 3.2.1.2 Infrastructure and Vicinity to Towns

The infrastructure in these villages varies, with some having paved roads and access to public transportation, while others remain isolated and difficult to reach. The distance between the village and the nearest city also plays a significant role in the development and connectivity of the village.

In the majority of the municipalities studied, high commuting rates and low levels of schooling are fundamental social problems. Furthermore, in settlements with less than 100 inhabitants, 70% of the inhabitants do not have a local job (HCSO data, 2022, Kiss, 2008a). The problem is aggravated by the fact that it is in these settlements that the lack of transportation facilities, which is a prerequisite for commuting, is most acute. The situation is worst in the case of peripheral settlements (often only one bus a day), but there are also settlements that are not connected to public

transport at all (no rail or bus services). A study of Hungarian dwarf villages from 2011 painted a similar picture, noting that "[…] there is one thing these villages have in common: there are no jobs locally, and commuting to the nearest town is impossible in most cases. Either there is simply no adequate public transport (we are talking about villages with typically a few pairs of buses a day) and/or the cost of travel is so high that it is simply not worth commuting daily for a minimum wage job." (Szabó, 2011)

At the same time, between 2011 and 2021 the number of passenger cars owned by natural persons (and not by businesses) increased almost twofold from 77391 to 114138 (HCSO 2021 data), which means that almost every second inhabitant of villages with less than 500 inhabitants owns a private car. Although this is a noteworthy increase, the average age of the cars reached 15 years. Those who cannot afford or do not have access to a car must rely on the public bus system, that poses challenges in some villages where the frequency is limited to only one or two buses per day. This lack of service can be inconvenient for residents, limiting their mobility options and access to essential services.

As an alternative, many villages have successfully applied for joint EU and government funding to purchase a minivan and hire a driver, allowing them to access discontinued services (medical, bureaucratic, commercial, etc.) in nearby towns. In other cases, the village caretaker or the mayor helps the elderly residents by running errands or providing transportation for them.

#### 3.2.1.3 Economic Situation

Village economies traditionally operated on a unique economic model, characterized by the communal sharing of labor and resources. This cooperative was deeply ingrained in the culture and was essential for the survival and prosperity of these communities. One notable example of this was during the harvest season, when villagers would collectively harvest each other's crops. Similarly, during weddings, the entire village would contribute in some way, whether it was by providing food, helping with preparations, or offering their skills. Even in the 1980s, this behavioral pattern held the communities together. No matter what happened, no matter who was in power, there was still a community code of conduct that people followed. This no longer exists in its traditional form, as monetary relations have replaced cooperative sharing (Kovách, 2022, Vidács, 2015).



"Self-sufficient food production (neither home-grown crops [...] nor livestock farming) is no longer a feature of village households. This process has reached such proportions that livestock farming has literally disappeared from most villages over the last two decades. This has fundamentally changed the habits of the people living there, the use of the land on the edge of the villages and the way in which the land is built on. Ageing, and a drastic reduction in the number of children, and new means of information and communication (television, telephone, internet, skype) have brought about profound changes that have almost completely destroyed local communities." (Szabó, 2011)

With the decline of common activities and cooperation on the one hand, and an increase in migration and communication on the other, local spaces enabling knowledge sharing and unification have been radically reduced (Kovács - Váradi, 2013).

Historically, the smallest settlements bore the brunt of the urban-centric settlement policies of the 1960s and 1970s and emerged as the obvious losers. A government decree issued in 1971 (called the National Settlement Network Development Concept) declared more than 2,000 villages to be 'secondary', devoid of purpose, leaving them without any financial or material resources, as their growth was deemed economically unviable. As a precursor to the decree, in 1966 Perczel and Gerle discussed this in detail: "[…] 50-60% of the settlements currently have less than 1,000 inhabitants, which neither large-scale production nor a population that wants a higher standard of living can sustain for much longer. Thus, of the small villages, only those most favorably located for large-scale production will need to be provided with public facilities for the 2-3000 population category […]. Thus, unviable small villages will slowly wither away as they become uncomfortable and obsolete for their inhabitants. Among the small villages of Transdanubia and northern Hungary, on average every fifth small village needs to be transformed into a central village of around 2-3,000 inhabitants." (Perczel & Gerle, 1966, as cited in Horváth, 2022).

Nevertheless, the issue of transforming agricultural underdevelopment remained a pivotal concern during the socialist era. Hungarian modernizers implemented policies that favored rural areas, resulting in better living standards and cultural development in bigger villages. With the transition to the capitalist market system, the aforementioned gains were largely reversed. In the absence of government subsidies, small village farms are unable to compete effectively against supermarket chains and global agribusinesses. It could also be argued that during the period of state socialism, the country invested a disproportionate amount of resources into

rural housing and related infrastructure, leading to a larger rural population than feasible. The ramifications of this historic misstep were obscured during the early post-socialist years but have become evident in the present populist era through welfare cuts, labor exportation, and local workfare programs (Hann, 2020).

The most notable impact of governmental intervention in the market mechanism was on the labor sector. In 2011, workfare programs (known as 'közmunka program') were implemented across Hungary to decrease the unemployment rate. Over the course of five years, the number of individuals employed in these programs reached two hundred thousand, with the majority situated in rural regions. However, in parallel this was also accompanied by a significant reduction in social benefits, which essentially forced the unemployed to participate in these low-paying programs. Local governments were tasked with implementing these programs, and mayors were generally pleased to have a free workforce at their disposal. Those with a critical perspective argue that these programs not only failed to provide participants with adequate training to re-enter the regular job market, but that they also became a means for the ruling party to reinforce its political control over the rural communities (Hann, 2020).

Some new families, attracted by the affordable housing in the village, adhere to traditional ideals of a self-sufficient lifestyle. Nevertheless, it is notable that a number of local households have ceased to adhere to these practices entirely. The low cost of food at large foreign-owned stores, such as Tesco and Lidl, which are easily accessible in nearby towns, is cited as a reason for the decline in the incentive to work in the backyard (Hann, 2020). Consequently, it is more pragmatic to concentrate on maintaining an aesthetically pleasing lawn and installing recreational facilities for children and grandchildren. The practice of slaughtering pigs has become increasingly uncommon, given the labor-intensive and unpleasant nature of the task. While supermarket meat can still be smoked in accordance with traditional methods and flavored with family recipes, it is now relatively uncommon for samples to be shared with relatives and neighbors. For the majority of people, it is no longer a significant concern that the food they consume is not the outcome of their own efforts, as it used to be in the not-too-distant past. However, some villagers express concern about their current position as residents of a global community, noting that a significant proportion of the food they purchase at supermarkets is sourced from beyond Hungary.

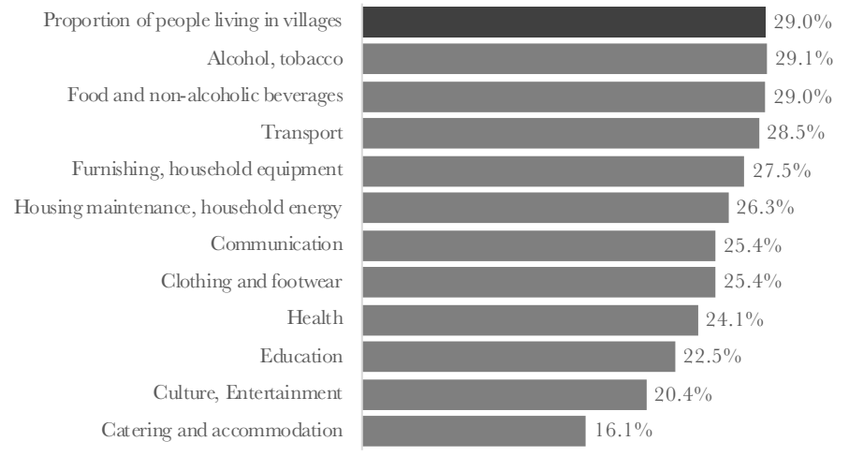



*Figure 8: Villages' share of the total expenditure. Source: Összkép & HCSO, 2016*

It is also important to note the differences in the spending patterns of the urban and rural population. According to the 2016 figures of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, although villages represent 29 percent of the total population, their share of expenditure in eleven product/service categories was noticeably lower, especially in the hospitality, culture, education and health sectors.

Compounding the effect of a lack economic power is low social and geographical mobility. The combination of a strong regional differentiation in housing prices as well as more extensive disparities in life chances and service accessibility creates a circular process that 'entrenches' regional differences in wealth distribution among households. Consequently, persistent and deepening fault lines are created throughout the country (Horvath, 2022).

The primary livelihoods in these villages include backyard farming, agriculture, participation in workfare programs, tourism, and factory or urban employment. The availability and success of these livelihoods depend on factors such as location, infrastructure, and the presence of resources and opportunities. In general, the low level of economic activity in these municipalities means that the local economy is unable to absorb the local labor force, leaving a situation of economic inertia and an increasingly tight labor market. Accordingly, these municipalities are heavily dependent on the centrally located municipalities close to them because of the scarcity of jobs.

*3.2.2 Social and Cultural Aspects*

3.2.2.1 Presence of Intellectuals

The presence of intellectuals, such as doctors, teachers, agricultural engineers, and priests, is vital for the development and well-being of these villages, however, they have long ago left their communities and settled in cities, losing their living and daily contact with local communities and their participation in their organization and management.

Due to the centralization and rationalization policies of the 1960s and 70s as well as the analogous contemporary measures of the past 20 years meant that the schools in these villages were closed and any remaining children had to commute to nearby bigger settlements, again contributing to the exodus of the population. In a similar pattern, after the closure of state agricultural farms in the 1990s, not only did unemployment suddenly increase by hundreds of thousands, but the more educated workforce also gradually left these villages.

Today, some villages with less than 100 inhabitants have an emergency ambulance service that can be called on a high-frequency radio and usually a doctor who visits for an hour or two, usually once a week, and receives patients in a room in the municipal building. In a remarkably similar fashion, churches typically hold services once a week, providing the only public meeting opportunity for the ageing population of the villages.

The arrival of new residents, such as young urban families, foreign pensioners, and commuters from neighboring countries can contribute to the revitalization and economic development of these villages, but their presence can also lead to increased social segregation and strain on local resources.

3.3.2.2 Community Life and Services

Traditionally, rural communities have been perceived as close-knit and rooted in their environment. However, population change through out-migration and in-migration is threatening the sustainability of these structures. On the one hand, the influx of residents with different values through counter-urbanization and migration creates conflicts over what community and rural life really mean. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that rural communities can also be exclusionary, marginalizing toward those perceived as outsiders.



The mobility of residents themselves also poses challenges to communities. Today, many people migrate temporarily for work, splitting their time between places. Second home ownership has become more prevalent, attracting urban dwellers to rural areas. In addition, residents who migrate to cities or abroad typically maintain ties to their home communities. This extension of community identity across spaces is captured by concepts such as the 'translocal village' (Velayutham & Wise, 2005). As a result traditional notions of community are being disrupted by this increased mobility.

In the 1970s, there was a significant trend toward centralization of management and supply systems. This resulted in a lack of local organizations in most of the villages, which only maintained their residential function. In 1968, villages received 22% of central resources, but by 1980, this percentage had fallen to 10%. In the same year, 47% of the country's population lived in these municipalities. In a three-year period between 1974 and 1977, approximately 40% of all schools were closed under the school district centralization program. In the two decades between 1960 and 1980, the number of ÁFÉSZ, which were general commercial organizations based on community participation in villages, decreased by a staggering 80% due to mergers. (Enyedi, 1982)

In most cases, the settlements have lost the basic functions they used to have, many villages have lost their primary schools and kindergartens, the basic grocery store and, in some cases, even the local pub. The educational level of people living in rural areas is low, reflecting the age and social composition of the population and the gradual decline and change in the economic structure of the countryside over the past 30 years. The low level of primary education has been significantly influenced by the loss of school networks in rural areas.

In post-socialist countries, societies have been in a transition and the consumption patterns of older generations may still be influenced by the previous political-economic era, including aspects such as the deficit economy (Shevchenko, 2015). Meanwhile, in Hungary, there is a common trend that the consumption of locally produced food is decreasing among the rural population, while the sale of food in stores is rapidly increasing (Györe et al., 2009).

Regarding retail establishments, Hungary has seen a steady decline in the number of retail shops since the early 2000s. Residents living in these areas face challenges such as limited opening hours, insufficient product variety, inflated prices due to a lack of competition, and the daily problem of shop closures. According to 2014

HCSO data, a total of 93 municipalities reported a score of zero for retail outlets. In essence, these statistics indicate that the population in these areas does not have direct access to any retail services in their place of residence.

Of course, the fact that this population may be severely underserved does not mean that their needs are not being met. Convenience stores, online shopping facilities, and traditional service outlets in larger neighboring municipalities with centralized functions can meet to the needs of this population. In the last few decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of mobile shops, especially in small settlements. (e.g. Szabó et al., 2019; Czene et al., 2010). A similar goal was pursued in Hungary with the establishment of the government-supported village caretaker program in 1993, which is organized by the local governments to help meet basic needs and is running successfully in some areas, operating a minibus to transport the local population.

Recently, the research company GfK showed in its 2022 analysis of domestic purchasing power that although the national average purchasing power has been steadily increasing in recent years, it is still 46 percent below the EU average. What is even more worrying is that the purchasing power of the counties with the highest number of small villages is even lower than the average, and in the county of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg it is 78% of the national average (GfK Purchasing Power, 2022). From a territorial point of view, it can be observed that the less developed regions of the country have a higher proportion of self-employed individuals. This can be attributed to the phenomenon of 'forced self-employment', where economic conditions, such as limited purchasing power and inadequate infrastructure, made it less attractive for larger multinational chains to establish their presence. (Agárdi-Bauer, 2000, Györe et al, 2009).

Nonetheless, disparities exist not only in terms of purchasing power, but also in the composition of demand between rural and urban regions. In 2016, individuals living in rural areas had an average monthly net income of only 87 thousand HUF, which is approximately 80% of the income needed to maintain an average standard of living. Although about a third of the population lives in rural municipalities, their expenditures in various consumption categories such as transport, culture, communication, clothing, and education are below the national average. However, they do match the national average in spending on alcohol, tobacco, food, and non-alcoholic beverages. (Virágh-Szepesi, 2018).



3.2.2.3 Settlers and Population Dynamics

The arrival of new residents in rural villages can have a significant impact on the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of these communities. The influx of young urban families, commuters from neighboring countries, and Western European retirees seeking a more affordable and quieter lifestyle can be observed in many villages.

The presence of the first newcomers often encourages more people to consider moving into the vacant houses, leading to a gradual revitalization of the village. In Hungary, this trend is particularly evident in villages located near larger cities. Young families and educated professionals who choose to relocate to these villages often contribute in some way to the development of the local community.

In addition to the desire for tranquility and prosperity, existential pressures such as fear of unemployment and impoverishment are also at work behind the decision to move to the smallest villages. Some stories reveal that newcomers relocate to avoid social tensions in their original place of residence, fractures in family life or because they cannot afford to live in the cities, their presence can put pressure on the village population. In these cases, the villages can be a refuge, but also a trap, a place of exile. The post-regime change stories of moving to the village reflect a pattern of social migration (Váradi, 2013). This was evident in the 1960s and 1970s when the previously mentioned government decrees deemed certain villages uninhabitable, forcing the often Roma population to relocate, which in turn led to increased social segregation in the new villages and a strain on local resources and services (Feischmidt, 2013).

"These settlements have in fact become part of urban networks, often used by urban people (commuters, holiday home owners, tourists, etc.) and often managed by urban institutions and organisations" (Szabó, 2011). As András Csite put it so eloquently: "Compared to the past, rural space is now much less a place of production, and much less a place of agricultural production. [...] Today, rural space is a type of urban space: part of urban networks, used by urban people (commuters, holidaymakers, tourists) and often managed by urban institutions and organisations. The urban lifestyle and thus urban people have 'conquered' the countryside." (Csite, 1999).

On the other hand, relatively wealthy foreigners and retirees can contribute to the economic development of the village by renovating properties, and supporting community initiatives. In Hungary, the presence of Western European pensioners

has been particularly notable in villages near Lake Balaton and other popular tourist destinations (Illés & Michalkó, 2008). Their presence can also bring cultural diversity and new perspectives to the community, enriching the social fabric of the village (Váradi et al., 2008).

### *3.2.3 Governance and Practices*

#### 3.2.3.1 Formal, Informal, and Illegal Practices

"In the long decades of dictatorship, the so-called 'second economy' or 'shadow economy' was built on this system of familial relations, which was based on the pre-monetary economy and heavy sanctions, and which enabled the societies of Eastern and Central Europe not only to bypass but to exploit the 'planned economy' based on the common ownership of the means of production. In so doing, they have defended their belief in the necessity and sanctity of private property for decades, but paradoxically deepened the collectivist nature of their thinking. In the collective consciousness, fraud and theft have been elevated, out of necessity, to the status of conventionally accepted natural phenomena. The collective consciousness no longer considered it a crime to steal or cheat the main institutions of collectivity, the cooperative and the state. On the contrary, the collective consciousness gave permission and encouragement to steal and cheat. If I stole from the collective economy, I acted as a brave and free man, because I took moral satisfaction on behalf of all for what was done to me in the name of public property, or I took back something that could be mine, or was objectively mine. The general ethical constraints imposed on the protection of public property were in reality dissolved in the collective consciousness. In the twentieth year of the dictatorship, no one asked whether there was at least a nominal reason for taking something, but everyone took what they saw and managed to move, and this was written into the collective consciousness as an ethically acceptable and politically desirable act. The basic structure of social consciousness was not changed by the democratic turn. Although privatization and reprivatization took place in a few years, this could not satisfy the collectivism of these societies, which had been converted to the principle of equality and had deepened during the years of dictatorship, nor could it prevent the previously reinforced economic and consciousness structure from continuing to function in the form of corruption that pervaded society as a whole. Which makes democratic functioning impossible or puts it at risk." Péter Nádas, A helyszín óvatos meghatározása, Hátországi napló, (trans. Carefully defining the location, Hinterland diary) 2011

Illegal practices such as electricity theft and illegal logging are prevalent in some of these villages, driven by a lack of economic opportunities and enforcement. At the same time, mayors in some cases wield outsized, quasi-feudal power, controlling local employment opportunities through the workfare program and the distribution of grants, sometimes using the materials received as their own.

#### 3.2.3.2 Party Preferences and Local Governance

It has long been maintained that voters in rural settlements have a strong preference for right-wing, populist parties, both in the international literature (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Berlet et al., 2019; Mamonova et al., 2020; Rickardsson 2021) and in the domestic political discourse (Ember, 2018). If we look at the graph showing the correlation between Fidesz vote shares and the size of settlements, we can identify a characteristic stepwise pattern that repeats itself over a longer period of time, which seems to confirm the above hypothesis, as it indicates a strong inverse proportionality between the party's vote share and the population size of the municipalities.

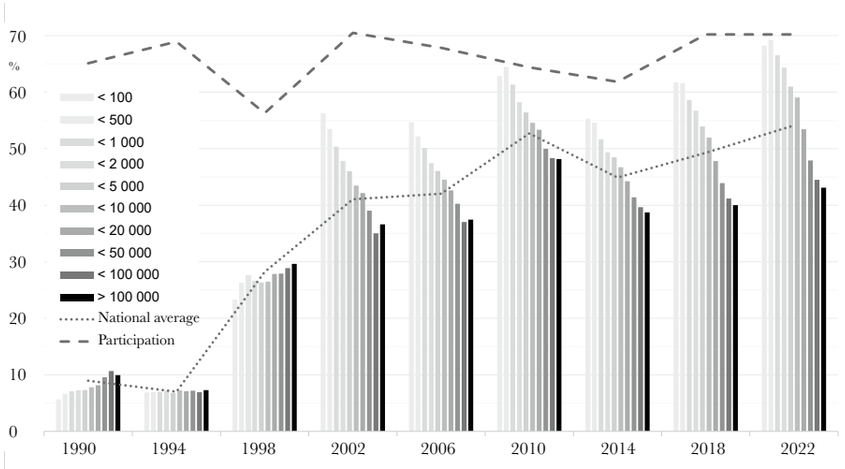



*Figure 9: Fidesz vote share by population clusters, by election, 1990 - 2022 (%).*

*Source: Mészáros et al., 2022*

It has to be noted, however, that while visiting the villages, the everyday realities are less extreme, and many people voiced their concerns and criticism of the government. The economic realities, the lack of employment opportunities mentioned before mean an increasing number of citizens desire to be mayors in the country, and even if they run independent of parties, they are dependent on governmental support to run the local workforce program and to support their meagre budgets.

The rural is often seen by city dwellers as backwards, focused on traditions and only exposed to biased state media outlets, which is somewhat understandable simply looking at statistical figures or the fact that the majority votes for right-leaning, conservative parties. In practice, one can regularly meet people with more nuanced views and a critical stance towards the governing party, though some confuse more distant, global players and have a hard time distinguishing the European Union from the United States.

*Pieter Bruegel the Younger, Two Peasants Binding Firewood, ca. 1620*

# 4 THE INGENUITY OF THE EVERYDAY

Extreme environments, whether geographical, political, or economic, impose constraints that require creative problem-solving in order to adapt and survive. This chapter looks at academic studies and artistic projects to argue that peripheral and isolated situations foster ingenuity and resourcefulness both at individual and community levels. By bringing together examples ranging from the deficit economies of Cuba and Russia to Arctic research stations and even pandemic lockdowns, I attempt to reveal the systemic socio-spatial dynamics as well as improvised everyday solutions that enable creativity under conditions of scarcity.

Ingenuity, resourcefulness, creativity, adversity, constraints, grassroots innovation and everyday design underpin this chapter as key concepts. Ingenuity in this research refers to the quality of being cleverly inventive and resourceful, especially in demanding situations. Creativity is understood here as the phenomenon whereby something new and valuable is formed through the recombination of existing assets (ideas, objects, skills) in response to an open-ended challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010). While both terms refer to generating novel ideas and solutions, ingenuity is generally associated with practical problem-solving and resourcefulness, while creativity encompasses a range of thought often artistic in nature. Constraints limit the possibilities for action but can also provide structure and focus to stimulate creative solutions (Stokes, 2006). Everyday design encompasses how ordinary people adapt, hack, and repurpose objects and systems out of necessity in their daily lives (De Certeau, 2011; Koskinen et al., 2011).

The mentioned examples unveil that extreme adversity triggers individual and collective survival instincts, instincts that generate innovative ideas. As the possibilities decrease, everyday citizens are forced to improvise solutions by recombining available resources in new ways. The literature suggests that such problem-solving under scarcity involves alternating divergent and convergent thinking, concrete experimentation, and social sharing of latest ideas and techniques (Basadur, 1995; Kaufman, 2016). Communities of practice emerge around making, modifying, recycling, and repairing material artefacts ranging from vehicles to household objects.

Discussions of grassroots ingenuity, however, should avoid romanticization. The following examples underline that necessity, rather than choice, gives birth to bricolage. The human costs of systemic deprivation should not be ignored. Yet the marginalized and oppressed also exercise agency in subtle ways through everyday creativity and resilience (Scott, 1985). As de Certeau (2011) notes, consumers become producers in clandestine and unexpected ways even in the most constraining contexts.

By bringing together a diverse range of case studies spanning from various peripheral regions: the Global South, post-socialist Eastern Europe, and even extreme environments such as the Arctic, I attempt here to construct a preliminary framework for understanding and evaluating ingenuity in peripheral places. The examples of everyday creativity about to be seen show the potential transformational power across different spheres: objects, solutions and social practices. The studies of these practices also unveil alternative value systems and design criteria. Often accessibility, customization, sustainability is prioritized. In other words, attributes that are overlooked by mainstream consumer culture. The impulse to create, personalize, play and find meaning persists even under conditions of scarcity.

## 4.1 The Role of Ingenuity in Peripheral Spatial Situations

### *4.1.1 Extreme Conditions, Mental and Physical Isolation*

Researchers now have an increasingly clearer picture of how creative thinking works under optimal conditions, and what cognitive and social processes are involved, but research into more extreme situations has only gained in importance in the last two decades (Suedfeld & Steel, 2000; Vries, 2019; Corazza & Lubart, 2020; Vartanian et al., 2020). This chapter provides a literature review of recent research on the possible correlation between the emergence of creative strategies and spatially restrictive situations and is partly based on my own paper published during the research (Halász, 2021).

In optimal situations, there is an inspiring environment and ample resources for creative thinking. However, living conditions are not always ideal, especially in the cases examined in this study, where small communities exist in long-term isolation from the outside world. An exciting newly developing segment of human creativity research investigates the effects of non-ideal environments. The findings show that creative thinking affects precisely the three neural networks that are active under stress (Beaty et al., 2016; Hermans et al., 2014). In the following, we will see through examples, how resourcefulness is affected by limited opportunities and small, closed communities.

*4.1.2 Deficit Economy in Emerging Countries*

In the former socialist countries, the deficit economy (Hey & Kornai, 1982) forced the population to solve everyday problems and challenges using resources already available. Many creative solutions were found in the face of these constraints. Still, analyses in previous decades focused on developed countries. Recognizing this gap, recent studies are concerned with emerging and developing countries (Bojica et al., 2018; Noor et al., 2020; Parthiban et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2020; Simba et al., 2020). To summarize the aforementioned research, ingenuity is not part of a consciously chosen and applied strategy, but a behavior that instinctively emerges in the course of improvisation driven by a need to survive.

*Photo: University of Alaska Geophysical Institute*

*4.1.3 Remote Research Environments*

Long-term living in highly confined spaces such as research stations in the Arctic Circle, deep sea conditions or space is physically and psychologically challenging, while offering both opportunities and challenges. While many analyses highlight the deprivation, confinement, danger, stress and emphasize mental disorders and intergroup conflict, there is overwhelming evidence that most people who have had such experiences view this lifestyle as an important stage in their personal growth and development, and look upon it with pride and joy (Krikalev et al., 2010, Suedfeld & Steel, 2000). Today's accounts report mostly positive experiences in both Arctic, deep-sea and space exploration, and an outstanding number of people are keen to return to this life experience. The surprising result is that the long-term effects of this experience have been found to be positive, supported both by personal accounts and scientific data. Participants have been shown to be mentally and physically healthier and more successful than the control group (Burr & Palinkas, 1987).

*4.1.4 Pandemic Survival Strategies*

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the coronavirus and the quarantine measures taken to control it became part of everyday life for a substantial percentage of the population globally. Naturally, many researchers have begun to look into the phenomenon and the impact of restricted living space on creativity at individual and community level (Araki & Cotellessa, 2020; Beghetto, 2020; Choukér & Stahn, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Mercier et al., 2020; Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

It is essential to discuss resiliency strategies, particularly in light of the increased attention given to economic inequality and material deprivation brought on in these times. It is evident that the strategies utilized by economically disadvantaged individuals to meet their basic needs are increasingly constrained, pushed to their limits, and in some cases, entirely transformed in order to navigate the evolving challenges and uncertainties associated with economic crises (DeParle 2020; Jourdan et al. 2020).

According to Beghetto's (2020) interpretation, self-confidence and willingness to take risks are needed to function creatively during a crisis, otherwise depression and anxiety may occur. However, it is underlined that creative action alone does not guarantee a creative outcome, and may even have negative side effects. Araki and Cotellessa (2020) argue that polymathic (i.e. comprehensive, cross-disciplinary) thinking is needed. In their view, polymathicity is an essential element of creativity, especially in cases where a new direction or change of perspective is needed. Yet their research concludes that the current dominant social, academic, political and business thinking is counterproductive and tends to specialize, which is a disadvantage when dealing with extreme situations.

Few studies have analyzed the long-term impact of isolation in epidemic situations and many researchers focus on negative factors (increased anxiety, depression) (Savage et al., 2020) However, recent findings by Australian and Chinese academics paint a more nuanced, and in some cases contradictory, picture.

Li et al. (2020) studied university students in the southeastern region of China before, during and after coronavirus-related lockdowns. Their results show that novelty seeking is strongly associated with the experience of stress, anxiety and depression. Surprisingly, however, while novelty seeking increased during closure and remained constant after opening, negative feelings showed a V-curve, i.e., decreased anxiety in students during closure. Two explanations are put forward: on the one hand, novelty seeking compensates for the effects of confinement on the subjects (creative solutions to overcome boredom, acquisition of new knowledge, reassessment of priorities, etc.), and on the other hand, the change in university life may have had a positive effect on Chinese students (less pressure due to deadlines, pressure to comply, competitive spirit, but at the same time more supportive family and teacher presence).

As the previous examples illustrate, extreme conditions can foster individual and community creative solutions as a method of adapting to situational constraints. Besides the academic, theoretical studies, there are also artistic projects highlighting the effect of such situations from "technological disobedience" in Cuba to home-made household items in Russia, to vernacular designs in Hungary. The cases explored on the following pages underscore: material and economic peripherality act as engines of creativity at individual and collective levels. Localized cultural responses to adversity are embodied in the artifacts and artistic representations, reflecting pride, resilience, even a determination to thrive within limitations. The concept of ingenuity thus unifies theoretical dimensions with grounded sociocultural domains; it demonstrates not just resilience but also remarkable resourcefulness in communities on the peripheries.

Research into creativity and ingenuity has, over the last two decades, been expanding into an exciting, critical area, making extreme situations the subject of study. The situations range from economically, socially, geographically, and politically peripheral situations to small rural communities, space exploration, arctic and deep-sea environments, prisons, and even quarantines. The results so far show that mental processes can be positively influenced by a limited environment, but it remains to be analyzed to what extent the aforementioned extreme circumstances have a similar influence on creativity, what exactly, if any, is at the root of the analogy and what causes the possible differences.



## 4.2 Artistic Investigations of the Ingenuity of the Everyday

*"¡Obrero, construye tu maquinaria!" // "Worker, build your own machinery!"*
*Ernesto Che Guevara de la Serna, 1961 (as cited in Beltrán, 2020)*

*Ernesto Oroza, Objects of Necessity, 2019*

### *4.2.1 Ernesto Oroza*

In 1991, after the decades-long US embargo, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered a period of significant economic challenge, known as the "Special Period in Times of Peace." This period was characterized by a severe scarcity of essential goods and services, compelling Cubans to devise innovative strategies for survival and adaptation. To describe this phenomenon, the Cuban artist - designer Ernesto Oroza proposed the term "technological disobedience". Through his Technological Disobedience project, he highlights ingenuity as well as the sociopolitical and economic forces that inform design.

In the video 'Cuba's DIY Inventions from 30 Years of Isolation' (Motherboard, 2013), Oroza argues that technological disobedience is when "people think beyond the capacities of an object, and try to surpass the limitations that it imposes on itself". It is a form of resistance against the planned obsolescence and consumerism that dominate societies. The project is not only about repairing or recycling objects, but also about transforming them into new functions and meanings, showing a

response to the lack of resources in Cuba and the need for people to create their own solutions to everyday problems. The perspective that distinguishes between viewing a malfunctioning water pump motor or an old rotary phone as valuable sources of raw materials rather than worthless garbage is what sets this mindset apart. It is a celebration of the human spirit and the ability to create something out of nothing.


*Vladimir Arkhipov, Home-Made Russia, Museum of Other Things, 2022*

*4.2.2 Vladimir Arkhipov*

There is an eerie parallel between Oroza's work and the long-term project initiated by the Russian artist Vladimir Arkhipov. In a similar vein as the closed Cuban economy had difficulties after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a sizable proportion of the motherland's population in Russia was faced with a severe lack of resources in the 1990s.

This resulted in a corresponding blooming of a DIY, hacky mentality, manifesting itself in unexpected constellations of objects in what is sometimes referred to as contemporary folk art, as objects born out of necessity. Arkhipov takes photographs of handmade objects, such as a model train created using empty containers, or a snow shovel made of a street sign. He also conducts interviews with the individuals who crafted these items. Tracing the roots of the project he mentions in the introduction in his first monograph: "In 1994 I saw, at an acquaintance's dacha, an unusual hook on which clothes were hanging. It was made from an old toothbrush, without bristles, and had obviously been bent on fire. There was something strange in that recognition" (Arkhipov, 2022).



Today there are over a thousand items in his collection, aptly named The People's Museum of Home-Made Objects. A number of Western reviewers of Arkhipov's collection interestingly mention the aspect of how these artifacts can be interpreted as a critique of the mainstream, throw-away, disposable materialist culture. Further, it can also be related to the 'poor art' movement of 1960s Italy, and some of the exhibitions were titled Poor Art (2000) and Russian Povera (2008). Though the objects might visually bear resemblance to the influential art movement, the intention of the creators stemmed from a disparate desire, though in the collection they are further decontextualized from their original connotations.

*Endre Koronczi, Csettegő beauty contest, 2003*

*4.2.3 Endre Koronczi*

The Economic and Transport Ministry of Hungary published a surprisingly unusual call for public art projects in September 2003. On the eve of joining the European Union merely a few months later, it was thought that although the changes concern the entire population, only a few take part in discussions regarding this seismic transformation. The winner, selected from the five submissions was the project of Endre Koronczi, with his idea of organizing a beauty contest for csettegő machines in Nagybörzsöny.

Csettegő are home-made vehicles used primarily for agricultural activities, transporting, towing, sawing, and they can be powered by a motorcycle, a lawnmower or even the engine of a small tractor. In the years of socialism, they were typically made by people living in the countryside who could not afford to buy or had no

access to the expensive factory-made machines. A wide variety of materials are also used for assembling the bodywork, such as parts from wrecked cars (Bálint, 2011). In many cases, the assembled devices are used quasi illegally on less frequented roads without any technical license. In an interview with András Pethő the artist said that he has chosen these vehicles as the theme of his work, because he believes these homemade vehicles show incredible creativity. According to him, the csettegő are a masterpiece of twentieth-century folk art. On the one hand, they demonstrate the ingenuity and creativity of the villagers, and on the other hand, the vehicles have a fantastic visual appearance (Pethő, 2003a, Pethő, 2003b).


*4.2.4 András Szalai*

Over several decades, architect – art historian András Szalai collected photographs of an urban DIY-aesthetic, of eclectic and ingenious urban solutions of the socialist times in Hungary. Residential house facades, business signs, monuments and amateur typography are all mixed together in his lectures and a book published in 2021. What makes his approach different is that his ironic accompanying commentary is predominantly making this phenomenon look embarrassing, awkward, and something to be shameful of and to laugh at.

*András Szalai, Kis magyar snassz és neociki (photo: János Marjai)*



*PAD, Everyday Shortcomings, 2021*

*4.2.5 PAD Projekt*

The Everyday Shortcomings project of PAD was an initiative that aimed to survey the daily life of marginalized, segregated people on the edge of a post-industrial town in Hungary, examining living conditions resulting from lack of public utilities (water, gas, sewage), harmful environmental factors, and the responses to them with the involvement of those living there. The PAD collective believed that the poor in Hungary were mostly portrayed in the mainstream media as inactive, resigned, apathetic people, but also that need makes people active and creative. In this situation, the assumption was that many individual and community solutions are created every day, ingeniously adapted to the circumstances (PAD, 2021).

As Judit Csatlós observed in her critique of the resulting exhibition on the pages of Balkon, the strongly action- and problem-oriented approach carries the risk that alternative knowledge acquisition routes and specific solution possibilities, which are slower and perhaps more difficult to formulate (such as cultural probes discussed in Chapter 2), are pushed into the background. As an example to bring the audience closer to the original experience, Csatlós mentions the Sociopoly theatre game, in which the participants, as residents of a slum, have to go through the playing fields of thirty days in order to survive the month. The players in the social game have

to choose from several options on each field (e.g. whether they accept the lucrative occasional black job, which excludes them from the low-paid long-term public work, or whether to take money from a loan shark to pay for the daughter's school trip). When players reason and consider various aspects according to their own beliefs and in-game interests, they are actually actively interpreting social and political phenomena (Csatlós, 2021).

Overall, in this chapter I examined how being isolated and having resources can spark ingenuity and resourcefulness at both the individual and community levels. In the initial section of this chapter, a thorough examination of secondary literature on isolated environments revealed how extreme circumstances can trigger unconventional adaptations, as constraints push people to think freely and their improvisation can go beyond existing conventions. The second segment of the chapter untangled how artistic projects document ingenuity as a potent force in the face of adversity. The examples from Cuba, Russia and Hungary exemplify how constraints can act as catalysts for novel solutions and in the process also inspire artistic archives. These collections serve a dual function, as they compile inspiring answers for survival, resilience and forms of resistance.

*René Magritte, Variante de la tristesse (Variation of sadness), 1957*

# 5 DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES AND THE RURAL

*"We tend to think of truths as like shiny pebbles: hard, unchangeable, clearly defined, collected in the mind as though it were a kind of rock garden. Truth is actually more like a real garden, an organic, holistic system where everything relates to everything else." (Julian Bagginni, 2017, A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World)*

## 5.1 The Critique of Documentary Practice

In a post-truth world, the concept of truth in the documentary mode is under constant scrutiny and transformation. Julian Bagginni's (2017) metaphor of truth as an organic garden aptly highlights how our understanding of truth has shifted from being rigid and fixed to becoming a complex interconnected system. This chapter delves into an examination of documentary practices, where uncertainty looms over every aspect of reception. However, this constant uncertainty, 'the perpetual doubt', which accompanies contemporary documentary reception, should not be seen as a deficiency, Hito Steyerl observes. Rather than being a 'shameful lack,' she argues, doubt constitutes the core quality of documentary today (Steyerl, 2007).

Building on this idea, Max Pinckers identifies potential within this uncertainty: "Maybe it is […] uncertainty that makes the documentary one of the most innovative forms of contemporary art today; creating new relationships between ethics, aesthetics, responsibility, fact and fiction, undermining power structures, economic conditions and political entanglement" (Pinckers, 2020). Steyerl and Pinckers invite us to navigate the occasionally contradictory landscape of documentary in an age characterized by narratives that challenge traditional notions of truth.

Contemporary documentary practice increasingly challenges established notions of representation and authenticity. This is largely due to the recognition that documentaries, like all forms of media, are constructed and influenced by the perspectives, biases, and intentions of their creators. The traditional assumption that documentary photography simply captures unfolding events has evolved, events are now often intentionally re-enacted and staged for the camera (e.g. Oppenheimer, Pinckers). This transformation reflects the changing nature of reality, blurring the line between the imagined and what is considered real. Today's documentary aesthetic often embraces playfulness, eclecticism, and rule-breaking, challenging the dominance of reality-based modernism prevalent since the 1920s. Contemporary practitioners, more aware of the medium's inherent constructedness, recognize that the acts of photographing and editing shape the audience's perception, so a focus on multiple perspectives, reflexivity and transparency allows for a more nuanced and honest exploration.

According to film theoretician András Bálint Kovács (1993), this shift reflects changes in ideology, technology and aesthetics that affect how we perceive and represent the world: "Ideologically, we could say that reality has become chaotic, or even disappeared, and that therefore films can only portray a utopian or apocalyptic world. Technically, we could say that in the age of digital imaging, there is no point in distinguishing between image and reality, the real pattern has disappeared behind the image, and films are therefore more a virtual reality. The aesthetic explanation, on the other hand, is that in the postmodern age, the boundaries between imagination and reality are blurred, all boundaries become permeable, the strict, rationalist interpretation of reality is no longer valid, and therefore play, eclecticism and rule-breaking in art take precedence over referential, reality-based modernism" (Kovács, 1993).

Kovács' insights considering the ideological, technical, aesthetic spheres, resonate with the ideas of Jean Baudrillard (1981) on simulacra, where representations become more real than the original, resulting in hyperreality. Stepping into the world of AI, the blurring of the real and the simulacrum, the creation of documentary-style content without an original reference in the real world threatens to further destabilize our perceptions.

How did we arrive here, how has the understanding of photographic truth and the documentary shifted over the decades, evolving from an objective representation of reality to a more subjective and critical perception? The following sections trace this transformation through the works of photographers, theorists, and movements that have shaped to the ongoing discourse on photography's role and responsibilities.

### *5.1.1 From the Gilded Age to the Space Age*

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, photographers Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Paul Strand used the medium as a tool for bringing about social reform. They used images to expose the realities of immigration and urban poverty in the new world, as well as widespread child labor, raising public awareness and advocating for change. During this period, photography was widely perceived as an objective medium capable of capturing the 'truth' of the world.

Meanwhile, in 1920s Europe, a new artistic movement emerged in Germany called 'Die Neue Sachlichkeit' (New Objectivity). Following the horrors of World War I, it was a reaction to expressionism and aimed for unsentimental realism, showing the realities of everyday life in an objective manner. While prominent members included painters like Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Max Beckmann, photographers such as August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch were also central figures. They focused on creating precise, detailed images of people, objects, and landscapes, reflecting a desire to catalogue and classify the modern world—until the National Socialists' rise to power in 1933 led to their work being condemned as 'degenerate art'.

*Albert Renger-Patzsch, Zeche Victoria Mathias in Essen, 1929*

On the more theoretical front, Walter Benjamin argued in his seminal 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' that photography's ability to reproduce images stripped away the 'aura' of original artworks and transformed the relationship between art and society, potentially democratizing access to art, yet allowing for potential misuse for political manipulation. Bertolt Brecht's book, *War Primer* (published in various versions in the 1940s and 50s) can be seen as an exploration of some of the ideas presented in Benjamin's essay, as it uses



mass-reproduced photographs of World War II and juxtaposing them with his own epigrams. In fact, already before his friend Benjamin published the aforementioned article, Brecht wrote: "The tremendous development of photojournalism has contributed practically nothing to the revelation of the truth about conditions in this world. On the contrary, photography, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, has become a terrible weapon against the truth. The vast amount of pictured material that is being disgorged daily by the press and that seems to have the character of truth serves in reality only to obscure the facts. The camera is just as capable of lying as the typewriter." (Brecht, 1931, as cited in Buckley, 2018)

In the United States, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project, led by photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks, promoted 'straight' photography that aimed to objectively document the lives of rural Americans during the Great Depression, between 1935 and 1944. However, this approach was criticized by Lincoln Kirstein, who argued in the afterword of *American Photographs* of Walker Evans that photography was not purely objective but rather reflected the photographers' personal biases, with an element of human judgment.

The postwar period in the mid-20th century saw the rise of a more subjective approach to documentary photography, as exemplified by the works of Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and Vivian Maier. These photographers embraced the idea that photography offers not an objective truth but rather a personal interpretation of the world. In this sense, to apply John Szarkowski's analogy written for a Museum of Modern Art show in 1967, documentary photography became a mirror reflecting the photographer's perspective rather than a window onto reality.

### *5.1.2 The Opposing Schools of Documentary Critique*

> *"Traditionally, ethical objections to specific documentary-style photographic projects are made by white academics and levied at white photographers whose photographs of marginalized individuals are deemed mean or exploitative." (Gregory Halpern, 2013)*

"The only 'objective' truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something - in this case, an automated camera - was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the imprinting of a trace, is up for grabs." (Allan Sekula, 1978: Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary - Notes on the Politics of Representation)

Artists and theorists like Martha Rosler, Susan Sontag, and Allan Sekula continued to critique the notion of photographic truth in the late 20th century. Rosler's 'House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home' (1967-72) series exposed the ideological biases in popular media representations of the Vietnam War by combining it with glossy images of domestic life, while Sontag's 'On Photography' (1977) and Sekula's 'Dismantling Modernism' (1978) essays questioned the ethics and politics of documentary photography.

These critiques highlighted photography's potential to manipulate and deceive, further eroding the concept of an objective photographic truth. They championed a poststructuralist critique that viewed photography as a medium unable to bring about significant political change. Instead, they saw it as a tool for simply evoking compassion, without transforming attitudes or actions. This perspective dismissed the idea that photographs could transcend boundaries through empathy. They argued that documentary images reflect the biases and agendas of the photographer rather than objective truth. Sontag claimed photographs alter and distort reality, arguing that: "The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist." (Sontag, 1977) Her contemporaries shared similar beliefs: Roland Barthes viewed photographic meaning as highly subjective and constructed. John Berger highlighted how images often serve power, and Allan Sekula exposed how documentary conventions conceal repressive ideologies.

Martha Rosler posited that: "Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful. Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble. Or who, like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go. War photography, slum photography, 'subculture' or cult photography, photography of the foreign poor, photography of 'deviance'". (Rosler, 1981) These postmodern critiques often cast documentary as a problematic representational practice absorbed with authority and control.

The Düsseldorf School, which emerged in the 1980s in West Germany from the photography classes of Bernd and Hilla Becher and included photographers like Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Candida Höfer, continued


*Martha Rosler, The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems, 1974/75*

the exploration of photography in new directions, avoiding overly subjective interpretations. Using a conceptual approach, these artists employed a cold, detached aesthetic to create large-scale, highly detailed images that often blurred the line between documentary and art, challenging traditional notions of photographic truth.

Contemporary thinkers like Ariella Azoulay, Susie Linfield and Judith Butler argue for reintegrating documentary photography into humanism, empathy and human rights. In our era marked by competing narratives and relativism, there is a need for deconstruction, reflection, and critique to better understand our complex world while nurturing deep emotional connections among individuals.

In her book 'The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence' (2010), Susie Linfield critically examined the postmodern stance and their attack on modernist photography. Grappling with the ethical and political implications of photographing human suffering, she argues that photography has the power to both reveal and obscure the truth, as it can cater to voyeuristic tendencies.

As Linfield succinctly observed: "Starting in the mid-1970s, the postmodern and poststructuralist children of Sontag, Berger, and Barthes transformed their predecessors' skepticism about the photograph into outright venom; in an influential essay written in 1981, for instance, Allan Sekula decried photography as "primitive, infantile, aggressive." Indeed, for the postmoderns, a relentless hostility to modernist photography—and to any belief in the photographer's authenticity, creativity, or unique subjectivity—was an ethical stance, though I see it as more of a pathological one. At the same time, the postmoderns were attracted to photography precisely because they saw the medium—with its infinite capacity for mechanical reproduction—as the worm in the modernist apple." (Linfield, 2010)

At the same time, she acknowledged that the refusal of understanding photographs as objective and neutral was a significant intellectual accomplishment of the postmodern thinkers. This debate was inspired by Susan Sontag's late essay, 'Regarding the Pain of Others' (2003), which questioned the capacity of photography to evoke empathy and promote social change. This essay clearly showed how her views became more nuanced since the 1970s in viewing the medium's power and limitations.

Ariella Azoulay expanded the discourse on photographic truth by emphasizing the importance of context and the viewer's role in interpreting images. Azoulay's concept of the 'Civil Contract of Photography' (2008) argues that photographs should be understood as part of a broader political and social framework, with the viewer bearing a responsibility to engage critically with the image and its implications, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the same year, Okwui Enwezor curated the exhibition titled *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International Center of Photography in New York City. In the exhibition and the accompanying book, Enwezor provides a comprehensive examination of the 'archival turn' in contemporary art and the various strategies employed by artists, such as appropriation, creation of fictive archives, and rearrangement or recontextualization of existing archives. These strategies serve to destabilize the power of the archive and question its supposed neutrality. In his interpretation, the archive emerges as a space of both remembering and forgetting, documentation and interpretation.

The emergence of a more 'speculative documentary' genre, which combines elements of documentary and fiction, further challenges traditional notions of photographic truth. By incorporating fictional or imagined elements, artists such as Bieke Depoorter, Cristina de Middel and Max Pinckers seek to examine alternative realities, question dominant narratives, and provoke critical reflection on the nature of truth itself.

In conclusion, the understanding of photographic truth and the documentary has significantly evolved over the decades, shifting from an initial belief in photography's objective representation of reality to a more nuanced recognition of its subjective, constructed, and context-dependent nature. As the discourse continues to develop, it is essential for photographers, theorists, and viewers alike to remain critical and engaged with the complex relationship between photography, truth, and the world it seeks to represent. Adopting a reflexive stance is especially crucial in rural settings, as it allows us to be aware of the potential for both exploitation and empowerment.



### *5.1.3 De/Post/Anti-Coloniality and Unlearning Practices*

> *"In research, [decolonization] means using approaches that capture the local context and prioritize the needs, experiences, and beliefs of the research participants." (Kamenopoulou, 2020)*

> *"And this kind of art can create a new image of the world that is not divided to the 'same' and the 'other' anymore, when the other is already part of the norm, which is what post-colonial condition is about. The post-colonial is about space, because exoticism is about being far away. But in reality everything is there, there is no far away anymore." (Ekaterina Dyogot, as cited in ARTMargins, 2003)*

> *"[Decolonizing] is about unearthing, shifting the glance, de-centering, giving agency, being vulnerable, making mistakes, ideation, thinking about our communities, thinking about mom/dad/grandparents/your neighbor, our chosen families, acknowledging not knowing and making the periphery the center." (Tejada, 2023)*

> *"[E]ven the special nature of the West–East axis has lost its raison d'être. The "privileged" and undoubtedly attention-generating situation resulting from being the "less developed" counterparty to the Western self, as a kind of projection field, does not bother anyone anymore, because marginality—as a position of discourse—has multiplied as well. In other words, all sorts of marginal positions compete for attention on the art scene thus enlarged." (András, 2011/2018)*


*Exhibition and online discussion, curated by Ieva Astahovska*

Building on the critical examination of documentary practices outlined above, the lens of de/post/anti-coloniality can be a useful tool in understanding representation and power dynamics within the Eastern European context. The region has a complex history shaped by external dominations from external powers, from the Ottoman and Habsburg empires to Soviet influence during the Cold War and present day Western market-driven forces (Zabel 1998/2009, Groys, 2003/2018, Țichindeleanu, 2011/2018, Schöllhammer, 2016/2018, Tlostanova, 2018). The depiction of the rural could be tainted by problematic power dynamics. Researchers and artists, often coming from more privileged, urban and educational backgrounds, risk imposing external frameworks, a concern heightened by critiques like Táíwò's (2022) regarding the potential for 'decolonisation' itself to become an externally applied academic concept, leading to misrepresentations, stereotypes and oversimplification of rural realities. In Eastern Europe, the rural has often been depicted as the 'other' - backward, traditional, and in need of modernization. This internal colonialism subjugated rural communities and devalued their ways of life.

On this account, decolonial and unlearning practices are particularly important and relevant today. Even though this international discourse has taken a slight delay to enter into Eastern European self-understanding, by engaging in these modes of thinking, scholars and artists can work towards more inclusive and just representations that recognizes the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the region, and that seeks to challenge and overcome the legacies of the past.

Decolonial movements in Eastern Europe often focus on creating new avenues for marginalized communities to gain cultural, political and economic agency. The need to articulate new perspectives on interpreting our world both on a global and a local level is a central theme. In addition, they concentrate on reclaiming and celebrating local histories, cultures, and traditions. The continuous influence of Western-dominated global institutions and processes, which carry over colonial legacies, is also critically examined and challenged. Notable early initiatives signaling this shift include the ambitious *Monument to Transformation 1989 - 2009* exhibition at the City Art Gallery in Prague and the formation of the L'Internationale museum network in Ljubljana (Hislop, 2018).

The exhibition and resulting book transcended the typical East-West axis through novel, contemplative means and situated the Czech Republic alongside other nations that had endured comparable political and social disruptions, including not only European countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain, but also South Korea, Indonesia and Argentina. The initiative was part of the long-term *Former West* research project (2008 - 2016) and aimed to facilitate a dialogue between postcolonial thought and the post-communist condition (Bishop, 2018).

Similarly, one of the main goals of L'Internationale, initiated by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, is to provide a platform for the critique of the economic and institutional system, to denationalize cultural heritage by instigating local-to-local and transnational cultural narratives, rejecting the homogenizing impact of globalism and proposing a utopian approach. L'Internationale is currently comprised of nine museums, a free online library and a journal, all working together to achieve these objectives.

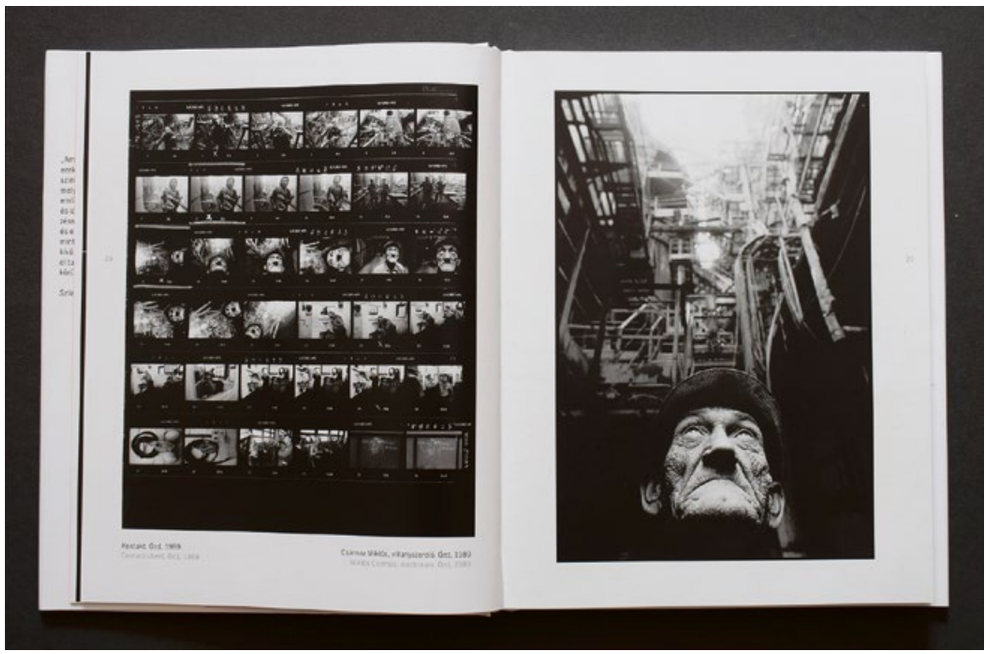
While initiatives like L'Internationale aim to challenge the homogenizing impact of globalism and propose alternative narratives, the motivations and interests behind decoloniality vary widely in different geopolitical regions. In the US and Western economies, it is the swift commodification and institutionalization, in the East-Central European region, the oppressive power, control and arbitrariness of the state that radicalizes the art-making practices and is the driving force behind this movement. Regarding research, the decolonization theory suggests that investigations should be carried out using the local native language, drawing upon regional knowledge systems, societal values and ideologies. In addition, it is noted that local participants should be given prominent roles in the research process (Smith, 1999, Oduaran & Chukwudeh, 2021).

*Ilona Németh, Eastern Sugar, Slovak National Gallery and Sternberg Press, 2021*

Ilona Németh's Eastern Sugar project (2017 – 21) is a powerful exploration of the themes of colonialism and decolonialism. The project presents a critical view of the history and legacy of colonialism in Eastern Europe by examining the impact of sugar production on the region. Through a series of installations, Németh highlights the effects that accompanied the spread of sugar production on local populations and the subsequent, post-socialist privatization of the industry in the region.

A key premise of the Eastern Sugar project is the view that colonialism is not only an episode in history, but rather an enduring phenomenon that continues to exert a profound influence the world we live in today. By drawing attention to the long-lasting effects of closing Eastern factories to protect Western interests, Németh encourages viewers to consider the ways in which power structures continue to impact society. A defining theme in the project is the tension between the global and the local, the struggle between multinational corporations and local communities, resulting in the marginalization of local cultures in the face of globalized capitalism.

The Eastern Sugar project can be seen as a powerful critique of the narrative of progress and development. By exposing the darker side of sugar production and its impact on local communities, Németh makes us think about what is actually positive and beneficial in an Eastern context and to question the underlying assumptions of the neocolonial narrative.



*Imre Benkő, AGÉL-Mű / STEEL-Art. ÓZD, 1986-2016*



Another important art project preceding Eastern Sugar is Imre Benkő's thirty-year-long photographic essay on the steel manufacturing industry in Hungary. Between 1986 and 2016, Benkő travelled every year to Ózd to document the intricate relationship between the industrial past and the dark present. The steel industry of the town has a long and storied history, dating back to the 19th century, when the town began its rapid transformation into a center of metal production. At its peak during socialism, the Ózd Steelworks employed thousands of workers and played a crucial role in Hungary's economic development. However, following the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc and shifts in the global economy, the once-vibrant industry faced a period of decline. In a similar fashion to what happened to the sugar factories, the plant was acquired by a Western corporation in 1997.

Both of these projects served as an inspiration in the sense that they are critically examining socio-economic trends in the region and attempt to give voice to the voiceless, creating visibility and increasing inclusivity for the affected communities. Both avoid the trap of the decolonial project turning into nationalist propaganda, which has been observed in the political arena in the early 2010s with slogans such as "We won't become a colony!", used at pro-government, anti-EU protests in Hungary.

As Gagyi (2015) observed, the international capitalist system tends to incorporate local elites and a nationalist rhetoric to maintain existing hierarchies of power, resulting in a "coloniality of power" even after formal decolonization. This can be seen in the rise of nationalist and populist political parties in Central and Eastern Europe since the 2000s that, while using anti-colonial rhetoric, ultimately reinforced neoliberal economic policies and racial/ethnic hierarchies (Kiossev, 2002).

By drawing inspiration from projects like Eastern Sugar and Benkő's work, and by remaining attentive to the pecularities of the Eastern European post-colonial condition, this research aims to create a nuanced representation of rural life in Hungary, moving beyond stereotypes and embracing the complexities.

## 5.2 The Documentary of the Rural in Eastern Europe

*Ó! Ó! Ó!*
*Mesterségünk a fotó!*

*Í! Í! Í!*
*Házhoz jövünk, hogyha hí!*
*Forgatjuk a kamerát,*
*lekapjuk a kamarát,*
*háznépét és szamarát -*
*Megörökítjük a*
*Mát!*

*Ő! Ő! Ő!*
*A fotóé a jövő!*

*E! E! E!*
*Our mastery is photography!*

*P! P! P!*
*We'll come to you, just make a plea!*
*With camera rolling,*
*We'll capture all you've got,*
*From people to livestock,*
*Preserving the present*
*lot.*

*E! E! E!*
*Our destiny lies in photography!*

*(Margit Szécsi, Photographer's Song I., 1977, translated by Daniel Halasz)*

*Jindřich Štreit, Village People, 1965-1990*

What is to be considered Eastern European documentary photography? This chapter defines the scope by considering photography made by practitioners born or residing long-term in the Eastern European region, focusing on and interpreting local contexts and situations. Consequently, while Western artists' work on these localities (e.g. Alec Soth, Bieke Depoorter, Rob Hornstra, Paolo Pellegrin, Jasper Bastian, Donald Weber, Camilla de Maffei, Oliver Udy, etc.) is acknowledged for their potential interest for comparative analysis, they fall outside this investigation.



*A general map of Eastern Europe (Wędrowiec, 2014)*

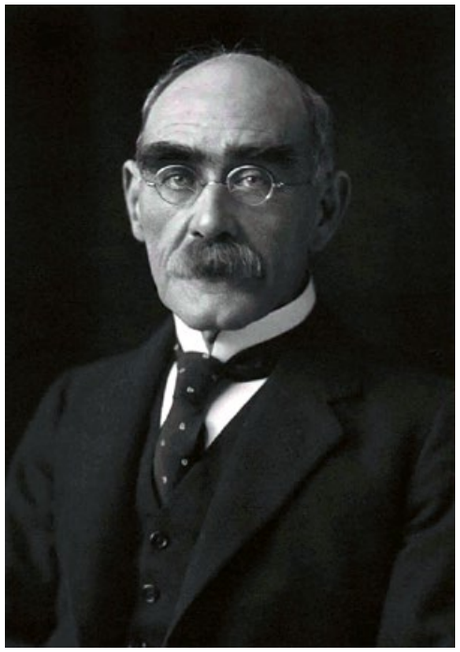
Eastern Europe here refers to the countries east of the former "Iron Curtain", i.e. the countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc: Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, the Baltic States, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Belarus, Ukraine, and the part of Russia west of the Urals. While acknowledging the complex and contested nature of this label, this definition helps focus the research on contemporary photographic representations emerging from shared, yet diverse post-socialist trajectories.

In order to have a comprehensive perception of the contemporary photographic landscape regarding the representation of the village, let us briefly look at how social representation of rural life first appeared in the history of photography, and what characteristics it had in Hungarian moving images. An understanding of the earlier stages of social documentary practices provides insights and makes contemporary trends and processes more clear. In what follows (and in the research in general), I am concerned with a branch of photography that does not focus on poverty and vulnerability, creating a spectacle of life of the lower strata of society, but with a humanist, sensitive, socially reflexive visual genre capable of being both a research tool for social scientists and a medium with artistic content.

The invention of the photographic medium coincided with radical transformations in European societies, through industrialization, migration to the cities and thus a shift in the rural way of life. The French government was one of the first to realize this rapid change in the visual surroundings and commissioned five photographers in 1851 to document and visually preserve the decaying landmarks in the so-called

Missions Héliographiques. While the British did not have such a centralized project early on, many photographers (including the inventor of the positive-negative process, Henry Fox Talbot) chose old farms, village churches, among other romantic subjects.

The National Photographic Record Association established in 1897 in England was one of the first photographic surveys with the aim of recording the rapidly changing social and physical landscape. During its thirteen years of operation, almost 6000 prints were collected and donated to the British Museum (now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum).



*Rudyard Kipling, 1924, Walter Stoneman*

*Young farmers, 1914, August Sander*

Furthermore, there were two photographic projects of a massive scale, solely focused on people. The National Photographic Record, a collaboration by Walter Stoneman and the National Portrait Gallery (and not to be confused with the above mentioned association) in England, and the *People of the 20th Century* by August Sander in Germany. The latter was started in 1911 and wanted to show a cross-section of society in seven sections from 'the farmers' to 'the last people', however, thirty-thousand glass negatives were destroyed in a fire in 1946. In contrast, the



project of Stoneman started in 1917 and only focused on the prominent members of British society, of which 200 were invited to sit for him over a 41 year period, resulting in around 8000 portraits.

Perhaps the most renowned large-scale, comprehensive, government-funded, socio-politically inspired photography project appeared in the United States. Following the 1929 Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration's Farm Security Administration (FSA) employed eleven photographers between 1935 and 1943. Their main task was to educate the urban population about the effects of the economic collapse on rural America and culminated in an unparalleled archive of over 250,000 photographs (now housed in the Library of Congress), later showcased by MoMA in the 1962 exhibition titled *The Bitter Years* curated by Edward Steichen.

*Installation views, "The Bitter Years", Photo: Rolf Petersen*

This attention towards the countryside, however, was not unique to photography. At the end of the 19th century, Grieg in Norway and Sibelius in Finland incorporated folk music into their compositions. In rural England, Cecil Sharp collected over 2300 folk songs and dances in his field recordings between 1904 – 1914.

Hungary witnessed a strong folk ('népi') movement in the 1930s, with authors, composers and artists devoting efforts towards exposing and preserving the simple, modest life of the rural population. Sociography became popular in literature, with the participation of novelists such as Gyula Illyés, Áron Tamási and later András Sütő, while in music Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály enjoyed wide-spread acclaim. At the same time, the 'bright winds' ('fényes szelek') movement of village researchers and folk writers attempted to link village and city culture in folk high schools. Filmmakers were also inspired by the phenomenon of the rural, and countless feature films dealt with village life and the consequences of ruralization (e.g. Fábri - *Körhinta* - 1955, Zolnay - *…hogy szaladnak a fák!* - 1966, Sára - *Vízkereszt* - 1967, Gaál - *Holt vidék* - 1971, Zolnay - *Fotográfia* - 1973, Gyarmathy - *Együttélés* - 1983, Tarr - *Sátántangó* - 1994).

*Pál Zolnay (dir.), Elemér Ragályi (dop), Fotográfia, 1973*

One notable example is the movie titled *Fotográfia* by Pál Zolnay, which delves into the complexities of rural life by exploring the tension between tradition and modernity, as villagers grapple with the outside world encroaching on their way of life. The arrival of the photographer team (the protagonists), with their modern equipment and promises of immortalized memories, disrupts the tranquility of the village, raising questions about identity, self-perception, and the value of preserving the past.

*Péter Korniss, 1992*

In the 1950s, during the Kádár era, the lack of jobs forced masses of people to commute regularly and to use the infamous black trains. Photographer Péter Korniss spent nine years making *A vendégmunkás* (The Guest Worker, completed 1988), documenting the commute of a man from the remote Szabolcs region to the capital. Starting in the 1960s, Korniss began to work on the disappearing traditional cultures, dedicating decades to the communities of Transylvania and Moldavia, returning repeatedly to the villages. In Kádár-era Hungary, these works were a specialty, and influenced later generations working on rural themes. The photo series of Imre Benkő from Szatmár-Bereg and those by younger photojournalists Simon Móricz (Sárvidék, Árnyéksáv) and Ákos Stiller (Farkasvölgy), are discussed later in the chapter.

Dénes Nagy (dir.), Tamás Dobos (dop), *Another Hungary*, 2013

Also worth mentioning are the documentary movies of the Béla Balázs Stúdió (*Cséplő Gyuri* - 1978, *Tündérsziget* - 1993) and the more recent *Másik Magyarország – Töredékek egy falu életéből* (2013) (tr. 'Another Hungary – Fragments from the life of a village'). The latter film offers a contemporary reflection by portraying the artist Imre Bukta, whose national recognition as a painter remains largely unknown to his village neighbors. The film begins by showing the exhibition opening of the artist in Budapest, so the contrast with the rest of the sequences, the everyday realities of village life, is especially stark. Bukta's art itself is drawing on folk culture and magical irrationality, and in this way can be seen as an antidote to both socialist realism and Western discourses.



Béla Tarr (dir.), Gábor Medvigy (dop), *Sátántangó*, 1994

Influential Hungarian filmmakers Miklós Jancsó and Béla Tarr shared a common interest in depicting rural life and the challenges of living in this changing environment. While both are known for their long takes, their visions are markedly different: Jancsó's films are characterized by symbolism and are plot-driven, Tarr chooses meditative, slow, obervational, open-ended reflection on the bleak life of his characters, people in the rural periphery crippled and dispossessed by state socialism.

Miklós Jancsó (dir.), Tamás Somló (dop), *Cantata*, 1963

This chapter would be incomplete without mentioning two additional Hungarian films that are significant in this context: Hukkle (2002) by György Pálfi and A sárga busz (The Yellow Bus) (2003) by Szabolcs Pálfi. Both movies were produced nearly two decades ago and they both use an experimental, unconventional cinematic style to reflect on the countryside:.

Hukkle exhibits several characteristics that align with documentary filmmaking: it is based on the true story of a group of women in the eastern part of Hungary, who poisoned hundreds of people during the interwar period. The film has an observational style, depicting the everyday life and routines of a small village, while not having a a dramatic arc, a traditional narrative structure or plot. Pálfi used non-professional actors and there are almost no dialogues throughout the 78 minutes.

*György Pálfi (dir.), Gergely Poharnok (dop), Hukkle, 2002*



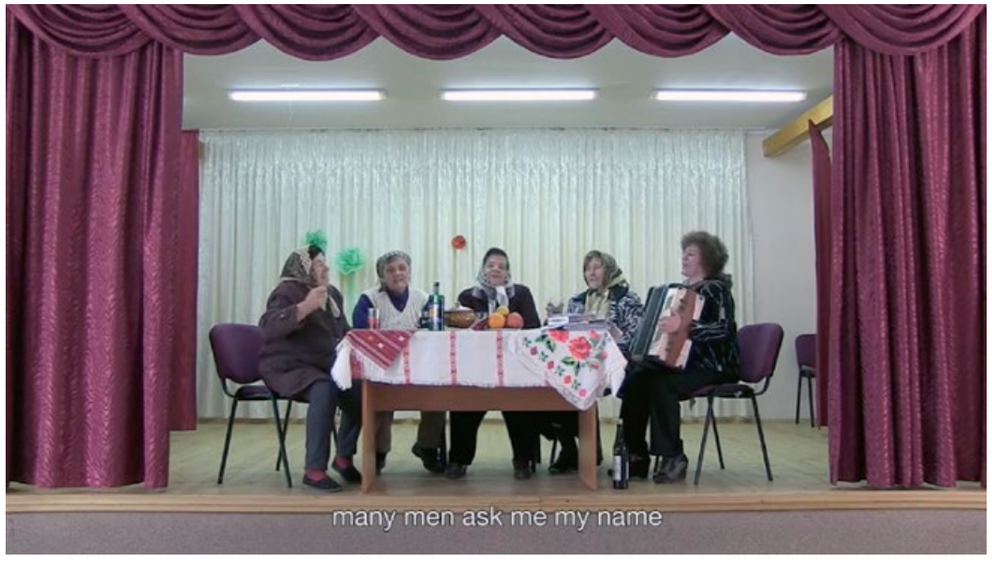
*Szabolcs Pálfi (dir.), The Yellow Bus, 2003*

The Yellow Bus (2003) was the graduation film of Szabolcs Pálfi. The short, animated film is based on the monologues of village residents recorded by the director himself between 1999 - 2001. In the recordings people discuss various aspects of life in a Hungarian village, including their everyday experiences, how the younger generation moves to the cities and the story of the symbolic 'phantom' bus. The latter is correlated to reality, in that the public, yellow buses are often devoid of passengers, as there are neither reasons nor means to go anywhere.

## 5.3 Visual Representation of the Village in Eastern Europe

Surveying contemporary photographic projects from Eastern Europe, there seems to be an increasing interest in the rural over the past two decades. The following pages provide an overview of the key themes and approaches. Examples span the region, covering topics such as female experiences, socio-cultural transformations, intergenerational connections, and more poetic, subjective narratives. The projects reveal the complex intermingling of tradition and modernity, resilience and struggle, particularly amidst ongoing economic, political, and social change in rural communities.

### *5.3.1 Women's Perspectives*




*Lucia Nimcova, Bajka / Tell Tale, 2016*

The work of photographer/filmmaker Lucia Nimcova takes us to personal spheres through her interdisciplinary approach. Unwinding the female experience in Eastern Europe and her native Rusyn minority are central to many of her projects. In *Bajka / Tell Tale* (2016) Nimcova and the sound artist Sholto Doble present us with a folk opera / documentary film with a collection of songs and stories about honest, often humorous, tragic and brutal domestic abuse, alcoholism, and marriage life that has so far been hidden in the traditional ethnographic field recordings. Similarly, the more recent *Dole* (2021) is a collection of photographs, videos and sound recordings gathered in the remote borderlands of Slovakia, Ukraine, Poland, and Romania about the contemporary subjective experiences of a previously repressed, currently unrepresented minority.

*Ágnes Sós (dir.), Stream of Love, 2003*

An exciting, analogous approach is employed by Hungarian documentary film director Ágnes Sós, who collected stories on the sexuality and love life of the ageing local residents of Transylvanian villages in *Szerelempatak / Stream of Love* (2003). What makes the movie unique is honesty of the eighty plus women and men sharing their views and experiences on love and sexuality. Through revealing taboos, what also gets unveiled is the patriarchal system, the suppression of women and the betrayal of the couples, yet the documentary manages to remain funny, surprising and heart-warming till the end.


*Alicja Rogalska – Katalin Erdődi, News Medley, 2020*

*News Medley* is a collaboration between Polish visual artist Alicja Rogalska, Hungarian curator Katalin Erdődi and the Women's choir of Kartal. Drawing inspiration from traditional folk singing, the project dwells into the experiences of rural women across different generations, addressing changes in political systems, lifestyle transformations, and daily challenges with humor and insightful commentary from the choir members.

*Ioana Cîrlig, Zâne, 2015 - ongoing*

Ioana Cîrlig investigates the lives of women deeply rooted in nature and traditions in remote Romanian villages in her ongoing project *Zâne* (Fairies, since 2015). Portraying the struggles of women in the remote, sparsely populated Danube Delta and the Transylvanian mountains, Cîrlig went to various parts of Romania where she captured the daily routines, rituals as well as challenges faced by these women while they do hard manual labor, rear livestock and take care of their families.



Her work also illustrates that while an increased migration to Western Europe and modernization is affecting their way of life, the core traditional values remain. Her work is a subtle presentation of a timeless, yet contemporary female identity, transcending cultural and geographical borders. Her sitters seem to invite the viewer to enter into their world: through their perspective, to appreciate the beauty and dignity in the simplicity of rural life.

### *5.3.2 Social Changes*

*Petruț Călinescu, Pride and Concrete, 2010 - 2015*

Observing the effects of Western labor migration is Petruț Călinescu, the co-founder of the Romanian Center for Documentary Photography, in the long-term project *Pride and Concrete* (2010 - 2015). His reflection on disruptive transformation in the rural communities of his native land following decades of labor migration to France, Spain and the UK is centered on rural home ownership. Today, one in four Romanians live abroad and the workers coming mainly from rural areas regularly send money home to build enormous, outsized and often uninhabited new houses as a competitive display of their financial success. His observation is in sharp contrast with the Hungarian rural reality, where a smaller percentage of people moved abroad to work and even those who did, do not tend to transfer money home (Hann, 2015).

*Adam and Dyba Lach, How to Rejuvenate an Eagle, 2019*

One of the rare contemporary series in black & white that I came across in my research is *How to Rejuvenate an Eagle* (2019) by the Polish couple, Adam and Dyba Lach. In this project the photographer and his documentarist partner traveled 16,000 kilometers over three years throughout the biggest Eastern European nation, which has often endured trauma and political oppression in its history. They examine contemporary Poland through interviews and photos, revealing diverse perspectives beyond the government's narrow definition of Polishness. Photos alternate between displaying extreme views and everyday moments, challenging readers to look beyond stereotypes.

*Anatoliy Babiychuk, Horaivka, 2009 - 2018*



Anatoliy Babiychuk is a Ukrainian-born artist and photographer, with a Western art education background from Vienna and London, who lives and works in Austria at the moment. Recently, he undertook the creation of *Horaivka*, a work that captures the essence of life within a Ukraine's rural village. Horaivka is situated within the Volyn region of Ukraine, currently having a population numbering approximately 520 individuals. The settlement offers a variety of community services, including a nursery, a post office, a school, and two grocery stores. It is located far away from the major cities and regions of Ukraine, such as Lviv, Kyiv, Odessa and Donetsk. Babiychuk visited Horaivka several times between 2009 and 2018, and captured the everyday scenes and portraits of the villagers with his camera. Babiychuk actively gathers local narratives and recollections; the villagers contribute their perspectives on history, politics, religion and culture. Babiychuk's Horaivka project inspects the identity and diversity of Ukraine, as well as the challenges that the villagers face today, close to Moldova. It is also a personal journey for Babiychuk, who was born in a similar village in Ukraine and moved to Austria when he was 23 years old.

*Siarhiej Leskiec, ARGO, 2017*

Siarhiej Leskiec is a creator from Belarues, whose work on the rural spans over two decades, capturing the essence of life in his homeland. The documentary *ARGO* project serves as a showcase of the evolution of the countryside. The landscape, culture and identity in Leskiec's work goes beyond being purely descriptive or nostalgic: he takes an analytical and critical approach, and delves into the connection between people and nature, tradition and modernity. Through his lens he portrays inhabitants as dignified individuals and highlights their vulnerability

and marginalization, capturing the pecularities and diversity of the environment. While documenting the threats posed by increasing urbanization, industrialization and globalization, he records not only traces of history and mythology but signs of decay and disappearance. "In Belarus, agro-town life is very politicized. These village's collective farms are presented by the state media as the greatest achievement of President Lukashenka, as they have helped preserve rural communities. State TV depicts agro-towns as 'heaven on earth' – one of the finest legacies of the Soviet Union. However, they have come under fire from independent media outlets, who believe that they have killed the traditional village structure.[…] In these villages, the state gives you everything you need. You stay at home and work on the collective farms. You get a good house, working internet, hot water and asphalted roads. You end up staying for 10-20 years because, if you leave, you lose everything.[…] These photos are a visual and anthropological study of Belarusian identity. I'm interested in the way our society is a transition from the collective (rural life) to the private (city life)" (Leskiec, 2017).

*Michał Adamski, Close to the Ground Far From Heaven (2017), I Dyed My Hair Again (2020)*



Michał Adamski traveled across Polish provinces working on his project *Close to the Ground Far From Heaven* (2017) and a desolate Lithuanian village for *I Dyed My Hair Again* (2020). His work documents life in "places in which most of us are usually not interested [… I was] visiting places, which seemed to be abandoned and empty because everyone left for work: to nearby fields, to a larger town or to work abroad." Adamski confesses: "I don't show how the people live in such a place, don't show real sadness and joy or problems of everyday life. These are just images that reinforce the vision of such a place. They deceive. They draw you into a world we do not know. They are like mermaids calling a sailor at sea: come to us and stay. What will happen if I stay?"

*Oleksandr Rupeta, Everything by Us is a Holiday, 2018*

### *5.3.3 Poetic Visions*

Oleksandr Rupeta is a Ukrainian photographer who is predominantly occupied with the themes of self-discovery, truth, and poetry. *Everything by Us is a Holiday* was inspired by the stories of legendary Hutsul rafters in the Ukrainian Carpathians. In this project he documented the way raftsmen carried salt down the Tisza river from the Solotvyno salt mines to the Yasinia village. He captures both the landscapes and resilient individuals, people who call this region home as they confront nature's challenges, while vigorously preserving their cherished customs and heritage.

Iveta Vaivode Gabalina, a Latvian photographer embarked on a project titled *Somewhere, on a Disappearing Path*, where she returned to her family's ancestral village in Pilcene to capture a series of photographs. Unlike a documentary or family album Gabalina's work offers a personal and poetic interpretation of the place, that is faced with the imminent risk of extinction due to migration and modernization.

Through her photography Gabalina establishes a connection with her past while weaving together fiction and reality, history and mythology (in a way similar to Laskiec). Gabalina draws inspiration from her family's stories and the narratives shared by the villagers she encounters along the way. She immerses herself in their experiences using them as a guide on her journey. This personal approach challenges the understanding that photography is always a true representation of facts and instead embraces its ambiguity and potential for sparking imagination. Gabalina's photographs evoke emotions of nostalgia, loss and belonging while also blurring the lines between collective identity, and past and present realities.

*Iveta Vaivode Gabalina, Somewhere on a Disappearing Path, 2014*



*Daria Tuminas, Ivan and the Moon, 2015*

Russian-born, Amsterdam-based Daria Tuminas is a freelance curator, academic researcher, photographer, whose first photography project (*Ivan and the Moon*) revolves around the lives of two teenage brothers, Ivan and Andrey, nicknamed Moon. The enchanting aspect of this project lies in Tuminas poetic exploration of brotherhood, mythology and the profound connection, between individuals and their surroundings.

Infused with mystique, this work introduces elements from Slavic folklore - using them to suggest an underlying depth, beyond the realism within everyday scenes. As she noted: "My goal is to try to photograph the 'unphotographable' side of the matter and challenge some formal criteria of 'classical' documentary" (Tuminas, 2011). The photographs in "Ivan and the Moon" are rich with narrative, often feeling as if they are stills from an unwritten film or snapshots of a dream. Through her language Tuminas captures moments of playfulness, relaxation and the everyday rituals that shape village life, that reflects the bond between her subjects and their homeland—a bond that is both nurturing and unbreakable.

*Kristina Rozhkova, Dacha, 2021*

Kristina Rozhkova's work is revolving around the theme of identity and her experience of rural life in Russia. Her documentary series titled *Dacha* is about the culture of family summer houses in the countryside, called dachas. She spent most of her childhood and adolescence years, similar to many urban kids, in this environment and she captures the nostalgic atmosphere using harsh light, and vivid colors. This contrasty light reflects how her own, younger generation experiences the changes that have occurred in the rural landscape and society over the years. "Dacha" is an intimate visual photo diary that shows the complexity of rural life in Russia from the perspective of the younger generation.

The array of contemporary photographic approaches highlighted here paint a kaleidoscopic picture of the Eastern European rural village in a state of transition. While exhibiting stylistic and thematic diversity, seen together, these bodies of work underscore both the rich cultural heritage as well as pressing challenges facing small villages across the region. Some photographers take an anthropological perspective to traditions and rituals that have endured through generations. Others document the gradual spread of globalization and migration unsettling community ties. A further group focus inward on personal identity and memory rooted in the rural landscape. Many photographers show the strength and humanity of ordinary village residents facing adversity. Despite their individual perspectives, these visual representations amplify the voices and presence of marginalized communities, challenging notions of what constitutes the center and periphery, as well as the past and the future.



## 5.4 Visual Representation of the Village in Hungary

> *"The "exotic other" […] in photography points to the sentiment of an "us" that can be photographed, and a "them" that cannot be photographed. The decision to not photograph could, following this line of thought, be seen to unintentionally uphold difference as a tool of separation and reinforce the notion of otherness. […] The documentary impulse to go somewhere other than inwards is necessarily one which implies risks; the risk of violating those who are photographed but also the risk of being accused (of exploiting, intruding, exoticizing, misrepresenting)." (Hamilton, 2021)*

The village plays a complex role in Hungarian society that parallels and contrasts with the previous Eastern European examples. Over the past five years, an increasing number of projects have revealed the harsh economic marginalization and poverty in rural regions, while others have grappled with the erosion of once-stable social structures after the closure of the community farms. Many photographic projects take a purely documentary approach, but the incorporation of personal experience or family history from the countryside is also increasingly common, offering more intimate perspectives. Familiarity with the rural subject matter allows for more nuanced representations that avoid tropes of exoticization or voyeurism that outsider projects risk falling into.

*Simon Móricz-Sabján, Permanently Overcast, 2022*

Simon Móricz-Sabján was awarded the 2022 Capa Grand Prize for his series of photographs entitled *Permanently Overcast*. The work depicts the changes in the region of Hungary known as the Great Plain (Alföld), where extreme climate, economic hardship and social issues have a lasting impact on the residents. Through his lens Móricz Sabján portrays the realities of villagers struggling with poverty and

isolation. The title *Overcast* alludes to both the gloomy weather conditions and the somber mood of the locals as they face an uncertain future. Using natural light and a medium-format camera, Móricz Sabján conveys the community's dignity, resilience and glimmers of hope.

*Ákos Stiller, The Farmlands, 2015*

Similarly, Ákos Stiller has been documenting the lives and landscapes of rural communities in Hungary since 2010 in a series that captures the struggling yet hopeful inhabitants of the countryside. Stiller's images portray the everyday life of the remaining elderly and the Roma populations, exploring themes of identity, belonging and nostalgia in his work. *The Farmlands*, completed in 2015, is in part a reflection of Stiller's personal connection to the rural environment, having grown up in a small village in Hungary.

*Szabolcs Barakonyi, Tell Your Mommy, Bring Some Money!, 2005*



*Péter Pettendi Szabó, Background – Have you ever been to Budapest?, 2006*

In contrast to the somber tones of the previous projects, Szabolcs Barakonyi's photo series *Tell Your Mommy, Bring Some Money!* takes a more humorous approach, transporting us back to 2005 with a wink of humor and a keen eye for detail. Following the routes of the Family Frost frozen food delivery trucks, the images paint a colorful, vivid picture of life in Hungarian villages, full of cultural nuances and political undertones. With a natural ease, Barakonyi captures the raw essence and charm of rural post-communist Hungary. The title itself is a conversation starter – it speaks to the economic trials and the importance of family - two threads that are intricately woven throughout his photographs. As one meanders through his collection, one can feel as though living and breathing the daily routines with them, and experiencing firsthand the fascinating blend of time-honored traditions with the glimmers of the new world.

id. Boros József (1935)
ifj. Boros József (1952)

Besence

Focusing on the disparity between rural and urban life, Péter Pettendi Szabó's photo and video work *Background – Have you ever been to Budapest?* highlights the exclusion of rural residents from the opportunities offered by the capital city. Reminiscent of the traveling village photographers of the past, he visited impoverished areas of the Alföld (Great Plains) and Tiszántúl (east of the Tisza River) regions. His simple question to everyone was: "Have you ever been to Budapest?" As a visual backdrop he chose a tableau of the Chain Bridge, representing the modern, developed capital. Most of the people he interviewed had never had the opportunity to travel to the country's historical, political, and cultural center. The project highlights the desperation and hopelessness of the inhabitants of the small villages, symbolizing their exclusion from the opportunities of 21st century Hungary, as Judit H Sas notes in the book's introduction.

Zsófia Sivák's series *Our Prices are in Forints* offers a glimpse into a another aspect of rural life in Eastern Europe: that of the dwindling world of country inns. Often the last bastions of community life after the closure of grocery stores, schools and churches, these once-thriving hubs, echoing with the stories of generations past, now face a sad reality.

Sivák's lens reveals a haunting tableau: silent decline of the pubs, their walls adorned with faded memories and faces marked by hardship - all confessing a longing for a changed past. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a similar decline in the number of rural pubs was observed in the UK in the late 1990s, to the extent that the Prince of Wales himself launched a campaign called: "The Hub is the Pub" to save rural pubs from imminent closure. This was based on the argument that these establishments formed the core of rural community life, a deep, multi-purpose social arena.

*Zsófia Sivák, Our Prices are in Forints, 2020*



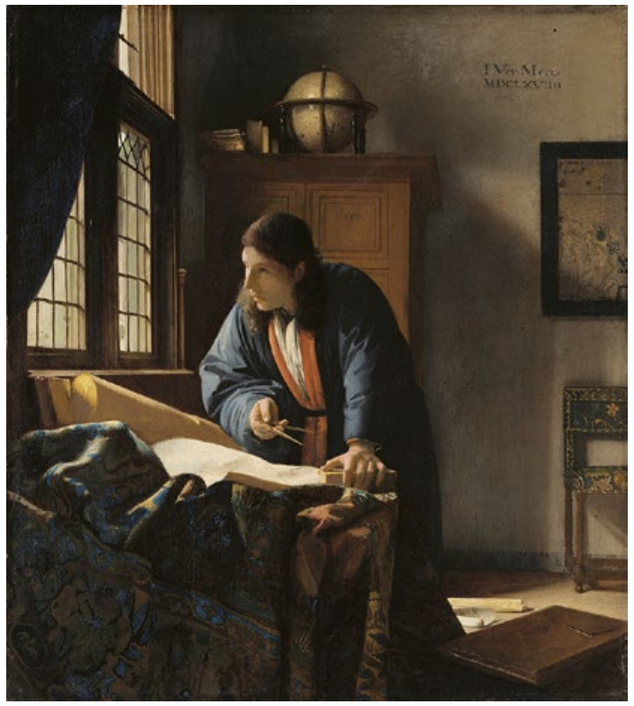
*János R. Szabó, Stories Along the Öreg-Túr River, 2021*

János R. Szabó's series titled *Tales Along the Öreg-Túr River* beautifully captures the essence of his childhood home. Having grown up on the banks of the Öreg-Túr river, Szabó's strong connection to the place and its people is evident in every image. These stories reveal the beauty of the land and the natural spirit of its inhabitants. Driven by a desire to understand how his home has evolved over time, Szabó's series skillfully combines his memories with perspectives gained from years spent away, and with an honest approach to his subjects, he documents the present without evoking nostalgia. He offers us a reflection on the inexorable passage of time and an authentic portrayal of life in the often-ignored countryside. The result is a world that feels distant yet familiar, akin to returning home after a long journey.

*Hunor Tóth, Narratives of Uncertainty, 2022*

Hunor Tóth is also a photography graduate of MOME, who interrogates his own rural roots in his projects *I've been here before but they don't know me*, and *Between the Church and the Abyss* (which is more recently referred to as *Narratives of Uncertainty*). Like Szabó, he moved to a big city for his studies, which gave him a new perspective on his insular community and the intergenerational dynamics at play. He is particularly interested in youth and how the knowledge, and values passed on by the older generations are changing village life in a time of disintegrating communities and deep uncertainty about the future.

The aforementioned contemporary Hungarian photographers employ a variety of styles and approaches to document the evolving rural landscape. Although they differ in emphasis, their work collectively illustrates the cultural richness and economic isolation that are often characteristic of contemporary rural existence. While the majority of these photographers refrain from employing stereotypical and exoticized portrayals, their work nevertheless gives rise to a number of ethical considerations in relation to the act of representation. Who has the right to represent marginalized rural communities and in what ways? How can photographers strike a balance between celebrating cultural traditions and refusing to romanticize often harsh economic realities? Wrestling with such questions is important because it tests our ability to recognize nuanced truths and helps to construct a multilayered image of the contemporary Hungarian countryside.



*Johannes Vermeer, The Geographer, 1669*

# 6 METHODOLOGIES OF THE RESEARCH

*"We bend down to admire a small flower. Renouncing the role of the aristocratic architect standing on a pedestal, we too bend down to reach small tasks, and by immersing in them, we slowly discover their hidden values and the beauties of small things" (Cságoly, 2013).*

During my art studies and in the years that followed, I developed an artistic methodology as a sequence of trial-and-error experiments, testing and stretching my boundaries and comfort zones. It was not an exact, overly conscious process, rather one predominantly based on intuition: understanding the environment, empathy with the participants, and improvisation to adapt to the unexpected. Since I also studied sociology, economics and development studies after high school, and have a combined bachelor's and master's degree in Scandinavian Studies, there has always been a strong emphasis on social and political issues in my artistic work, grounded in a conceptual framework.

My working method in the initial phase of the doctoral project was informed by these previous experiences, and since considerable amount of my childhood was spent in a Hungarian village, I already had some knowledge about rural life, about customs and traditions. On the other hand, I knew that villages are complex social phenomena, so their research can be the most fruitful and the knowledge gained can be maximized by using a wide range of methodologies.

In the initial phase, planning and preparation were of paramount importance, allowing me to delve deeper into the sociological, anthropological literature and historical statistical data on the area (census data, data collections of the KSH - Hungarian Central Statistical Office, and databases of the TEIR - National Spatial Development and Planning Information System) on the one hand, and previous artistic projects on the other.

After creating a map of the villages with less than 100 inhabitants based on the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, I traveled over 18,000 kilometers by train, bus, car and on foot for five years, visiting more than 80 of the tiniest villages scattered all over Hungary.

Arriving at a place, I would wander around like a rural flâneur, walking through the village, exploring its structure and physical layout, assessing where the center is located, whether there are any distinct parts of the settlement, whether there are any signs of special interest, approaching and talking to each person I encountered. The act of immersing myself in the environment, of "aimlessly" wandering around and engaging in conversation with individuals. Instead of posing any preconceived questions directly, it is often more useful to let the stories and anecdotes told gradually unfold the answers (Tomay, 2019). Sensing my genuine interest, I was often invited into homes and after explaining my undertaking, I asked if I could take photographs. This preliminary approach was constantly revised, based on the awareness about various academic procedures that I learned during the theoretical research.

Photography plays a crucial role in this research, both as a method of research and data collection and as a mode of representation. Beyond merely documenting visible elements, photographs can capture and convey "experienced knowledge" that evades textual description (Harper, 2002). The camera becomes a note-taking instrument for recording intuitive perceptions and embodied understandings in the research environment. Slow, observational photography enables me to tune into the sights, sounds, smells - the felt senses of being present. This grounds the visual data in lived, experiential knowledge.

By photographing ongoing activities, the environmental contexts they take place in, and candid portraits, I could access participants' realities in an unobtrusive way. The resulting images communicate latent meanings, and make the hidden social frameworks operating in the setting visible (Sontag, 1977). Photographs thus provide a pathway into understanding everyday, resourceful practices in a holistic, context-sensitive manner.

Rather than following a structured protocol, intuitive perception guides my photographic process. Roaming through the environment with an open, curious flâneur-like gaze, visually attuned to moments of interest, the unplanned encounters and uncontrived decisions shaped the images. This improvisational approach aligns with the "probing" nature of the research, gathering data through an adaptive, reactive methodology (Gaver et al., 1999).

By integrating intuitive, embodied knowledge with interviews and images, the combined approach complements gaps in understanding. The images add texture and detail while harnessing sensory ways of knowing. Photography in this way is a useful method for accessing the contextually situated logic of resourcefulness in marginalized settings.

## 6.1 Data Collection Methods

Based on the insights gathered from the literature review, a diverse range of methods was used in an attempt to expand my previous artistic practice and to overcome a situation frequently encountered in research on the rural condition: studies often reflect an external viewpoint, employing only quantitative statistical methods. Even if the methodology is qualitative, the examination in most cases is contrived to a sole case study. During the distinct phases of the research, specific methods had a more pronounced focus. As detailed in Chapter 7, the combined use of the methods, the inclusion of the perspective of the inhabitants, and the attention to the phenomenological factors of resourcefulness give this research a novel dimension.

Initially, while creating the *You Were Never Really Here* series, academic literature review, participant observation, field notes, mixed-type, semi-structured interviews and typological photography were the main tools of the study. My work methods have undergone significant changes during the years of the research. Cultural probes, a reflexive documentary approach and interactive storytelling methods defined the second phase.

The emphasis has shifted towards aesthetic, ethical, and social issues, and a continuous pursuit for answers. The latest segment of the visual research reflects my exploration of the inherent nature of my work, my identity as a photographer, and my attempts to establish communication and collaboration with the individuals. As I identify myself as both an insider and an outsider, I see myself striving to bridge the gap with the participants. Ultimately, it is the collective stories of both the photographer and the subjects that shape the final work.

### *6.1.1 Slow Action Research*

My artistic practice is rooted in applying an intuitive, empathetic stance. This approach defines my practice and is a manifestation of a more conscious, meditative, slow research position. One of the most significant current discussions on the slow approach to action research has been by the Irish researcher Máirín Glenn, who discussed the negative impact of a fast-paced lifestyle on research and education, including the demand for constant production, and the lack of time for critical reflection (Glenn, 2021). She outlines how a slow approach can be practically implemented as a sustainable alternative and how this includes prioritizing critical reflection and quality scholarship over constant production and reporting. Even though it stems from a yearning for slow deliberation in the academic field, this approach is highly relevant in studies of the tiniest villages, as their residents share a corresponding perception of time. The steps leading to a slower research as traced by Glenn in detail. It is argued, that in traditional forms of research, the identity of the researcher is rarely held under the microscope and in a similar manner, intuition is seldom mentioned as a tool in research manuals. Yet, these factors can substantially affect the atmosphere and the interpretation of it even before a single word is said in a human interaction.

### *6.1.2 Mixed-Type Interviews*

In the first phase of the research, I initiated a conversation with every resident in the villages I visited. There was a fixed set of talking points and questions that I intended to touch upon in the discussions, relating to the general conditions in the village, the recent changes and current economic, social, work situation, and personal stories. As such, the talks had a structure, yet the open-endedness of the inquiry allowed for a responsive and empathetic, flexible approach (Babbie, 2016).

Combining various interview types, allowed to start with more factual questions and organically shift to a phenomenological, open-ended conversation to the subjective experiences, thoughts and ideas of the respondents. As this approach combines elements of both structured and unstructured interviews, it allowed me to maintain a level of consistency across interviews while still providing the flexibility to explore unanticipated topics and themes that may emerge during the conversation.

Before conducting the field research, as suggested by Józsa (2014), it can be worthwhile to analyze the online presence of a settlement (homepage and social media groups), to identify local opinion leaders and civil organizations. Unfortunately, most of the villages in this research do not have their own websites, but their Wikipedia page often reveals useful information about the local history, as well as who the current mayor is and who the previous leaders were. The mayor, as the representative of the commune, can be one of the most important resources and point of contact in the study of a village.

### *6.1.3 Cultural Probes, Arts-Based Engagement Ethnography*

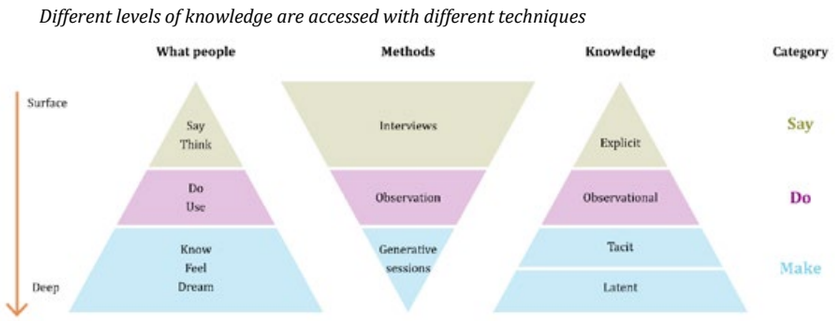



*Figure 10: Based on Figure 1 of (Woertink, 2021) after (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005)*

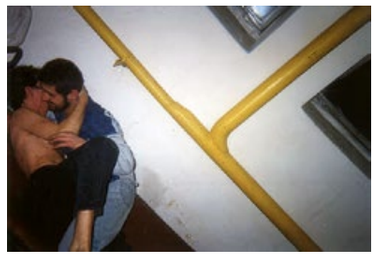
Each research tool has its advantages and disadvantages, so it is recommended to combine both verbal and visual, objective and subjective methods within a process. To get a more latent insight about the ideas, perceptions, views, and experiences of rural life, to go beyond the surface level of the interviews and observation, generative techniques can be used (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005). The desire to do so started in the second phase of the research and was inspired by the doctorate work of Rosanne van Klaveren from 2018. By using imaginative and engaging techniques, the research can traverse the linguistic limitations that are typical of the majority of conventional social science approaches.

The tool to reach this deeper level were cultural probes in the current study: thought-provoking tasks that are assigned to participants in order to prompt inspiring reactions. The term first appeared in January 1999, in an article published by researchers from the Royal College of Art, London and the Domus Academy, Milan. The probes were inspired by the French situationists and the astronomical and surgical probes and in practice were packages containing maps, postcards, disposable cameras and other stimulating material, which "were designed to provoke inspirational responses from elderly people in diverse communities" (Gaver et al., 1999).

Their approach reminded me of one of the first photographic exhibitions in my life that had lasting memory on me, still a high school student. It was the presentation of the project of Miklos Erhardt and Dominic Hislop at the Budapest Gallery in the spring of 1998, also using disposable cameras, working together with a community. Their work called Saját szemmel/Inside Out showed around 100 color photographs



taken by 40 homeless people, who were given simple disposable cameras to portray their own life. As Dominic Hislop mentions in an accompanying text, some of the inspiration came from Martha Rosler's thoughts registered in a book accompanying her exhibition project If You Lived Here: "Especially in the case of homelessness, the viewers and the people pictured are never the same people. The images merely reproduce the situation of 'us looking at them'" (Rosler, 1991). This observation will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6, discussing the critique of the documentary photographic practice and in Chapter 7, talking about the evolution of the research itself.

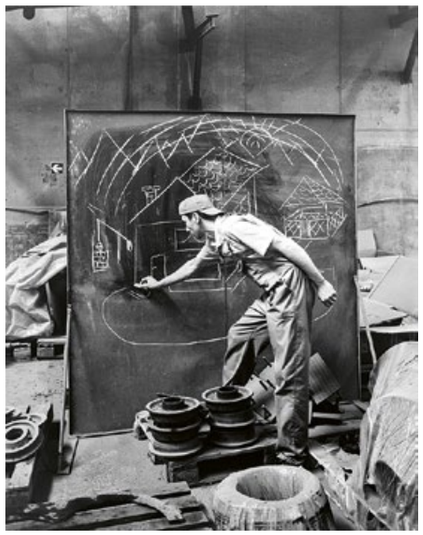


*Erhardt – Hislop: Saját szemmel/Inside Out (Photos: Zoltán Vass, Ferenczé Vargha)*

The Saját szemmel/Inside Out project was analyzed by Erhardt in his own doctoral dissertation, where he noted that it put him in a position where he had to fundamentally reassess and redefine his ideas and intentions regarding art. According to him, the starting point of the project was an essentially ethical questioning, which sharply raised the question of the artistic representability of the Other, and the obligation to do so. In this case it is those who have no voice, no cultural representation, and are only objects in the discourse. Therefore, the project represents a radical denial of the artistic image and of artistic autonomy for him. Similar works, which initiate a kind of critical situation or attempt to create a new one, go into unknown and uncontrollable territory, and combining so many artistic, ethical, sociological and pedagogical dilemmas, entail countless dangers that can only be reduced, not avoided. Presumably, these are part of the essence of such projects in question (Erhardt, 2009).

Nevertheless, turning back to Gaver and his colleagues' study, we have to note they highlighted that the goal was not to arrive at objective conclusions about the situation of elders in the various localities, on the contrary, to gain a more impressionistic portrayal of their cultural preferences, beliefs and desires. Gaver and his companions wanted to avoid the utilization of formal questionnaires or meetings that appear official, as that might have positioned them as medical practitioners who diagnose user issues and recommend technological solutions (Gaver et al., 1999). Naturally, this flattening of the power relations, of the perceived hierarchical status of the

researchers helped foster more natural, informal, and ergo informative responses. Lastly, the probes in their understanding are not intended to be analyzed, but rather be used to inform as a complement to the personal findings, readings and various data sources. In recent years, probes have been used in research as small creative tasks, encouraging participants to engage in imaginative thinking.



*Arion Gábor Kudász, Human, 2014-2016*

The photography based project and doctoral dissertation of Arion Gábor Kudász shares some aspects of the cultural probing method, though providing no evidence or awareness of this coincidence. Kudász involves people by asking them to reflect on certain personal dreams and desires through drawing by white chalk on makeshift blackboards of a factory (Kudász, 2016). Although not a central part of his doctoral work, this gesture adds a new layer of understanding, highlighting the benefit of such research tools in an artistic context. In contrast to participatory design/art projects, where the initiator completely hands over the reins to the participants, here there is a more granular balance between the two.

As the method is increasingly and more widely applied in research, Thoring et al. (2013) have reviewed the most common probe items included in the probing sets and found they can be grouped around five main functions: documentary (e.g. disposable camera, local map), visionary (e.g. collage, postcard, sketchbook), inspirational (word cloud), motivational (chocolate), practical (pens), and instructive (user's manual). Based on their literature review and their own research, the researchers conclude that cultural probes provide more personal results than other qualitative methods thanks to their open-ended constructions and the possibility to complete them in private.

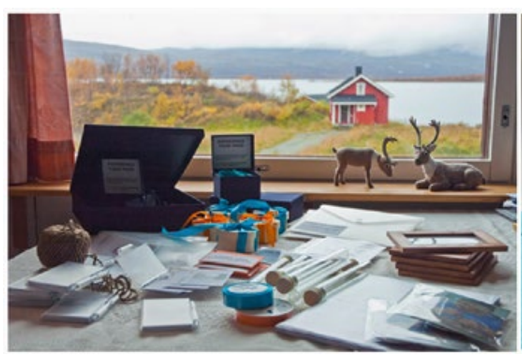



*Bieke Deporteer, As it May Be, 2011 - 2017*

Bieke Deporteer's As it May Be (2011 – 2017) project put forward a unique vision of contemporary Egyptian society, using a blend of documentary photography and collaborative storytelling, where she invited local residents to write directly on her photographs, adding their own voices and perspectives to the images. This approach allows the viewer to engage with the photographs on a deeper level, as the texts provide a personal and non-Western insight into their lives, dreams, and struggles. As it May Be experiments with the boundaries of how we perceive and interpret images, transforming them into a dynamic and more interactive form.

*Rosanne van Klaveren, Toward Togetherness, Food Related, 2018*

The texts on the images in As it May Be can be interpreted as a form of cultural probing, as they offer a window into the thoughts, and experiences of the community, revealing aspects of their lives that may not be immediately apparent from the photographs alone. These written annotations foster a sense of empathy and understanding between the viewer and the subjects. By incorporating these voices, Deporteer's project attempts to transcend the limitations of the visual medium and encourages a multi-layered interpretation. The texts provide more context, and thus challenge us to question the preconceptions and assumptions about Egyptian society.



Rosanne van Klaveren (2018) interrogates the use of probes and probology in her complex PhD-in-practice work titled Toward Togetherness: Probing as a Decolonizing Approach for Artistic Inquiry, noting that this technique helps to examine the relations between participants ('them') and researcher/artist ('us'), agreeing with what Erhardt also referred to in his diagnosis. Although the us and them dichotomy is less pronounced in my research, as a Hungarian native speaker with one side of my family being village dwellers, and as personally spending extended periods growing up there in my childhood. Naturally, I was still considered somewhat of an outsider, as everyone is, according to most villagers, who is not born in the same locations where they were.

In her two key PhD art projects: Food Related and Niva to Nenets, van Klaveren uses probes as a means to counter the traditional, colonizing aspects of research. Through the exploration of this methodology, she wants to establish a more inclusive and collaborative approach to artistic inquiry, one that actively engages with diverse voices and perspectives. By utilizing probes as a research tool, she aims to dismantle the hierarchy often present in the field, opening up a space for more equitable and dynamic exchanges between artists, researchers, and their subjects. She argues doing so enables the establishment of more horizontal relationships, a sense of togetherness and mutual understanding. Further, she underlines the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness, and emphasizes that researchers must persistently scrutinize their own assumptions and biases (van Klaveren, 2018).

The use of cultural probes in research has been coined arts-based engagement ethnography by Goopy and Kassan (2019), who highlighted how this methodology can be key in engaging peripheral communities with limited competencies by asking participants to articulate their ideas and practical knowledge through imaginative and playful techniques (i.e. cameras, journals, maps, drawings, etc.) that go beyond the traditional social science approaches (i.e. questionnaires, interviews, observation, etc.). The conventional, structured interviews restrict participants from sharing the full story, while surveys often fail to uncover unexpressed, hidden or unexpected information. Probing, on the other hand, transforms research from focusing on communities to research that aims to engage with and involve communities respectfully and ethically.



### *6.1.4 Observational Photography and Speculative Documentary*

During writing the dissertation, I have discovered the concept of the radical observational documentary of Kazuhiro Soda, and after deepening my understanding about it, I would say that it relates closely to my own practice. Soda is a Japanese documentary filmmaker, also known for his ten commandments, whose observational style is a compelling model for exploring the lives of people in villages. His approach emphasizes the importance of capturing the mundane moments of everyday life, giving voice to the marginalized, and fostering empathy between the viewer and the subjects. One of the key strengths of Soda's approach is his emphasis on the role of the artist as a participant-observer. Rather than remaining detached, Soda actively engages with his subjects, building relationships and rapport.

*Kazuhiro Soda, Inland Sea, 2018*

"When I say 'observation' in this context, I do not mean maintaining a distance from my subjects or being a neutral third party. On the contrary, it is about looking and listening attentively. Furthermore, there are two aspects to observation. Firstly, I as a filmmaker closely observe the reality in front of me and make films according to my observations and discoveries, not based on my assumptions or preconceptions I had before I shot the film. Secondly, I encourage viewers to observe the film actively with their own eyes and minds." (Soda, 2018)

It is important to emphasize that the goal is not to seek the (ultimate) truth, but rather to uncover the narrative of the truth as it is experienced, interpreted and presented by the individual. Employing methods rooted in fieldwork facilitates a better understanding and empathy towards the perspectives of the people involved.

Nevertheless, it is vital to avoid the error of accepting this perspective as the sole reality (Tomay, 2019). Not being a neutral third party, a fly on the wall, is an attitude also employed by the School of Speculative Documentary, a conceptual initiative established by Belgian artists in 2019. As expressed in their invitation/ manifesto, their goal was to promote a practice based on conjecture rather than knowledge, believing in a poetic, layered approach, where a multitude of realisms are intertwined.

*6.1.5 Walking as an Artistic Practice*

Last but not least, it is important to untangle the central role of walking in the context of this research. When walking is approached as a deliberate artistic method, it can contribute to the documentation and understanding of the rural Hungarian communities.

The idea of walking as an artistic and intellectual practice has a history spanning centuries and various cultures, tracing back to the Greek philosphers. Aristotle and his followers were known as Peripatetics (derived from the word 'peripatos', or 'to walk about') and they would walk while being engaged in teaching and philosophical discourse. In 17th century Japan, the poet Matsuo Basho walked around 2400 kilometers on an epic journey while writing his poetic diary and haikus culminating in the influential work 'The Narrow Road to the Deep North' (Matsuo, 1974).

In 19th century Europe, the figure of the flâneur emerged inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840), was popularized by Charles Baudelaire and later theorized by Walter Benjamin. According to him, the flâneur was a wanderer of the city, a detached observer of urban life (Benjamin, 1999). The flâneur's practice of walking and keen observation offers a good method for the study of rural Hungarian communities and was also used in my Borderland project.

The avantgarde movements of the early 20th century further positioned walking as an artistic practice. Dadaists organized an excursion in 1921 to a banal urban location, where the act of walking was the art itself (Careri, 2017). Some of the participants would later found the Surrealist movement, and led by figures such as André Breton and Louis Aragon experimented automatic writing, attempting to tap into the subconscious through walking (Coverley, 2012).



*Francis Alÿs, The Green Line, Jerusalem, Israel, 2004; 17:41 min*

The Situationist International formed in 1957 (by Letterists and other groups) introduced the concept of the dérive, an intentional technique of exploring and understanding the landscape (Nicholson, 2008). Guy Debord defined dérive as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" (Debord, 1958). Francesco Careri (2017) argues in his work 'Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice' that through the act of walking, artists can read and write the space simultaneously, creating a dynamic interaction between the observer and the observed.

More contemporary practices that involve walking include the Stalker Lab in Rome and the Sodh Yatra in India. The latter is a roughly 250 km walk organized twice a year (and already in its 51st iteration in 2024), "with a firm belief that the hardship and challenges of natural surroundings are prime motivators of creativity and innovations" (Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions [SRISTI], n.d.). Walking to discover innovative practices at the grassroots, the participants' aim is reaching remote villages and sharing knowledge from different parts of India, talking to villagers about local examples of ingenuity in farming, biodiversity and local ingredients.


*41st Shodhyatra - Andaman & Nicobar Islands (South India)*

The phenomenological aspects of walking as an artistic practice are explored by Appels (2011), who draws connections between walking and self-moving in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Appels argues that walking engages the body and allows for an embodied understanding of space and place.

This practice of being guided by the embodied knowledge, the psycho-geographical contours of the environment, offers a useful methodology for exploring rural Hungarian communities. It shows how walking can be both a means of observation and a creative act in itself. This concept can provide a multisensory approach, reveal signs that might be overlooked through other methods of observation, and help comprehend the daily lived experiences of the communities.

This mode can potentially lead to the consideration of sensory ethnography in new studies, as a related approach that emphasizes the role of the senses in understanding cultural and social phenomena. Sensory ethnography, as developed by Sarah Pink (2009), aims to incorporate a full range of sensory experiences (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) into the research process. By walking through the villages with a heightened sensory awareness, artist researchers could observe nuances that other methods might miss. Combined with walking, this approach has the potential to reveal further layers of meaning.



## 6.2 Data Processing and Analysis Methods

> *"So the potential is that practice-based research might singularize knowledge rather than be neatly placed within its structures. That materials, associations, narratives, methodologies would pursue one another in unconventional modes, invite each other to dance" (Rogoff, 2010).*

The fieldwork and data gathering processes immersed me in the villages, however, it is during the processing and analysis stage that I could find time for reflection, which I value as a critical synthesis phase. The thousands of photographs taken during fieldwork over the years of the research served as material for exhibitions, artist books and an experimental, interactive game. In addition, I have also made ambient sound recordings and used them in a video work, intended to be used at an exhibition environment, introducing an auditory dimension to the visual experience.

### *6.2.1 Archiving and Editing*

The archiving and editing of the images were done through the cataloging tools of Adobe Lightroom Classic, which allowed me to filter photographs based on the time they were taken, the camera and lenses used, the exposure settings, and the labels and ratings that I gave them during the review process. There are a number of sub-catalogs that were created with various considerations in mind and for various purposes, be it for classifying the archive according to the depicted themes or for a specific exhibition setting.

Although incredibly useful for handling a large number of pictures, once the selection was narrowed down to around 200 images for the masterwork, I printed test images on a basic office laserjet in postcard size, to be able to lay the photos out in a grid on the floor and on tables, to help seeing them all at once, and bring about new associations and revelations, which were conducive in sequencing the work for the photobook and the doctorate exhibition installation.

*6.2.2 Interactive Text-Based Game*

During the corona lockdown period, when it was not possible to visit the villages, I decided to enroll in an online, non-profit coding school, which has led the research into an experiment, whereby I developed the concept and the working prototype of an interactive, text-based computer game, playable in any browser. One of the inspirations behind the game was Sociopoly created by Michael Jessup in 2001, and the Hungarian participatory theater adaptation Szociopoly by László Bass in 2010. Both are game-based simulations that raise awareness about social inequality and the challenges of poverty. My idea behind creating an online game was twofold: to let a younger generation experience the conditions of the studied rural environments in an immersive way and to let an international audience wander around a Hungarian village and interact with the inhabitants in English, in a non-scripted way, by employing generative intelligence tools.

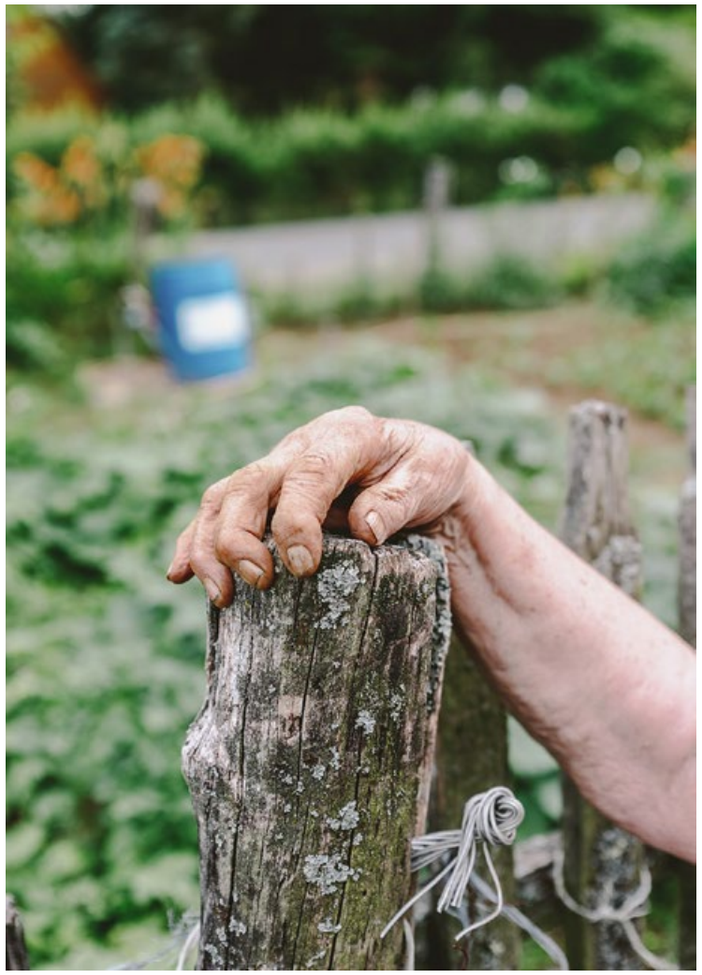

*Figure 11: Screenshot from The Village Story text-based adventure game*

*6.2.3 Ambient Sound and Video Installation*

In order to create a multisensory experience for visitors of an exhibition, I recorded ambient sounds with a portable field recorder during the last phase of the research. The captured audio material includes a variety of everyday activities, spontaneous calls by domestic animals, subtle ambient layers of wind, distant chatter, and the ever-present humming and buzzing of the natural environment. This soundscape was planned to be used on its own in an exhibition setting, nevertheless I also created a version where it is accompanied by video footage showing corresponding imagery.

*Dániel Haldász, from the series Fáu, 2018–2025*

# 7 ART PROJECTS OF THE RESEARCH



*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

*"I've always experienced the documentary process as a hybrid one, where various approaches can come together in different forms and from multiple perspectives in response to reality's multi-dimensionality. Where the creation of an image can shift fluently from a performative or theatrical act into a sculptural intervention, contextualized by found footage, embedded into a socially constructed narrative, ultimately brought together in the form of a book, film or exhibition installation. Above all, a space in which images are conscious of their own deceptive nature and can openly embrace its limitations, critically questioning itself, doubting and speculating over our mediated relationship to reality when attempting to (somewhat clumsily) represent it through images and narrative." Max Pinckers, Speculative Documentary Photography, 2021*

*"I'm not saying it is fiction, but it has that element of being more somehow than the real – more beautiful, more ugly, more complicated and contradictory." Gregory Halpern, 2016*

After situating the artistic research within its theoretical and methodological context in the preceding chapters, examining artistic methodologies, the literature on the presence of resourcefulness in peripheral situations, the typologies of the smallest villages in Hungary, the critique of the documentary mode, and the survey of practitioners working on the rural in the Eastern European region, this chapter shifts to a more personal tone. Here, I will write about the three projects that form the visual output of the research and that were realized during the doctoral years from these perspectives. The research methods and methodologies discussed in Chapter 6 and the theoretical perspectives laid down in Chapters 2-5, which engaged with existing literature and which were written continuously during the research process, organically influenced the direction of my practice. Taken together, these are what informed the research and the artistic projects. The creation of these works involved integration of several methodologies, and experimentation across media.

Compared to my previous photographic work, I would argue that these new projects can be seen both as a continuation and a departure. Continuation in the sense that my previous work has also been concerned with the relationship and interconnections between contemporary social and cultural phenomena and historical memory, in particular by putting marginalized groups and ideas into new perspectives. *Camp 165 Watten, Family, Preparation for the Persecution of Art, 14 Shades of Void, The Machine, For God* and *My Country, Zora* are dealing with the study of time, family, the rule of law, wheelchair users, refugees or those who are otherwise disadvantaged. However, it is also somewhat of a departure, as while these new works also have a documentary

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

aesthetic, they are more pure and do not have the same conceptual preference for irony, self-deprecation, humor and unexpected, unusual situations where I often inserted myself physically into the work. Rather, they opt for a more subtle approach, corresponding to the environment they are made in, and the unexpectedness and mystery are the result of framing and sequencing.

## 7.1 You Were Never Really Here (2018–2022)

On a calm, damp summer night in 2020, I woke up to someone calling my name: "Daniel, Daniel! Are you there? Open the door!" I was only in my underwear, but sweat was forming on my forehead, as I reached to check the time on my phone. I woke up in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room. What was happening, was this a bad dream? In fact, I was in one of the tiniest villages in Hungary and was about to let in Mr. M., who had a pack of beers with him, and soon shared his fear with me: after having a fight at home, his family had threatened to call the police, and he was afraid he might hurt someone. Being hot-tempered, he stabbed a boxer at the age of 19 and spent 8 years of his life in prison as a result. And that was only his first time behind the bars. So how did I end up in this village, why was I listening to his story?

As I tried to trace my steps, I realized that one of the potentially first sparks came in August 2010, when I was invited to take part in a photography workshop in Russia. With students of the Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography, and the collaboration of the 'New Songs of the Ancient Land' folklore music project of the Udmurt State University in Izhvesk, we visited several villages in Udmurtia, Mary El, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and the Permsky region, each of us working on individual projects and organizing an exhibition in one of the villages and later other venues in Russia. During the time there, I created two series: *Family* and *Russia*, the former being a more conceptual and the latter a more observational work. 'Family' is an ironic reflection on the belief that Hungarians came from the Ural region, where the ethnic Udmurts live to this day, and like a prodigal son, I return to the ancient land, trying to find my supposed relatives. "Depending on the setting, Halasz becomes a father, brother, uncle or son, temporarily older or younger. A wry take on questions of nationality and ideology becomes also an enquiry into the dynamics of family and the traditions of portraiture." (Fedorova, 2015)

A second spark happened in December 2017, when I was asked by the curator Katalin Erdődi to take photographs for a rural project by Antje Schiffers, a member of the Myvillages collective. The project was part of the *Common Affairs* exhibition at the

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

Ludwig Museum Budapest and involved three people (a goose farmer, a watermelon producer and a winemaker), who participated in one-week collaborations, creating short films about their micro-realities in exchange for a painting of their farm.

A year later, in December 2018, during a difficult period in my personal life, I decided to seek new challenges instead of running away from problems, and to challenge myself by turning the camera inward, to understand where I grew up as a child, where I came from, and to examine my own backyard. This led me to list and map the smallest villages in the country, which I researched over the following years as a kind of therapeutic, autoethnographic journey. At this point, it was not clear yet what the outcome of this initiative might be, and for the first few months I deliberately left such considerations fluid. Rather than limiting the scope of the search for specific signs, I employed artistic research methods, immersing myself in relevant academic literature, while simultaneously engaging with the rural environment, using documentary photography as my primary tool for representation.

Over the following three years, I travelled more than 14,000 kilometers, visiting over 70 of the smallest villages scattered throughout Hungary, settlements with fewer than 100 inhabitants. My interest in these aspects of life became an urge to move my eyes into the Hungarian periphery, using the camera as a microscope, documenting people, the built environment, objects and landscapes. In order to experience being in the periphery, I chose to travel to the locations by every means possible: walking on foot through the fields and forests from neighboring villages, taking the train, or riding the one and only bus that transports people every day. After the first month I decided to buy a 20-year-old car to be able to work more on this project.

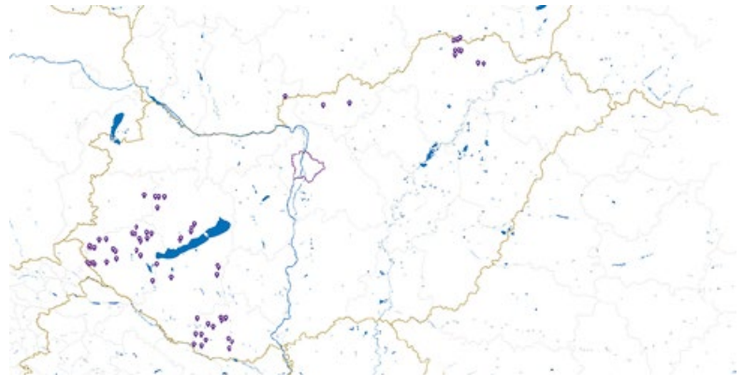
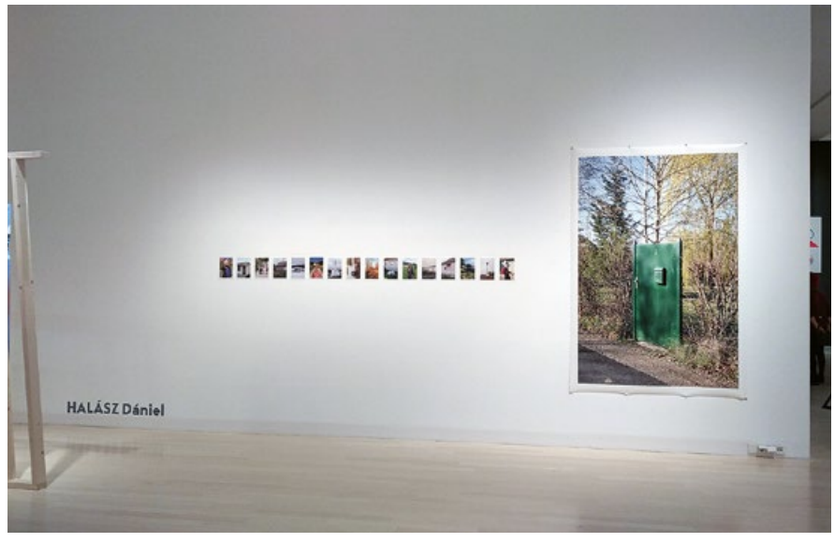


*Figure 12: Villages with under 100 inhabitants visited in 2018-22 in Hungary*

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

My strategy at this point was to pick a region on the map that I could realistically visit in one trip. At first I went alone, but on later visits I was occasionally accompanied by one or two friends or my partner. Arriving in a village by car, I would first survey the surroundings, walking slowly through the streets to understand the layout of the village, where the church, the mayor's office, and some signs of life are located.

This attitude could be compared to that of a flâneur (as described by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin), but instead of strolling through nineteenth-century Paris, I was observing, exploring the rural environment, more like a person on a Guy Debordian dérive, letting myself be drawn by the minute attractions and encounters I could find. In practice, this meant striking up conversations with every single person I met and being open to where those conversations might lead.




*Ludwig Museum Budapest, Installation view, 2019*

I have to be honest and admit that this new approach was scary at first. It was scary not to know where this process would take me, not to know exactly what I was looking for, not to have every image in my head before I took out my medium format camera, but instead to let it take me to new places. To allow myself not to create well-defined answers, but to ask questions about the rural state of being in which I grew up as a child, but which I have since forgotten. This phase of the work served as a preliminary study to establish the context, and gain insights and

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

points of reference for the next period of the artistic research. It helped me to understand the world of small villages, the distinct typologies and the recurring systemic phenomena.

Each visit to a village can be described as a singular experience, as the interaction with people, the storied they shared were unique, the natural and built environment were different and even the season and weather conditions influenced the atmosphere and the attitude and openness of both the inhabitants and myself.. As I visited more and more locations, and as the conversations and the images started to accumulate, they started to have a life of their own inside my head and converse with each other.

Within the first few months, to my initial surprise, the work was receiving praise from curators and fellow photographers at portfolio reviews. At the same time, I felt a growing desire to deepen my theoretical research in parallel with thinking about new visual presentation methods. The doctoral program at my alma mater, the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest seemed like an ideal choice for this pursuit, as the duality of theory and artistic practice is deeply embedded in the school's DNA. I was admitted as a doctoral researcher that same year. The title of the research at the time was: "The role of ingenuity on the social and cultural peripheries."

*Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Installation view, 2020*

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

Another recognition in 2019, which gave me the energy to continue, was that the work was not only shortlisted for the Esterhazy Art Award and exhibited at the Ludwig Museum Budapest, but it was also awarded a Capa Grand Fellowship, which allowed me to work even more intensively on this research and collecting phase for a year, at the end of which I produced a report exhibition and a book, which was shown at the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center in Budapest in the fall of 2020. Different selections of the project were later exhibited in Belgium at the BAC Art Lab and in Budapest at Drei Raben.

Village by village, the working process, the methodology got more refined. When spending time in a village, most often I was met with the heightened curiosity of the residents. As the amount of social activities and interactions is minimal in these environments, people welcomed me with a mixture of warm hospitality, suspicion towards an outsider and a human desire to share life stories. In the conversations, I would introduce myself as a person interested in the smallest villages of the country, and would ask if my information is correct, that there are very few people living in the community. Sensing my curiosity, this would often lead to hours long discussions on local conditions, and after a while I would ask what they considered worthy taking pictures of and if they would agree to sit or stand for a portrait. Only then would I take out the camera from my bag.

From a technical standpoint, the photography during the research was characterized by experimentation. Initially I started with a Fujifilm XT-2 digital camera, then a Mamiya 645 analog medium format system (which failed multiple times on location, and was subsequently abandoned for this reason), followed by a Fuji 645GA and a Fuji XT-3 (plus temporarily with a Sony A7RIV that I received from the distributor for testing). Finally I purchased a Fuji GFX 50R medium format camera to slow me down even more and to allow for finer detail in the images.

The occasional suspicion that I encountered was more often voiced by members of the Roma minority residents and stemmed from their experience that most urban dwellers are only interested in villagers' opinions and way of life around the time of the national elections, when reporters and TV crews arrive from the city. Similarly, due to the scarcity of employment opportunities and the often only available jobs through the workfare program controlled by the mayors, in some villages, residents were unwilling to open up and rather directed me to talk to the mayor, who in these locations often delivered very positive, propaganda/public relations announcement sounding answers. In the majority of cases, however, I was invited into people's homes and received a warm welcome and was flooded by a sea of stories about their

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

experiences and everyday joys and struggles. I heard enough stories to fill a series of novels, so it would be a futile attempt to recount them all here. To give a rough idea about their scope, let me note down a few memorable examples.

In one household, an elderly woman shared how she fled with her husband across the border after World War II, only to be captured by American soldiers. She reminisced about her sole visit to the capital in 1945, describing it as overwhelmingly busy, loud, and dirty—a place she vowed never to return to. In another home, a disabled man spoke of life in his village, once designated as a restricted military zone near the Slovenian border during the Iron Curtain era, even recounting secretely helping Romanian migrants cross to the West. A young mother, who had grown up near the city park in Budapest, but was never taken there by her parents, shared how her dream of a countryside life with children had eventually come true, and she could not be happier. Elsewhere, an anecdote emerged about a break-in at the village's old castle, where the only items stolen were half a bottle of soda and a can of Coke. A man in another village noted the greatest freedom of rural life: the ability to relieve oneself anywhere, unlike in cities, where even that comes at a price. Another villager lamented the loss of Hungary's sovereignty, listing historical dominations by Turks, Germans, and Russians before declaring that now, everything was controlled by Americans, pointing towards the EU flag hanging on the town hall. A sweet elderly lady compared me to her children, calling me an angel sent to her by God. A bus driver revealed that I was the first passenger on his route since he began work a month ago. A woman, who had moved from a mining town due to a lung condition, proudly mentioned her sons' successes: two working for the Hell energy drink company and one serving as the village mayor. Other stories spanned countries: a middle-aged man boasted of cooking omelets for the Norwegian queen during his time in Oslo, while another villager shared her heartbreak after her sister's death, which left her raising her sister's children and abandoning her dream of becoming a nurse. A former miner invited me to share a bowl of his self-cooked goulash, as he told me the story of his life: born in a remote settlement, he was recruited during the height of socialism to work in the newly opened mines. He rose to fame, earning numerous government medals and awards, even being featured in articles as an exemplary worker. Yet now, in his old age, he struggles with mobility and the reality of being tricked by online scammers on a dating site. A Swiss expatriate, who moved to a village 30 years ago, reflected on her youthful naivety and how her current rural life focused on caring for her beloved horses. An elderly woman, reflecting on decades of hardship under various regimes, declared that the current political climate was the harshest yet, accusing the government of wishing to eliminate the

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

poor entirely. Others recalled historical traumas, such as a sweet lady who fondly talked about her loved chicken, while also remembering the Jewish midwife who helped deliver her at birth, only to later witness the midwife's forced deportation.

## 7.2 Borderland (2019–2020)

The notion of the periphery in relation to the smallest settlements has often appeared in the literature review phases, especially in the discussions of the center-periphery model and the rural-urban divide that is notably present in Eastern European discourses (Monostori, 1991, Fricz, 1999, Fricz, 2013, Bolchover et al., 2016, Paar, 2021). According to Western thinkers, the center-periphery metaphor is dubious and the distinction between the city and the country are blurred in the post-rural age since the 'rural turn' (Cloke, 1997).

In 2019, the call for new proposals for the biennial Budapest Photography Prize suddenly brought these strands of thought together in me to apply with a proposal that examines the edge of the capital, the administrative boundaries of Budapest. This imaginary line connects the city to the countryside, crossing the city's very different demographic, geographical, social and architectural layers. In many cases, the almost unrecognisable Budapest landscapes could be in a village, even though they are only a few kilometres from the historic city centre. Péter Korniss, Gabriella Csizek, Áron Fenyvesi, Judit Gellér, Emese Mucsi, Krisztián Puskár, Gyula Sopronyi formed the professional board of trustees and decided in favor of the concept, which meant that I received a grant to work on the topic for a year, culminating in an exhibition and a book launch at the Robert Capa Photography Center.

*Installation view, Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Curator: Emese Mucsi, 2021*

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

As the poet and animation director Orsolya Láng said in her opening speech: "Imagine Budapest as a puddle, that dries up from the edges towards the center. Its center retains some density until the last moment, where the drops, afraid of disappearing, flee. The flight of the edge. The fading places of the periphery squeeze the center like a ring into a smaller and smaller area. […] it is as if this is the edge from which the capital begins to shrink, to be absorbed. The under-dressed road has no asphalt. The under-dressed house has no plaster. The under-dressed mannequin has no clothes. This is the under-stylized language of the poetic discourse of the Halász images. He does not pontificate, he simply states. He is not polite, but deeply sensitive. He is persistent in his documentation (he continues what he started in his village series), he investigates things with the tenacity of a forensic investigator."

The pandemic lockdowns and the lack of widely available vaccinations in 2020 meant that I was not able to visit the villages as before, so this project was also important as it allowed me to keep working and to continue the research. In the series, I initially travelled around the 150-kilometer municipal boundaries of Budapest. The photographs show the outskirts of the city, the fictional, imaginary area, the border that separates the city from the countryside. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on geographical boundaries as static formations, as structures that are symbols of permanence. In practice, however, boundaries are usually an extensive zone, that both separate and connect. Boundaries not only exist in physical space, but also - sometimes overlapping with it - in the mental space between us. In addition to the political and administrative boundaries, there are social, cultural, ethnic and mental borders. These are symbolic boundaries that shape our actions when we cross them.

In reality, the municipal line is merely a mental line, a virtual boundary. There is no physical fence on most of the land and the distinction is only apparent on the navigation app. The space has depth, it is a borderland between Budapest and something else, representing a transitional zone. The project was shot in largely unknown places and situations, from which it is only a leap to get to somewhere else, on foot and in thought. As the curator Emese Mucsi notes in her essay for the book, I look into the geographical and virtual peripheries of the capital like a flâneur:

"On the one hand, he strolls, with a camera in hand, along the administrative boundaries of the city – by dormitory suburbs, magnificent hiking areas, green spaces, cross-border railway lines, highway noise barriers, factory sites, horse ranches, detached houses under construction on plots newly connected to utilities – and a deal of his pictures document these wanderings of his. Although Halász's

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

focus area is definitely not the city center bustling with people, his creative behavior is similar to that of the flâneur, a characteristic figure roaming through the crowded streets of Paris at the end of the 19th century. According to its theorists, the flâneur always strolls around with special attention, not to lose sight of the smallest detail of the area strolled. He moves around with the state of awareness of a naturalist, a detective, or a photographer as Victor Fournel points out in his writing What One Sees in the Streets of Paris in 1858: 'That kind of man [the flâneur] is a mobile and passionate daguerreotype who retains the faintest traces of things, and in whom is reproduced, with their changing reflections, the flow of events, the city's movement, the multiple physiognomy of the public mind, the beliefs, antipathies, and admirations of the crowd.'" (Mucsi, 2020)

Due to the pandemic lockdowns, which also affected the parallel research in the villages meant that the exhibition opening was postponed by nearly six months. The theoretical readings on the critique of the documentary mode had thus more time to influence this project as well, and eventually the photographs taken on the symbolic border between the countryside and Budapest, along the administrative line, were freely mixed with shots taken in other locations of the city, on borderlands that were even less physical, rather more mental, personal and felt.

## 7.3 We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human (2022–2023)

> *"Sitting alone in that hole for seemingly endless periods of time, I somehow crystallized a critique of this artistic attitude, and my attention was drawn to myself, to the questionable role of myself as a manipulator of the context, instrumentalizing and exploiting its participants, while accumulating symbolic capital."*
> *Miklós Erhardt, as cited in Kőkai, 2022*

The months of the coronavirus lockdowns, the exhibitions of the work in various institutions, the fact that we moved away from Hungary at this time with my partner, first to Brussels, later to Paris and eventually Vienna, as well as the initiation of the PhD process in Belgium (later culminating into this double doctorate) gave me the possibility to take the time to reflect on my work until that point and to think about ways going forward with the research. Drawing from the previous experiences, one of the main observations was, that although the villages have distinct characteristics

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

due to their differing geographical/historical/economic/demographic patterns, their visual image, the dominant natural and the built identity features anchor them firmly into an Eastern European, specifically Hungarian context.

At this point, I was confronted with a lot of self-doubt and concern about the validity and direction of my undertaking. In these struggles, I was looking at methods to experiment with incorporating self-reflection and to go beyond using a purely documentary visual attitude, mixing it with staged elements. This was exciting in two ways. On the one hand, it brought the research closer to my main artistic medium, the field of documentarism, in which most of my previous works have been made, and at the same time it started me thinking in a direction that can put a twist into the masterpiece by twisting the problematic of the document.

I was searching for a long time for a way to take the project further, and it seemed to be a great opportunity to create a partially collaborative material mixed with elements of fiction. In contrast to the 'traditional' documentary approach, by partly retaining its visuality and formal world, while at the same time reacting to the growing social uncertainty about the documentary (the spread of fake news, skepticism about science), a material could be created in which real and staged, interfered images are presented together. Subsequently, I conducted more visual experiments, tried to complement the research with new elements and methods. These can be summarized in three directions: visuals taken in my grandparents' village, in a Belgian dwarf village, and pictures taken in bigger villages with a technically new approach, by using flash to light some of the scenes.

Visiting the village of my grandparents was important to me, because the time I spent there as a child was the inspiration to start this journey. Furthermore, it is located in a geographical area (Győr-Moson-Sopron county) that has not been previously included in the regions studied. The visual comparison with the current situation of the smallest Belgian municipality was also exciting, as similar settlement dynamics were partly taking place there in the 1970s, but today, only a single village in Belgium has fewer than 100 residents according to the official Statbel database (98 per cent of the population is urban, the highest proportion in the European Union). The third technical addition concerned the format of the images and the use of lighting and lights. The introduction of a narrower 4:5 aspect ratio and the use of flash resulted in new perspectives and new pictorial formulations during this time.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

As a further venture, a prototype for a text-based, interactive, story-based interface was created as a new media experiment, which could help to present the research in a different and complementary way to traditional exhibition situations. The goal was to present the conversations and stories from the villages in the form of a mobile game, giving a more tangible way to experience life in the dwarf villages. The interactive theatre performance and drama play Sociopoly was a source of inspiration, in which anyone can experience what kind of dire daily decisions an income from social benefits, family allowances or casual work requires in low-income households.

Finally, more fieldwork was also carried out, forming the backbone of this third, more experimental segment of the research. Visiting eight settlements in the western border region of the country in the counties of Zala and Vas, this time I was joined on the trip by a doctoral colleague (Anikó Gál, University of Ferrara) who was doing her own research on attitudes towards clothing, and talking through the connections between our topics led to fascinating conversations. Here it is perhaps important to write about our positionality as two Hungarian artistic researchers, both living abroad for extended periods of time, both experiencing life in the 1980s before the collapse of socialism, and both having lived, personal experience from the countryside provided an important connection to the local population. Equally as crucial, our gender equity generated trust, and literally opened several doors more easily. Furthermore, the longer encounters and conversations, interviews due to our different research interests often led to insights that might not have been realized otherwise.

In this phase, my aim was to try to get new insights, by unsettling village residents. One of the reasons for this was that most villagers, when asked about resourcefulness in their surroundings, could not think of any examples. It seemed, that most people do not think of their solutions and strategies as novel or resourceful, they see it rather as the normal flow of life, the only way of life that they know. However, when the questions were completely open-ended, asking about imaginary scenarios, asking for advice, relating to personal pride and happiness, some of the respondents provided insightful answers.

In order to elicit personal thoughts and deeper emotional responses, to get beyond canned responses, an unconventional questionnaire was assembled and distributed. Inspired by cultural probes, this set of unusual questions allowed participants to answer anonymously, at their own pace, at home.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

Although making, distributing and collecting the questionnaire proved to be extremely challenging, it helped to define the final segment of the work, which began in Szaknyér, a village I have visited several times. The residents quickly accepted my presence and were happy for the attention and compassion that I showed towards them. The responses ranged from practical to philosophical and imaginative, offering a view into the ways the respondents perceive their realities and possibilities. For example, when asked how life would be different if there were no electricity for a year, responses varied widely, from one resident expressing a nonchalant acceptance rooted in past experience - "I was born in a house where there was never electricity" - to another highlighting the essential nature of electricity in modern life: "Even one day without causes issues, as we need it in every hour of the day." Similarly, answers to a hypothetical scenario where the village would be cut off from the outside world for a decade ranged from fatalistic - "the village would die out in 3 years" - to reassured: "We could manage everything, from food to all, especially the elderly, as they have already experienced the lack of things." These varied and sometimes contradictory responses showed the coexistence of nostalgia for self-sufficiency with an acknowledgment of contemporary dependencies. When faced with fantastical or improbable scenarios, such as the idea of everyone in the village being able to fly, responses ranged from imaginative - "We would just fly from one branch to the next" to pragmatic - "We are not birds, we are all human."

Despite not having the best educational backgrounds, language skills and internet competencies, the older generation makes up for this with their wider historical perspective. For instance, uncle Géza reminisced how both in the socialist and current times orders are coming from above and often turn out to be unrealistic and even counterproductive. He even observed it sarcastically, that it can be said on TV, that there are plenty of jobs in the country, but the reality is that this is enabled by all the young who left to work in Austria, Germany and the UK.

These remarks were not unique, on the contrary, people shared similar sentiments in all parts of the country, comparing the socialist system to the current governance, who had personal first-hand experience or knowledge of working in Western countries and above all, who had to come up with ingenious solutions in order to get by in their environments. This latter recognition dawned on me gradually. In the first year of my field work, it was often frustrating to get blank looks and vague responses when attempting to talk about solutions, methods, spaces and objects that were the results of resourcefulness, and bricolage.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

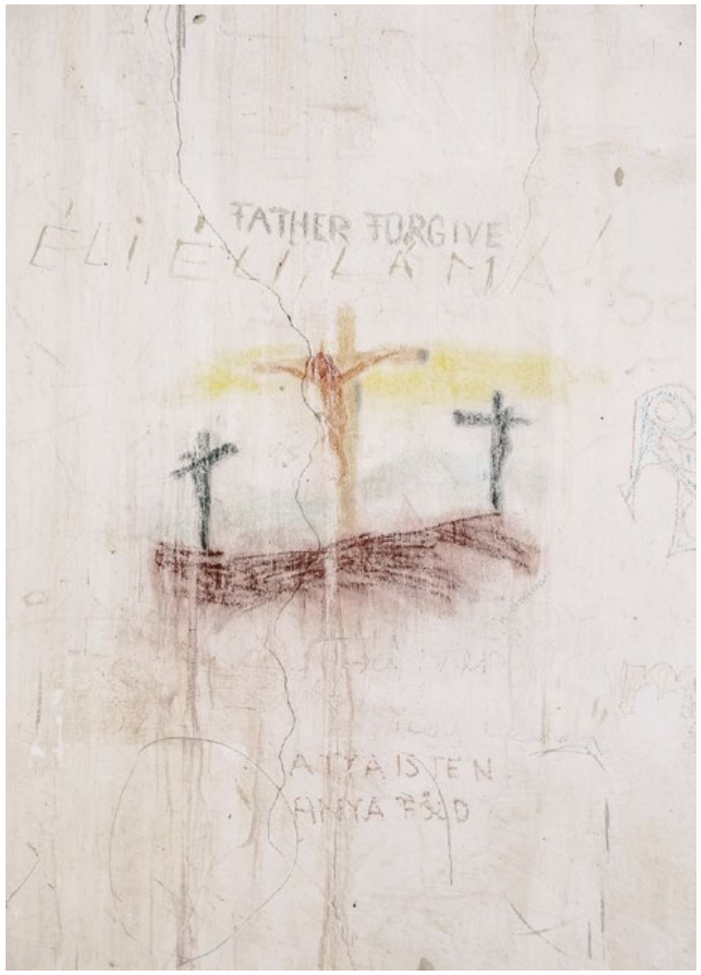
It is so difficult for the village dwellers to pinpoint to specific examples, because ingenuity is manifested as an all-pervasive, general life strategy. It is natural, integral part of all aspects of their lives. When asked directly or indirectly, using a cultural probing methodology and questions to ask about the dreams, desires, hardships and joys, the responses are nothing to write home about, it is rather through casually shared stories and observation that such phenomena are revealed. Sometimes objectified in a single object, such as the upcycling, reusing plastic milk containers to create a sturdy door mat, other times it is more intangible, such as the use of a pasta maker to cut the home-grown, attic-dried tobacco leaves for making and eventually selling cigarettes, an illegal practice.

Being aware of the stillness of photographs, and thinking of how to convey the small village atmosphere to an audience, and inspired by sound engineer in Wim Wenders' Lisbon Story, I started recording soundscapes using a field recorder device. The initial idea was to potentially have the ambient sounds encapsulate the installed images in an exhibition space, especially in a busy urban environment. Down the road, the sounds have been accompanied by motion picture and resulted in a short, black and white, widescreen video.

## 7.4 Falu (2018–2025)

The final artistic output and masterwork of this doctoral research culminates in the photobook *Falu* (2018–2025), which includes images from the two segments of the research: *You Were Never Really Here* (2018–2022) and *We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human* (2022–2023). While intended primarily to live in a book format, a site-specific exhibition derived from it will also be installed for the public defense at the 2B Gallery in Budapest.

*Falu* represents a personal edit, what I call a 'reflective documentary'. In this mode, I playfully engage with sequencing, aiming to take advantage of the peculiarities of the post-truth era by allowing for juxtapositions. The editing, sequencing and placement of text segments trigger a degree of uncertainty, where mystery and ambiguity fill the space between the images, letting the viewer gradually understand the project. The theoretical base for this approach is connected to the insights that emerged in the chapter on the critique of documentarism. The readings refined my approach to photography, my interest in documentarism, and my previous work, layering my intuition with critical, theoretically grounded perspectives.




*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

The paths scouted during the second segment of the research eventually eased my doubts and gave a peace of mind, a belief that my initial, intuitive working methodology is the most appropriate for this subject. Since I am first and foremost a visual artist, looking back it feels like the dominant character of the work was set early on, before the theoretical explorations, which provided a natural, honest and personal lens. Nevertheless, engaging with new theoretical directions significantly influenced the work by releasing the images from percieved tensions, conventional documentary expectations, allowing the series to embrace more obscure, tactile, abstract and surreal undertones. The readings provided me with the necessary, deeper understanding of the context the village residents live in and it initiated a process that could subtly reshape the work by refining the documentary attitude.

The decision to have the final visual result printed as a photobook came very early on, already in 2018. I remember vividly when I mentioned this intention to a lady in the first village I visited (Tésa), she got excited and responded that she would love to purchase a copy once it is available. I have created some booklets and book dummies during my university studies and later projects. Fortunately, the prize I received to pursue the Borderland chapter of the research, culminated not only in an exhibition but also in the publication of my first photobook. While the institutional constraints did not allow us (Emese Mucsi and Zoltán Szmolka were the curator and graphic designer) to explore all the potential of the material, it did let me learn from the experience and to better understand the bookmaking process and how I want to approach creating my second book.

The medium of the photobook is chosen by many authors working on long-term visual projects, especially research/documentary pieces. The reasons for this can be manifold, some more obvious than others, as Jörg Colberg explains in his detailed account on the intricacies of photobook publishing (Colberg, 2017). For this work, the format was chosen to enable reaching a wider audience over a longer period of time due to its accessibility and affordability. The book allows for an intimate viewing experience, showing a bigger selection of images and texts that establish the context in a more deliberate manner by careful sequencing, compared to the less predictable ways the gallery exhibition is viewed and read. The title, the cover, the layout, the paper type, the binding were all carefully considered. The size of the book was chosen to be comfortable to hold and remain practical for portability. Additionally, it was chosen to harmonize with the format and dimensions of the dissertation itself, thereby reinforcing the unity of the doctoral research.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

In terms of content and structure, I felt it was important that the research's three core perspectives (the rural, the everyday, the documentary critique) also subtly embrace the editing of the photobook, avoiding overly obvious and didactic sequencing.

In the process of making a photobook, first I created a draft on my own, printing out the potential images at the university office printer and playing with arranging them on the floor. This hands-on approach allowed me not only complete control over the editing, sequencing, design and production considerations, but also provided an important sensory experience, engaging with the images in a physical form, rather than merely through a camera viewfinder or computer screen. This version of the book in late 2024 was an essential step, but I knew that I wanted to have another pair of eyes, an external viewer, a person who does not know the personal memories and stories attached to each image.

When I started to think about a graphic designer to work with on the photobook, I looked at hundreds of publishers' and designers' book catalogs for research and inspiration. It was clear from early on that I would want to collaborate with someone who has a good understanding of the material, of the cultural context, and whose work I deeply admire. I approached Flóra Pálhegyi for these reasons. Knowing her work and having met her before, I knew that she would have empathy towards the Hungarian village setting and having moved to Amsterdam, she would also have a good awareness of both my personal experiences and the arts community in the Western context.


*Figure 13: One of the first drafts of the layout of the photobook, 2025*

*Dániel Halász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

This collaboration also led to an unexpected but ultimately fitting development regarding the book's title. The working title had been *We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human* (the title of the second research segment); however, perhaps due to a misunderstanding during the initial design phase, Flóra created several cover mock-ups using the title *Falu*. While initially surprising, upon reflection, this suggestion resonated more deeply. 'Falu,' the Hungarian word for 'village,' had coincidentally been the working name for my image archive ('Falu projekt') throughout the research. The appeal of its brevity, its direct connection to the subject matter in Hungarian, and its connection to the project's origins ultimately convinced me to adopt *Falu* as the final title.


*Figure 14: First versions of the photobook cover, 2025*

When looking for an exhibition space, approaching László Böröcz, the director of 2B Gallery, if he would be interesting in hosting the photography installation, felt like a straightforward decision. The size and arrangement of the venue, the non-commercial operation all fit the project well. To help visualize the installation, my wife, an architect, created a small scale model of the gallery space. Making the maquette was very helpful for thinking through the shift from book to gallery wall. While the photobook is carefully sequenced, the exhibition inherently required different planning, accounting for viewers navigating the space freely, drawing their own connections between images.

*Dániel Haldász, from the series Falu, 2018–2025*

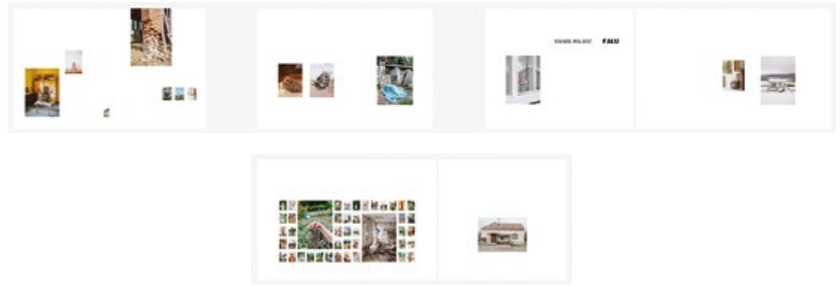


*Figure 15: First digital mockup of the installation at 2B Gallery, 2025*

In both its book and exhibition forms, *Falu* serves as the visual synthesis of this doctoral research. It is not an illustration of the research findings presented textually, but an embodiment of the research process itself, the ongoing interplay between theory, methodology, fieldwork, and reflection, presented through photography. Presenting *Falu* publicly through the photobook and the defense exhibition marks the completion of this artistic research cycle. It offers the work for interpretation, dialogue, and discussion beyond the immediate academic context, leading us into the final concluding reflections of this dissertation.

*Dániel Halász, from the series Fáu, 2018–2025*

# 8 CONCLUSIONS

## 8.1 The Significance of the Rural in Hungary

In contrast to developed countries, in Eastern Europe de-agriculturalization and de-peasantization were not followed by de-ruralization. The post-socialist countries have a high rural population ratio (in the recently joined EU member states the realistic figures are around 50 per cent (Kovách, 2022), which has not been radically changed by the shift to a market economy and various globalization phenomena.

During the years of this artistic research, I set out to study the resilience, resourcefulness and adaptive strategies in the smallest rural communities of Hungary by using a combination of methodologies (slow action research, observation, cultural probing, mixed-type interviews) to support my primarily visual, photographic approach.

This topic is relevant today, as an increasing percentage of the Earth's population lives in urban centers, and the rural environments are becoming more desolate on a global scale. Compared to six other post-socialist states (Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic), Hungary's rural society is characterized by the strongest segmentation due to the specifics of privatization, high unemployment rate, and high ratio of pensioners (Csite & Kovách, 1995).

In Chapter 3, the rural is examined from a macro perspective: how the rural is perceived, and what economic, demographic, and historical trends have shaped these regions in the past decades. This is followed by looking at the Eastern European conditions and changes throughout history, and the developmental patterns of the rural in Hungary, from the agricultural collectivization of the 1950s, through the regime change in 1989, to years following the acceptance into the European Union.

In Hungary, over forty per cent of the residents live in rural conditions, and the number of villages with less than 100 residents is increasing. Although they represent over five percent of the number of settlements, they were considered 'purposeless', unfit for life and incapable of development by socialist-era rural development policies, their conditions further deteriorated during the post-1989 transition, and they remain relatively under-examined in academic literature.

Chapter 3.2 zooms in even closer, focusing on these smallest villages and employing typological analysis to better understand their current conditions. Despite sharing the same category based on population size, these villages are not uniform, rather they exhibit a wide range of characteristics. Villages located near bigger population centers, or at current national borders with limited transport links, villages with an older demography and ones with Western pensioners or young urban families might share similar pasts, but predict very distinct futures.

The geographical distribution of these small villages is rooted in historical factors like the Ottoman occupation and settlement system development. Today, these regions face significant economic hardships, with material deprivation and relative income poverty. The exodus of intellectuals has contributed to the decline of these communities, leaving them without essential services and community leaders. Centralization policies have resulted in the closure of schools, shops, and other amenities, eroding the social fabric. While the arrival of new residents like young urban families, foreign pensioners, and commuters can contribute to revitalization, it can also introduce social segregation and strain local resources. Despite the challenges, these villages remain an enduring part of the social landscape, and understanding their unique characteristics can help grasp how resourcefulness can be a part of their survival strategies.

## 8.2 The Everyday and the Documentary

After introducing and locating the state of the rural, Chapter 4 examined the ingenuity of the everyday from two angles. The first section looked at the recent academic literature studying extreme, spatially remote or otherwise peripherally located environments. Although thinking processes under optimal conditions are well documented, research into how mental processes are affected by extreme situations has only gained in importance in the last two decades. The mentioned examples range from economically, socially, geographically, and politically peripheral situations to small rural communities, space exploration, arctic and deep-sea environments, prisons, and even quarantines during the recent global pandemic. The studies show that mental processes and resourcefulness can flourish in constraints, that it can be positively influenced by a limited environment and can trigger unconventional adaptations, as constraints push people to think freely and their improvisation can go beyond existing conventions.

The second part of the chapter looked at artistic investigations and archives about everyday ingenuity, specifically in a post-socialist context. Ernesto Oroza is collecting examples in Cuba (*Objects of Necessity*), Vladimir Arkhipov in Russia (*Home-Made Russia*), while Endre Koronczi (*Csettegő beauty contest*), András Szalai (*Little Hungarian Snazzy and Neotwee*) and the PAD collective (*Everyday Shortcomings*) had such activities

in Hungary. The projects exemplify how constraints can catalyse novel solutions and in the process also inspire artistic archives. These repositories serve a dual function, as they compile inspiring answers for survival, resilience and even resistance.

The various critical stances towards the documentary medium and photographic truth are put under the microscope in Chapter 5, reflecting a shift from early documentary photographers using the medium to expose social realities, to a more nuanced understanding. While the notion of photography as objective was initially challenged by thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, the postmodern critique of the 1970s and 80s went further, with theorists like Susan Sontag and Allan Sekula arguing that it merely reflects the photographer's biases, unable to bring about meaningful political transformation. However, contemporary scholars have called for reintegrating documentary into humanist frameworks, recognizing its dual capacity to both reveal and obscure truth. The emergence of 'speculative documentary' genres that blend fact and fiction further challenge traditional conceptions of photographic truth. The chapter closes by exploring two Hungarian art projects that use documentary elements to critically examine socio-economic trends and give voice to the affected communities.

Subchapters 5.3 and 5.4 then surveyed contemporary Eastern European and Hungarian practitioners operating within the documentary mode, with historical examples for additional context. Eastern European documentary photography, as defined in this research, encompasses works by photographers native to the region, focusing on local socio-cultural realities. The section traces the evolution of social documentary practices, particularly those not emphasizing poverty but offering a humanistic, socially reflective perspective. Historical context includes early documentation efforts like the French Missions Héliographiques and the U.S. Farm Security Administration's projects. In Hungary, movements from the 1930s onward, such as the népi (folk) movement and subsequent Kádár-era works by Péter Korniss, are examined for their depiction of rural life.

Contemporary Eastern European documentary photography is inspected through themes of gender roles, socio-cultural shifts, and poetic narratives. Notable projects include Lucia Nimcova's explorations of female experiences, Petruț Călinescu's reflections on migration impacts, and poetic works like Iveta Vaivode Gabalina's personal interpretations of rural heritage. These visual approaches highlight the cultural diversity and ongoing transformations within Eastern European villages, amplifying marginalized voices and challenging conventional center-periphery narratives. The second part reviewed contemporary visual representations of Hungarian villages by photographers such as Simon Móricz-Sabján, Ákos Stiller, Szabolcs Barakonyi, Péter Pettendi Szabó, Zsófia Sivák, János R. Szabó, and Hunor Tóth. Their work captures the hardship, social disintegration, and everyday nuances of rural life, balancing the need to avoid exoticization and voyeurism while showing authentic realities.

Chapter 7 traces the development of the three core artistic projects I realized during the doctoral studies. It offers insight into the research process, the methodologies chosen, the findings that emerged, and how these new bodies of work connect to my previous artistic practice. The chapter is divided into sections dedicated to each project: *You Were Never Really Here* (2018–2022), *Borderland* (2019–2020), *We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human* (2022–2023), leading to the final synthesis in the masterwork *Falu* (photobook and exhibition, 2018–2025).

My work on *You Were Never Really Here* stemmed from a personal, even therapeutic impulse to spend time in the smallest Hungarian villages. This developed into an intense phase of the research, involving immersion into the lived realities of these isolated communities. Recognized by both artistic and academic circles, this stage symbolically closed with an exhibition at the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center.

*Borderland* shifted my focus to the liminal zones between Budapest and the countryside. Walking the 140 kilometer municipal border became a method for exploring the physical and mental boundaries that define these spaces. Inspired by a flâneur-like approach to unveil the socio-cultural and geographical borders, it documented the real and symbolic boundaries of the capital, contemplating on the tension and connectivity between urban and rural life.

*We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human* blended documentary photography with a more reflexive attitude, to critique and expand on my earlier approaches. By incorporating self-reflection and initiating collaboration, it challenged documentary conventions by loosening its ties to reality-based constraints and giving space for the personal, the ambiguous, and the uncertain. Throughout the chapter, the dynamic interplay between theory and practice is shown, revealing how the research evolved through continuous back-and-forth engagement with academic literature and artistic inquiry.

## 8.3 Contributions and Implications of the Research

The detailed examination of rural Hungary provides insights into the systemic phenomena influencing these areas, such as the historical impact of Ottoman occupation and the consequences of agricultural collectivization and post-1989 centralization policies. By documenting the lived realities of these communities, the research not only captures their struggles but also their resilience and resourcefulness. This focus on local, practical ingenuity, documented through artistic, photographic methodologies, underscores the potential for novel solutions to emerge from within these communities despite significant constraints.

Beyond the Hungarian context, the findings have broader applicability to other Eastern European regions facing similar socio-economic and demographic challenges. Many Eastern European countries share a history of socialist rural policies and subsequent economic transitions, leading to comparable rural conditions. By exploring the resilience and adaptive strategies in Hungarian dwarf villages, this research offers insights that can inform art research, rural development policies and local initiatives across the region. The documented examples of local ingenuity and resilience can serve as models for similar communities, promoting a better understanding of how constraints can foster creativity and innovation.

This research and the associated art projects potentially contribute to the field of contemporary art practice by engaging with themes of rurality, resourcefulness, and documentary practices. The combination of methodologies employed, such as slow action research, cultural probing, and mixed-type interviews, alongside a primarily visual and photographic approach, demonstrates how art can be a powerful tool for exploring and documenting complex social realities.

The artistic output, the masterwork titled *Falu*, shows how theory and visuality mutually complement each other in the research of certain themes, highlighting artistic research's capacity to capture social dynamics and personal narratives within peripheral communities in ways that would be more difficult to visualize through purely text-based inquiry.

By adopting an autoethnographic and immersive approach, the research expands on and challenges classic documentary practices, blending real and fictional elements to offer a more reflective and collaborative perspective. This approach can provide a model for integrating academic research with artistic experimentation



The critical examination of photographic truth and the evolving nature of documentary photography contributes to ongoing debates within the field, on understanding photography's role in representing social realities.

Compared to my previous photography projects done before the doctoral process, the tone of the work has become more raw, more stern, more gritty and less overtly conceptual or explicitly political. This artistic process, the methodology developed over the research years, can be informative for fellow practitioners and be considered as an important output of the research. The personal, empathetic, gradual approach in communicating with local communities and listening to their stories and inviting them to participate as sitters can offer a working model for artists working in similar socio-cultural environments.

Another insight gained through this process, relevant for future endeavors, is that confronting the doubts and dilemmas, the skepticism, the uncertainty and the constant questioning of the directions the work is taking, while incredibly painful at the moment of experiencing it, by consistently and stubbornly facing it leads to experimentation and trying out new directions, expanding my comfort zones and eventually, hopefully, leading to a more stable and grounded artistic position.

In the context of art education, this research offers potential ideas for teaching practices in art, photography, and documentary studies. The methodologies and findings can inform curriculum development, emphasizing the importance of immersive and reflective approaches in documenting and engaging with marginalized communities. Educators can draw on the examples presented in the research to inspire students to explore innovative and critical perspectives in their own artistic practices. Utilizing constraints can catalyze creativity, and the research encourages educators to foster environments where students can experiment and adapt, developing their own unique responses to social and artistic challenges.

Overall, the research bridges academic inquiry and artistic practice, demonstrating how photography can be a relevant medium for addressing complex social realities. The implications potentially extend beyond the Hungarian context, offering considerations for rural development and art education in Eastern Europe and beyond.

## 8.4 Further Research Directions

This interdisciplinary artistic research focused geographically on Hungary and specifically on the smallest rural communities. Based on the findings and these limitations, several avenues for future research could be considered, to enrich our understanding of resilience and resourcefulness, both within Hungary and in similar contexts globally. Specific directions to study that intrigue me include: how does resourcefulness look like in urban contexts, what are the specificities and common aspects? Is it correlated with geographical, political, historical, socio-economic, ethnic, gender, Maslowian, psychological, religious, or other conditions?

The time-frame of the study covered several years, but the dynamic nature of rural communities means that social, economic, and environmental conditions change over time. The findings thus reflect the specific temporal frame of the present study and may not account for longer-term trends (even though historical records indicate a similar trajectory). Revisiting the topic after a decade could offer updated and more accurate conclusions about these trends.

Personally, I am looking forward to shift from a fundamentally observational into an active participative role in my next visual project, thereby returning to the recurring theme of my previous art projects. Another exciting area for further research is the role new digital technologies can play in documenting rural life. While this study relied primarily on the traditional apparatus of photography, the integration of newer digital tools, such as augmented and virtual, mixed reality could provide additional insights and an immersive experience for some audiences, as the recent work of Poulomi Basu and Barna Szász demonstrates.

While this dissertation has focused on the unique socio-economic conditions and adaptive strategies of Hungarian villages, the concept of social innovation in rural areas (Bock, 2015, Steiner et al., 2021, Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022) potentially provides a promising framework for extending these local practices. Defined by Murray et al. (2010) as developing new solutions through collective engagement, social innovation is sometimes seen as enabling communities to take development into their own hands, potentially replacing top-down governmental interventions (Neumeier, 2016). Future research could question how the everyday ingenuity observed in these communities can be formalized and scaled through social innovation initiatives.

Further research could also be inspired by studies like Bevilacqua and Bertaux's recent fieldwork (2022), observing interpersonal interactions and relations in small Italian and French villages, where asylum-seekers were resettled. Although this scenario is currently less likely in the Hungarian context, but could be extremely interesting and provide an alternative lifeline to some communities.

The potential research directions highlight the need for continued investigation into the dynamics of rural life. Future research can build upon the foundations laid by this study and not only deepen our understanding of rural ingenuity and resilience, but also inform more effective and inclusive policies and practices for rural communities globally.

Considering the visual core of this work, the idea of creating an archive has emerged early on. Initially thought of as a repository of the thousands of photographs accumulated during the fieldwork, going beyond the 70 selected images that comprise the master work, the practicalities of the creation of such an archive quickly raised critical questions regarding scope, accessibility, and conceptual framework. I realized that due to its scope, it is likely best suited for a post-doctoral phase. Key considerations remain: What is to be included? Who is this archive for? Is its primary audience the academic community, local residents, or perhaps the general public? The answers will shape not only the image selection but also the presentation.

The notion of an archive naturally brings historical parallels, like the folk music collection of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, into mind. A contemporary example, Miklós Both's Polyphony project archiving Ukrainian folk songs, received the European Union's Creative Europe grant and worked with a 16 people staff. This only reinforced my feeling that publishing a good quality archive is an enormous undertaking.

The archive could be a more traditional, searchable database, categorized by location, subject, or demographic data. Alternatively, it could take a more conceptual and artistic form, reflecting the layered complexities of rural life. Instead of functioning as a typical search engine, the archive could restrict access to one image daily per visitor, encouraging deeper engagement with each photograph. It could also become a shared resource that visitors can contribute to and transcend the static repository model to become a dynamic space for exploring of rural ingenuity and change.

Unlike historical folk collection practices, which aimed to preserve specific segments of traditional culture, an archive stemming from the present research could be a significantly different resource, simply because traditions are simply non-existent in everyday life any longer. Folk crafts, music, traditional clothing, community events related to agricultural activities have become practically extinct from the lives of the inhabitants of the villages. This archive, instead, would provide a collection of the contemporary everyday, imprints of life lived at the peripheries. It could test how visual archives can engage local realities, sustain interest among younger generations, and serve as a living document of rural transformation. Ultimately, the archive's design, conceptually and technically, would shape how these images, and how rural Hungary itself, is viewed by future generations.

## 8.5 Concluding Thoughts

As I write the last paragraphs of this dissertation, I would like to close on a personal note, reflecting on the five years of my artistic doctoral research and how this journey has been transformative for me both professionally and personally. My desire to embark on a long-term photography project in Hungary and to create the theoretical foundation for the research through the doctoral program allowed me to learn about the resilience, resourcefulness, and adaptive strategies of Hungary's smallest rural communities.

As an artist, this research pushed the boundaries of my photographic practice and challenged my own assumptions about documentary storytelling. The masterwork *Falu*, emerging from the preceding projects *You Were Never Really Here*, *Borderland*, and *We Are Not Birds, We Are All Human*, represent the culmination of this artistic and academic exploration. Through these projects, I have attempted to get closer to my own roots, to understand the current realities of the smallest villages, to think about documentary practices, to incorporate self-reflection and collaboration, and to present a nuanced and human perspective on rural life. Visiting the tiniest villages allowed me to understand the socio-economic contrasts of the country, and its dynamics with the capital. This juxtaposition of the rural and urban extremes has illuminated broader socio-economic and cultural patterns within the nation, revealing the interconnectedness of its peripheral and central spaces.

Beyond my personal growth and learning, I hope this study can be a valuable resource for artists, educators, and scholars working in the fields of photography, rural studies, visual anthropology, arts education and social sciences. By offering insights into the lived experiences of rural communities and the ways in which they are represented in visual culture, the research may hold relevance for similar situations in Eastern Europe and beyond. Documenting and understanding the nuances of life in Hungary's smallest villages offers, I believe, a micro-perspective on a macro-level phenomenon affecting societies globally.

Looking forward, I am excited about the opportunities for further research and exploration. The constantly, albeit slowly, changing nature of rural communities means that artist-researchers should continue to work in this field. Whether it's about incorporating the latest digital technologies or studying resourcefulness in urban situations, there are multiple avenues to dedicate oneself to.

Dorothea Lange once noted that "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera" (Meltzer, 1978). This research has taught me to keep asking questions, to be patient despite failures and hard times along the way, to find meaningful moments in every situation. In short, the importance of persistence, curiosity and empathy in the face of uncertainty. To remain open to new perspectives and to appreciate the complexities of the smallest communities.

# PROPOSITIONS, THESES

1. Investigating contemporary rural spaces, particularly on the peripheries, offers critical insights into global issues like food security, climate adaptation, resourcefulness, and cultural persistence.

2. Hungary is the only country in Europe experiencing a constant population decline since 1981. 40 per cent of the population lives outside of cities and, one-third of its settlements have less than 500 residents and over 5 per cent have a population below 100.

3. Complex geographical, historical and socio-political processes have shaped the development of Hungarian villages, which consequently exhibit distinct typologies.

4. Peripheral environments characterised by geographical, economic, or social constraints can foster ingenuity and resourcefulness as inherent adaptive strategies.

5. Contemporary documentary photographic practices are increasingly reflexive, inclusive and critical, challenging notions of objectivity and often combining fictional elements to address issues of power and representation.

6. Recent photographic projects focusing on the rural in Eastern Europe and Hungary address a comprehensive array of themes, including the experiences of women, gender roles, intergenerational connections, displacement and poetic narratives.

7. Documenting resilience requires a layered, adaptive and empathetic artistic research methodology, combining different approaches to observation, interaction and representation.

8. The artistic component (photobook and exhibition) is integral to this research, visually articulating and complementing the theoretical discourse presented in the dissertation.

9. Resourcefulness and adaptation in the face of adversity are revealed not as isolated acts, but as fundamental, pervasive aspects of everyday life, deeply ingrained in material culture, social interactions, and survival strategies.

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# LIST OF IMAGES

*Dániel Halász, self-portrait, 2023*

# CURRICULUM VITAE

## Education

| | |
|---|---|
| 2021 - | KU Leuven / LUCA School of Arts, Brussels, Belgium<br>PhD in the Arts |
| 2019 - | Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, Hungary<br>Doctorate of Liberal Arts in Multimedia |
| 2006 - 2011 | Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, Hungary<br>MFA/BFA, Photography<br>(graduated in July 2011) |
| 2009 | Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, United Kingdom<br>Fine Art Photography, exchange study grant |
| 2003 - 2005 | London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom<br>Development Studies, Management |
| 2001 - 2006 | Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary<br>MA/BA Scandinavian Studies, Cultural Management<br>(graduated in July 2018) |
| 1999 - 2000 | University of York, York, United Kingdom<br>Sociology and Economics |

## Teaching

| | |
|---|---|
| 2024 - | Visiting Professor // University of Sopron, Hungary |
| 2023 - | Visiting Professor // Central European University, Austria |
| 2020 | Tenured Lecturer // Eszterhazy University, Hungary<br>Guest Lecturer // Moholy-Nagy University of Art, Hungary |

2019 Lecturer // Eszterhazy University, Eger, Hungary
Module Leader and Mentor // Milestone Institute, Hungary

2016 - 2017 Teaching Assistant // International Center of Photography, NYC

## Other Activities

2023 Jury Member // Budapest Photography Prize, Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest, Hungary

2022 Jury Member // MA Photography Graduation, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, Hungary
Educational Officer // HackYourFuture, Brussels, Belgium

2015 Photographer and Videographer // Gulu Youth Development Association, Gulu, Uganda

2013 – 2015 Board Member // Studio of Young Artists' Association, Budapest, Hungary

2012 – 2014 Senior Photo Editor // Envato, Melbourne, Australia

2009 – 2011 Art Director // Laboratory Group | Partner of JungvMatt, Budapest, Hungary

2006 – 2008 Editor // Origo | Deutsche Telekom, Budapest, Hungary

## Awards

2019 Capa Grand Prize 2020 // Fellowship
Esterhazy Art Award 2019 // Shortlist
Budapest Photography Grant // Winner

2017 Reclaim Photography Festival // RPS Award

2016 Head On Portrait Prize - Museum of Sydney // Semi-Finalist

2015 International Photographer of the Year Awards // Honorable Mention



2011 NEU/NOW Festival for graduating young artists // Selection

2009 European Commission Photo Prize // Winner
Fotomuseum Winterthur - PLAT(T)FORM 10 // Nominee
International Photography Awards // Selection
Google Photography Prize // Winner

2008 Epson Art Photo Award // Winner, Best Class

## Scholarships & Grants

2019 – 2023 Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design // research grant
2014 Studio of Young Photographers // field research in New York
2010 Rodschenko School of Photography, Moscow House of Photography // research workshop in Russia
2009 Glasgow School of Art // Erasmus scholarship in Scotland
2008 Bauhaus University Weimar // scholarship in Germany
2005 Universitetet i Bergen // scholarship in Norway
Vraa Hojskole // scholarship in Denmark

## Exhibitions (selected)

2023 3rd Work-in-Context Symposium and Exhibition // Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, Hungary
On The Road // Három Holló, Budapest, Hungary

2022 Edgeland // Három Holló, Budapest, Hungary
Borderland // BAC Art Lab, Leuven, Belgium

2021 Borderland // Corinthian International Photography Festival, Greece
Borderland (solo) // Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Hungary

2020 You Were Never Really Here – Capa Grand Prize 2020 // Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Hungary

2019 Esterhazy Art Award 2019 // Ludwig Museum, Hungary
The Walls // Drei Raben, Budapest, Hungary
The Walls // Debrecen, Gyor, Nyiregyhaza, Szeged, Bankito Festival, Hungary

2018 585.000 m2 // Erzsitt Jewish Historical Archive, Hungary
Delete the future forever // Hungarian University of Fine Arts

| | |
|---|---|
| | Golden Boundaries // Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest, Hungary |
| 2017 | Family // Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia |
| | 585.000 m2 // Jerusalem Biennale, Jerusalem, Israel |
| | 585.000 m2 // KlezKanada, Montreal, Canada |
| 2016 | EuroPhonia – public space// London, UK |
| | 585.000 m2 // WhiteBox, NYC, USA |
| | I sleep to wake up, I get up to lie down // Studio Gallery, Budapest, Hungary |
| 2015 | Patron // Studio Gallery, Budapest, Hungary |
| 2014 | NYC // Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest, Hungary |
| | Our Holocaust // Studio Gallery, Budapest, Hungary |
| | Contemporary Hungarians // Brooklyn, NYC, USA |
| 2013 | Inditek Temateka // Labor Gallery, Budapest, Hungary |
| 2012 | New members // Studio Gallery, Budapest, Hungary |
| 2011 | Take the money and run (solo) // Lumen Gallery, Hungary |
| | Preparation for the persecution of art // Ponton Gallery, Hungary |
| | Family, Notice // Studio Of Young Photographers, Hungary |
| 2010 | Homo politicus // Photokina 2010, Cologne, Germany |
| | Imaginary Diary // PhotoEspana 09, Madrid, Spain |
| | Imaginary Diary // 21st Photobiennale, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Greece |
| | Imaginary Diary // Hungarian House of Photography, Hungary |
| | Imaginary Diary // European Commission Representation, UK |
| 2009 | Imaginary Diary // Contretype Contemporary Photographic Art Centre, Brussels, Belgium |
| | Camp 165 Watten // Photomeetings Luxembourg |
| | Camp 165 Watten // Saatchi Gallery, London, UK |
| | Friends // Contemporary Photography Biennale, Dunaujvaros |
| | The Danube Delta // Bucharest, Romania |
| 2008 | Epson Art Photo Award // Art Cologne, Germany |

## Memberships

| | |
|---|---|
| 2014 – | Studio of Young Artists' Association (FKSE) |
| 2017 – 2018 | Royal Photographic Society (RPS) |
| 2017 – 2018 | Photographic Society of America (PSA) |
| 2012 – 2017 | Studio of Young Photographers (FFS) |

# EREDETISÉGI NYILATKOZAT

Alulírott Halász Dániel (születési hely, idő: ..... ....., anyja neve: ....., útlevél szám: .....), a Moholy-Nagy Művészeti Egyetem Doktori Iskola és a KU Leuven – LUCA School of Arts doktorjelöltje kijelentem, hogy a "Rural Resilience: Photographic Representation of Resourcefulness in Hungary's Smallest Villages" című doktori értekezésem saját művem, abban a megadott forrásokat használtam fel. Minden olyan részt, amelyet szó szerint vagy azonos tartalommal, de átfogalmazva más forrásból átvettem, egyértelműen, a forrás megadásával megjelöltem. Kijelentem továbbá, hogy a disszertációt saját szellemi alkotásomként, kizárólag a fenti egyetemekhez nyújtom be.

Budapest, kelt: 2025. május 25.

# MAGYAR NYELVŰ ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ, TÉZISEK

Magyarország legapróbb falvainak közösségei a társadalmi-gazdasági változások kihívásaihoz alkalmazkodnak. E művészeti kutatás azt vizsgálja, hogyan nyilvánul meg, formálódik és reprezentálódik a találékonyság és az ellenállóképesség a mindennapi vidéki életben, és hogy ezeket a gyakorlatokat miként alakítja a tágabb társadalmi-politikai és gazdasági környezet. A munka elméleti kutatásra és száz főnél kisebb lélekszámú településeken folytatott fotográfiai terepmunkára épül.

Az „életvilág" fenomenológiai fogalmából kiinduló elméleti keret három, egymással összefüggő szempontból közelíti meg a vidéki élethelyzeteket: a kortárs kelet-európai vidéki identitás összetevői, a gyakorlati találékonyság mindennapi megnyilvánulásai, valamint a dokumentarista fotográfia képessége ezen valóságok megragadására.

A kutatás módszertana a séta mint művészeti gyakorlat, a lassú, megfigyelő fotográfia, az interjúk, a kulturális jelenségeket feltáró kísérleti módszerek (cultural probes) és a médiakísérletek ötvözetére épül. Így elméletileg megalapozott, reflektív vizuális elemzést kínál a magyarországi vidéki valóságról. A tartós közösségi jelenlét és az analitikus vizuális feldolgozás eredményeként létrejött három művészeti projekt, valamint a Falu című mestermunka a vidéki élet kézzelfogható nyomait örökíti meg: a megélt tapasztalatokat és az észlelt valóságokat.

A disszertáció a művészeti mestermunkát kíséri és egészíti ki, célja, hogy párbeszédet kezdeményezzen, és új szempontokat kínáljon a kelet-európai vidéki találékonyság összetett, gyakran mellőzött világának megértéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: dokumentarista fotográfia, találékonyság, hétköznapi probléma-megoldás, leleményesség, túlélési stratégiák, Kelet-Európa, Magyarország, falu, vidék.

1. A kortárs vidéki terek – különösen a perifériákon – vizsgálata kritikus felismerésekkel szolgálhat olyan globális kihívások mélyebb megértéséhez, mint az élelmezésbiztonság, az éghajlatváltozáshoz való alkalmazkodás, a találékonyság és a kulturális értékek továbbélése.

2. Magyarország az egyetlen ország Európában, amelyet 1981 óta folyamatos népességfogyás jellemez. A lakosság 40 százaléka városokon kívül él, és a települések egyharmadának lakosságszáma nem éri el az 500 főt, több mint 5 százalékuké pedig a 100 főt sem.

3. A magyar falvak fejlődését összetett földrajzi, történelmi és társadalmi-politikai folyamatok formálták, melynek eredményeként jellegzetes településtípusok alakultak ki.

4. A földrajzi, gazdasági vagy társadalmi korlátokkal terhelt perifériás környezetek táptalajt nyújthatnak a leleményességnek és a találékonyságnak, mint az alkalmazkodás velük járó, szerves stratégiáinak.

5. A kortárs dokumentarista fotográfiai gyakorlatok egyre inkább reflektívek, inkluzívak és kritikus szemléletűek; megkérdőjelezik az objektivitás hagyományos fogalmát, és nemritkán fiktív elemeket is alkalmaznak a hatalom és a reprezentáció kérdéseinek feszegetésére.

6. A kelet-európai és magyarországi vidéket középpontba állító közelmúltbeli fotográfiai projektek témák átfogó körével foglalkoznak, beleértve a nők tapasztalatait, a nemi szerepeket, a generációk közötti kapcsolatokat, a migráció jelenségét és a költői narratívákat.

7. Az ellenállóképesség dokumentálása olyan rétegzett, adaptív és empatikus művészeti kutatási módszertant igényel, amely a megfigyelés, az interakció és a reprezentáció különböző megközelítéseit ötvözi.

8. A művészeti komponens (fotókönyv és kiállítás) a doktori kutatás szerves részét képezi, vizuálisan artikulálva és kiegészítve a disszertációban kifejtett elméleti diskurzust.

9. A leleményesség és a nehézségekkel szembeni alkalmazkodás nem elszigetelt cselekedetekként, hanem a mindennapi élet alapvető, mindent átható aspektusaiként tárulnak fel, amelyek mélyen beágyazódnak az anyagi kultúrába, a társas kapcsolatokba és a túlélési stratégiákba.

Rural Resiliance:
Photographic Representations of Resourcefulness in Hungary's Smallest Villages

Design: Dániel Halász, Ella Hassin
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