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Body of Thought

Artists' Texts and Their Contribution to Theory

Barok, D.

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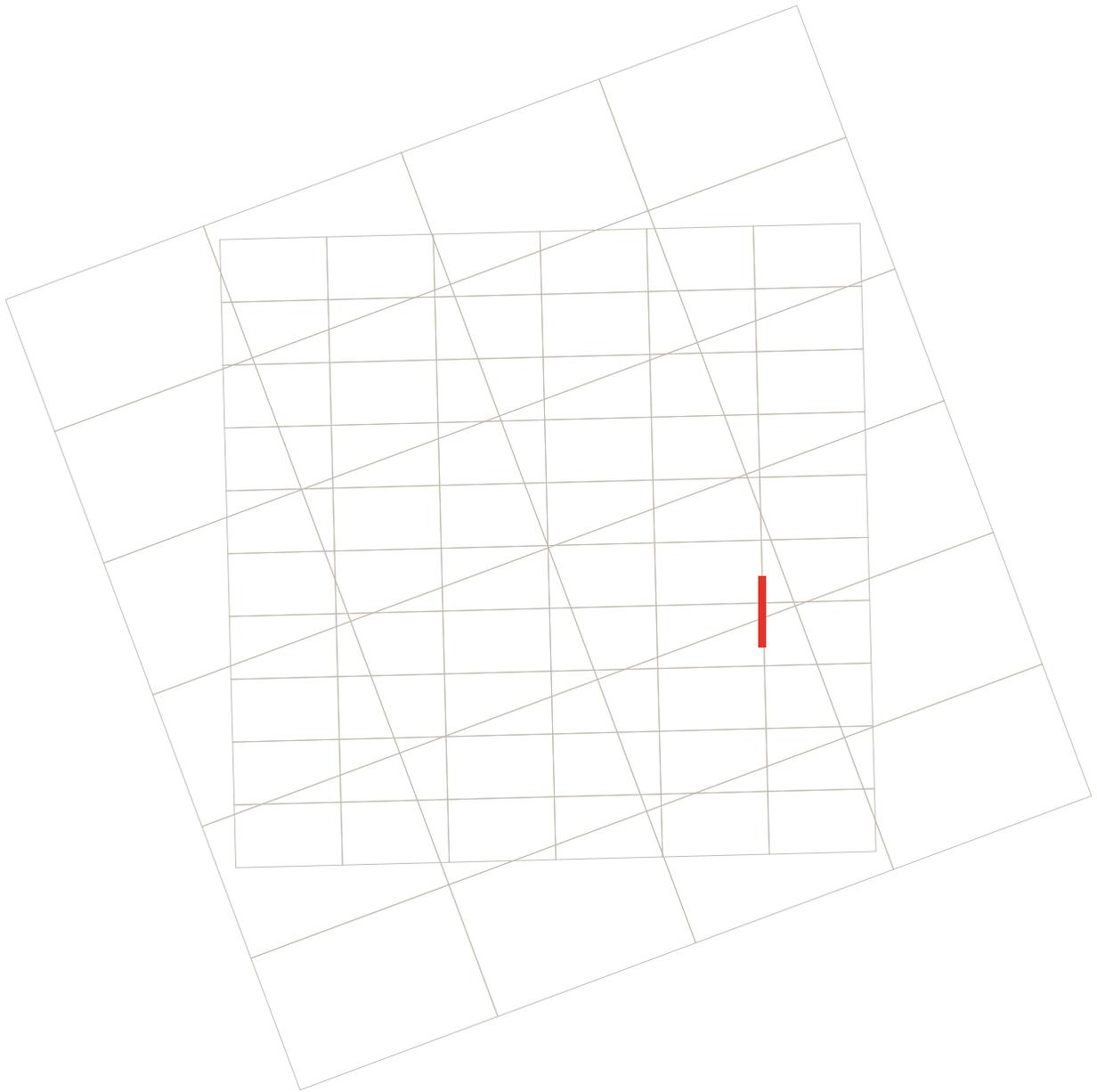
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!K Local Contexts | International Networks
Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe

**Local Contexts / International Networks
Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe**

Edited by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi



**Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum
Kassák Foundation
Budapest, 2018**

THE AVANT-GARDE AND ITS JOURNALS 2

Proceedings of the International Conference “Local Contexts / International Networks – Avant-Garde Magazines in Central Europe (1910–1935)” held in the Kassák Museum, 17–19 September 2015

kassakmuzeum.hu/en/index.php?p=kutatas&id=104

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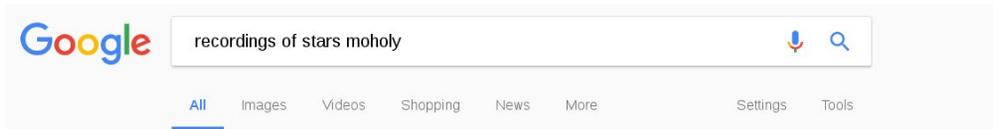
Body of Thought – Artists' Texts and Their Contribution to Theory

I offer some observations and thoughts on the challenges that artists' texts pose to art historical scholarship today. Although I am not a historian, my work, and particularly one of the projects I am working in as a digital librarian, has engendered a fascination with the ways historical material is being intertwined with recent work and even immediate records of today. On the web, writings from the rarest of the artists' magazines from a hundred years ago are juxtaposed with the most recent art criticism and myriads of other writing.

Several threads emerge from these results. Firstly, the burgeoning digitization of cultural heritage is bringing online material that was previously confined to dusty archives. Now it is accessible to search engines on the same terms as everything else. Historical material previously limited to the highly-specialized researcher can now pop up in anybody's search results. In past decades, interwar artists' magazines were almost exclusively read by art historians engaged in historical analysis and interpretation, but now they are available to the masses, including artists working today. The context in which many people read these texts today is defined by their positioning within online networks. A text from an issue of *A Tett* magazine of 1915 has become a page in 'the book' of the internet whose cover is a search engine.

Secondly, what first appears as a list of random results or even mere noise and chaos is in fact a setting with which we are all too familiar, whether or not we are engaged in research. We have developed a sensitivity to recognise which of the messy results are relevant to our immediate interests. We are able to synthesize discourses out of the results 'on the fly' and to identify modes of writing. Is it an academic study or journalism or a diary or an advertisement? We need only a couple of seconds, or less, to identify a result as a possible artist's text. We may not even have been looking for it. It has just matched our query. Paradoxically, an excerpt, a snippet from this text can be displayed just next to a passage from a scholarly essay discussing it. Written by you.

This is not to say that full-text search has replaced the library and archival research that scholars are used to. Not at all. It does show,



About 202.000 results (0,68 seconds)

PDF | MOHOLY-NAGY - Monoskop

https://monoskop.org/.../8/.../Moholy-Nagy_Laszlo_1922_Production-Reproduction...

Mates (170, 172, 216, 217); Milch Fotostudio, Essen (53); H. Moholy-Nagy, (28); István Petrás Telescopic recordings of stars as well as radiography represent ...

Astronomers Recorded This Eerie Music From a 13-Billion-Year-Old Star

gizmodo.com/astromers-recorded-this-erie-music-from-a-13-billion-1780874453

Jun 6, 2016 - In fact, judging by these eerie recordings of the music being thrown off by the oldest stars in the Milky Way, space actually sounds like a bit of a ...

Missing: moholy

'Moholy-Nagy: Future Present,' Vision and Precision in a Fluid Braid ...

<https://www.nytimes.com/.../moholy-nagy-future-present-vision-and-precision-in-a-fluid...>

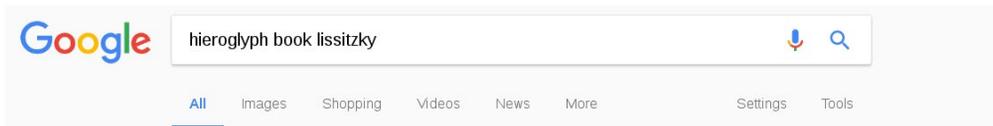
May 26, 2016 - The first large exhibition of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in this country in ... It packs around 300 works into Frank Lloyd Wright's great spiral — perhaps a record The star here is Moholy-Nagy's own "Light Prop for an Electric Stage," ...

The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking

<https://books.google.nl/books?isbn=0495015857>

Kenneth Hoover, Todd Donovan - 2007 - Political Science

Thomson, the Star logo, and Wadsworth are trademarks used herein under license. recording, taping, web distribution, information storage and retrieval systems, ... Printer: West Group Cover Image: "A 19," 1927, by La' szlo' Moholy- Nagy.



About 17.300 results (0,99 seconds)

Our Book by El Lissitzky - Dani Kim - Atavist

<https://danikim.atavist.com/our-book-by-el-lissitzky>

This is an advantage which the letter-book has lost. So I believe that the next book-form will be plastic-representational. We can say that. (1) the hieroglyph-book ...

Komiks: Comic Art in Russia - Page 53 - Google Books Result

<https://books.google.nl/books?isbn=1604733675>

José Alaniz - 2011 - Literary Criticism

THE AVANT-GARDE BOOK AND CHILDREN'S PRESS Comics techniques found their ... Lissitzky takes this "hieroglyphic" approach in a longer-form narrative ...

El Lissitzky: The Future of the Book. New Left Review I/41, January ...

<https://newleftreview.org/I/41/el-lissitzky-the-future-of-the-book>

the hieroglyphic book is international (at least potentially); the alphabetic book is national, and; the book of the future will be non-national; for it needs the least ...

works into Frank Lloyd Wright's great spiral — perhaps a record The star here is Moholy-Nagy's own "Light Prop for an Electric Stage," ...

Paul Klee: The Visible and the Legible - Google Books Result

<https://books.google.nl/books?isbn=022623360X>

Annie Bourneuf - 2015 - Art

Similarly, Lissitzky implies that the "hieroglyphic mode" of "Chinese or ... as a model for "the book of the future," which, unlike the "alphabetic book," will require ...

Figure 1. google: telescopic recordings of stars art

Figure 2. google: hieroglyph book international

however, that historical scholarship concerning rare publications, of interest to a somewhat specialized audience, takes place in a new setting. Digitization of magazines for online archives and the uploading of research to websites like *academia.edu* invests this setting with a rather different discursivity. Artists' writings from the interwar period now stand next to texts by post-war artists, texts by contemporary artists, and texts of art-historical analysis. Although most of these were no doubt produced within specialized discourses, conditioned by institutional and professional norms, their sudden presence in digital networks augments their performativity, even if this is not always admitted. A 'rare' magazine stops being rare the moment it is digitized and put online. And texts are 'scholarly' only when they are accessed in a scholarly manner.

Further 'complicating' the multiplicity of discursive perspectives produced by digital networks is their dehistoricizing tendency, which is my third point. Linear chronology is one among many modes of ordering. Date of original publication is one of many indicators determining the relevance of a query. Digital networks unfold multiple temporalities at once. A text from 1922 can be relevant, inspiring and productive for an artist in 2015 without much awareness of its historical context. It does not have to be viewed as a text that 'talked' about something, but could easily 'be talking' about something. Examples of such a dehistoricizing tendency in printed form are reviews of books and annotated bibliographies where annotations are narrated in the present tense.

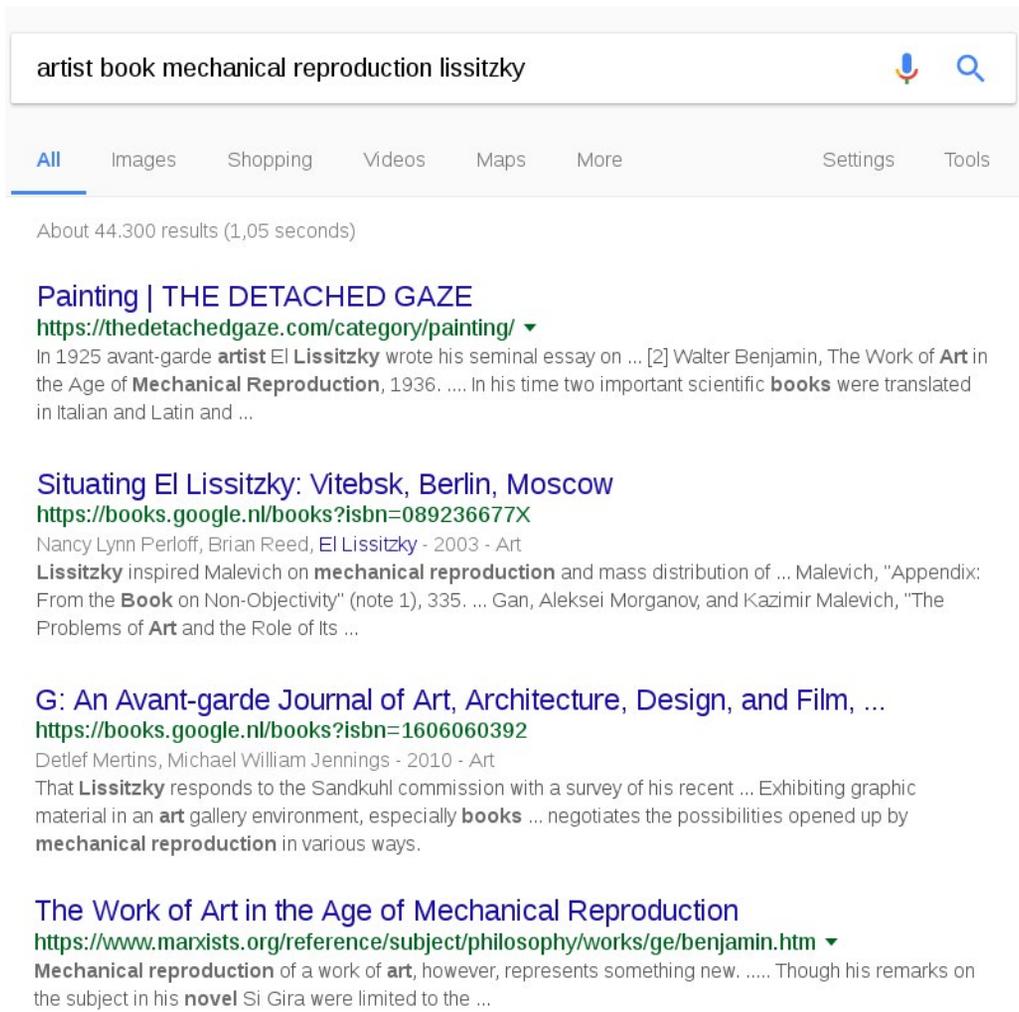
This is not a call for present-tense history but rather a loose attempt to examine a scale of writerly forms between the very personal and vaguely worded text of an artist at one end and the scholarly art-historical study bound to a single linear chronology at the other.

At the artists' end, more is being written and published than ever. A growing number of academies run PhD programs for artistic research. It is not obvious whether dissertations should be evaluated as self-standing works, separate from 'practical' work. In addition, there are many large publishing houses and established journals that release recent artists' writing along with works by art critics and art historians. Berlin's Sternberg Press, Les presses du réel in Dijon, Onomatopée in Eindhoven, and the journal *e-flux* are some examples. There is hardly any consensus on what makes a good artist's text. The rare reviews they receive in peer-reviewed journals are usually concerned with what editors did with them

and the place of texts in the artist's oeuvre and art history, rather than their substance, let alone what they have contributed to scholarship. They are considered too ephemeral, poetic, subjective and, indeed, situated (bound to the work of a given artist), and lacking standards of scholarship normally acquired in specialised institutions. They are looked upon as having only an indirect relevance to scholarship and as constituting part of the body of work of artists, using printed matter as material, or merely an appendix to their art works, offering some hints for their interpretation by scholars. There is something familiar in this from the previous century. Still, art historians have adopted many terms and concepts that originated with artists. Additionally, there are many texts that contain a movement from an artist's own practice towards a more general articulation of the condition of making art.

At the other end, there is an assumed objectivity that does not always hold. Many novel approaches to historiography have emerged in recent decades, challenging established approaches that give primacy to the artist's biography or oeuvre, or to artistic styles. We have seen methods of structuralist literary theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-colonial theory and other frameworks being imported into the historiography of art. The emphasis on the genius of the male artist and his original work has been challenged by alternatives that analyse the interests, forces and mechanisms at work. So for example, around the 1970s, art historians began to talk about ideologies, machines and apparatuses, almost as if in echo of what avant-garde artists had discussed back in the 1910s and 1920s on the pages of their journals. Rather than treating interwar avant-gardes as having merely celebrated the objectivity and efficacy of the machine, and structuralist art historians as assessing art in order to lay bare the machinery of control, one may look for what they have in common. One perspective would be to view both as attempting to identify technical conditions that define and regulate rules for cultural production, including the production of art. After Michel Foucault's historical-archaeological method and Friedrich Kittler's extension of it, we might consider the media-technological condition in the broadest sense of both media and technology. In this regard, the figures of machine and technique, but also those of synthesis, network, system, program, circulation, connection, information, recursion, virality, software, and so on, are helpful in moving attention to the condition both artists and art historians are embedded and operating in.

The setting in which the central position is shared among internationalism, networks, and little printed magazines gives us cause to rethink art from perspectives that problematize the usual anthropocentric positioning, especially if we acknowledge the presence, protocols and properties of digital networks that ever more condition the historical gaze today.



The image shows a Google search interface. At the top, the search bar contains the text "artist book mechanical reproduction lissitzky". To the right of the search bar are icons for voice search and a magnifying glass. Below the search bar, there are tabs for "All", "Images", "Shopping", "Videos", "Maps", and "More". The "All" tab is selected and underlined. To the right of these tabs are "Settings" and "Tools" links. Below the tabs, it says "About 44.300 results (1,05 seconds)". The search results are listed below, each with a title, a URL, and a short description.

artist book mechanical reproduction lissitzky

All Images Shopping Videos Maps More Settings Tools

About 44.300 results (1,05 seconds)

Painting | THE DETACHED GAZE
<https://thedetachedgaze.com/category/painting/> ▼
In 1925 avant-garde **artist** El **Lissitzky** wrote his seminal essay on ... [2] Walter Benjamin, The Work of **Art** in the Age of **Mechanical Reproduction**, 1936. In his time two important scientific **books** were translated in Italian and Latin and ...

Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow
<https://books.google.nl/books?isbn=089236677X>
Nancy Lynn Perloff, Brian Reed, El **Lissitzky** - 2003 - Art
Lissitzky inspired Malevich on **mechanical reproduction** and mass distribution of ... Malevich, "Appendix: From the **Book** on Non-Objectivity" (note 1), 335. ... Gan, Aleksei Morganov, and Kazimir Malevich, "The Problems of **Art** and the Role of Its ...

G: An Avant-garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, ...
<https://books.google.nl/books?isbn=1606060392>
Detlef Mertins, Michael William Jennings - 2010 - Art
That **Lissitzky** responds to the Sandkuhl commission with a survey of his recent ... Exhibiting graphic material in an **art** gallery environment, especially **books** ... negotiates the possibilities opened up by **mechanical reproduction** in various ways.

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm> ▼
Mechanical reproduction of a work of **art**, however, represents something new. Though his remarks on the subject in his **novel** Si Gira were limited to the ...

Figure 3. google: artist book mechanical form reproduction lissitzky

György C. Kálmán – András Kappanyos | *Institute for Literary Studies, Research Center for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest*

Avant-Garde Studies in the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Past, Present and Future

The Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in January 1956. It was modelled on the structure of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and comprised an institute for each major field of scholarship under the auspices of a central body of scholars. The Institute was set up to work on literary history with the long-term aim producing a synthesis of Hungarian literary history. Unofficially, it was also used to prepare and to consult on Party documents on literature and culture. Although subordinated to the control of the Party, it became an asylum for scholars who were denied positions at universities. It was thus a relatively peaceful and free institution.

In the period when Communist Party was consolidating its control of Hungary (1945–1948), the avant-garde was not regarded as an important part of the history of Hungarian culture, but as something ephemeral and even suspicious. Despite its undoubted role in the formation and development of modern Hungarian literature, the avant-garde was represented as a sort of childhood illness, an accident, a dead-end. Not even its influence on a number of important authors made it worth mentioning. There were several factors that gave rise to this view. Firstly, the Soviet line was simply to suppress the avant-garde and even expunge its memory. Secondly, although most artists of the Hungarian movement were close to the left and some were even communists, they did not fit into the image of the communist artist and were regarded as bourgeois, decadent, aberrant or dissident figures. Thirdly, the movement lacked continuity, with no vigorous generation following in the tracks of the ‘old’ (historical) avant-garde.

Since this was the canonical view of Hungarian literary history as dictated by Party ideology, literary historians were forced to comply with these guidelines. The relative freedom within the walls of the Institute did not make it immune from the pressure of official expectations. The



Figure 1. András Kappanyos and György C. Kálmán during the conference Local Contexts / International Networks in the Kassák Museum. Photo by Hajnalka Tulisz.

treatment of the avant-garde at the institutional level, however, contrasts with the work of some of its members. In the huge, six-volume history of Hungarian literature, the avant-garde appears as negligible side-track, merely a bizarre episode in the careers of some major authors. Paradoxically, study of the avant-garde was reserved for members of the Department of Socialist Literature, the part of the Institute intended to be most concerned with ideology. That was because the literature of the socialist movement was inextricably connected – personally, ideologically and poetically – to avant-garde trends. Despite the ideological constraints, some individual scholars interested in the movement did find an opportunity to elaborate important issues of the avant-garde both in the Hungarian (Miklós Béládi and Béla Pomogáts) and the international context (Miklós Szabolcsi and Endre Bojtár – the latter devoted a short but essential book to avant-garde trends in Central and East Europe).

When Party directives and official canons lost their direct effect on scholarly work in the Institute following the political transition of 1989 (the culmination of a trend that had started in the mid-1980s), a new interest in

the avant-garde emerged. The Institute is now preparing a new synthesis of Hungarian literary history, and the third volume will chiefly be about the twentieth century. Its central concept is the 'modern' and all its cognates – modernism, modernity, modern-ness, etc. This at last opens up opportunities for a complex and thorough treatment of all the histories and memories of avant-garde, its branches and afterlife, its predecessors and its hidden influences. Individual inquiries into both historical and present day (neo) avant-garde have also started to flourish again, and both authors of the present report have published monographs and anthologies in the field. The new generation is more and more interested in similar problems.

An outline of a current research plan may serve to give an impression of our present endeavours. We want to capitalize on the fact that our institute is the flagship of textological research in Hungary: several critical editions of great Hungarian authors have been, and are being prepared here. However, the textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde has never been assessed from this point of view.

Strangely, the overwhelming presence of Kassák's personality and oeuvre is a hindering factor. Unquestionably, no comparable literary talent emerged in the Hungarian avant-garde, without even mentioning his activities as organizer, editor and visual artist. It is also hard to deny that several of Kassák's followers were epigones, minor talents. But this should not allow us to forget about the truly original authors who either improved on Kassák's inventions or developed their devices independently.

Another factor obscuring our judgement is the relatively short lifespan of the Hungarian avant-garde. The movement itself lasted no more than one and half decades, even including its preliminary activities and aftermath. Its participants, however, went on with their own lives and oeuvres. Some exchanged aesthetic for political radicalism (like Sándor Barta and Aladár Komját); some gave up literature altogether (like, to the best of our knowledge, Mátyás György and Lajos Kudlák); and others started their 'serious' literary career after being 'cured' of the avant-garde (like Tibor Déry, Gyula Illyés and several others). Accordingly, the avant-garde period of these oeuvres, when presented in the accounts of literary historians, tends to appear as some sort of youthful excess.

These factors have so far delayed the objective assessment of the Hungarian avant-garde. The present public image of the avant-garde can best be described through the allegory of the iceberg: almost anything outside the Kassák-oeuvre is invisible, and even most teachers of Hun-

garian would be unable to come up immediately with the name a second avant-garde author. Our research aims at drawing the map of this invisible, 'underwater' territory. It is not an area full of brilliant masterworks so much as a domain of unique cultural-historical documents. They make up more than a footnote to the Kassák-oeuvre, just as the avant-garde is more than a footnote to the era of high modernism. The task is long due, and in the centenary year of the birth of the Hungarian avant-garde, it cannot be delayed any more.

In the Kassák Museum, the process of digitizing Kassák's three avant-garde reviews (*A Tett*, *Ma*, and *Dokumentum*) is already in progress. We have observed these proceedings as invited experts ever since the original planning period, and we have maintained our contribution throughout. The two projects mutually acknowledge and methodically support each other; they do not compete but complement. In a later period, a few years hence, the two projects might be unified and together might provide the full virtual textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde.

Our own project in the Institute of Literary Studies starts with the treatment of all of the individual volumes (books, booklets, pamphlets etc.) that were published by *Ma* and *Dokumentum* (except works by Kassák that are available in current editions, which will be dealt with when the idea of critically editing Kassák's oeuvre arises).

The second, and from the philological viewpoint, much more challenging part of the project is to find and digitize the periodicals that emerged outside Kassák's influence, partly in foreign political territories. Since not even the National Library holds full copies of all of these, we rely greatly on our international cooperative network of scholars in Vienna, Novi Sad, Cluj-Napoca and Bratislava.

The third phase will examine the books whose avant-garde character is not indicated by the name of the publisher. They are by authors who either left Kassák's circle or were never part of it. This corpus is quite difficult to define, and we will probably be unable to declare our list of avant-gardes (authors and works) to be complete and final.

The main purpose is to explore the complete textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde between 1915 and 1930. We plan digital publication in the first place, although paper-based editions may be warranted in some cases. Our present purpose, however, is to produce a textology-philology-based website that could become the virtual centre of Hungarian avant-garde scholarship.

We plan to present our material at the level of a critical edition, as far as the material itself allows us. We expect to find very few autographs, but will consider all textual variations. We provide the texts with annotations on the formation, impact and references of the texts. The corpus thus created, and our work on it, could serve as a starting point for several other projects. The philological process on the late avant-garde achievements (like the activities of Ödön Palasovszky or Károly Tamkó Sirató) can get off to a new start. Our work will enable some avant-garde-related correspondence (like that of Aladár Komját, Sándor Barta, László Moholy Nagy, Ervin Sinkó and others) to be explored. A potential by-product of the referential annotations, when organized and expanded, could be an encyclopaedia of the Hungarian avant-garde, gathering together all the data and connections of all periodicals, soirees, exhibitions and their participants.

By providing these necessary tools for further research in the fields of Hungarian avant-garde we hope to work off some of the handicap that has been left us by several decades of scholarly negligence.