

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
Doctoral School

„It will be good for something else”
Fields of interpretation of the hoarder and their environment

Theses of the DLA dissertation

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The research topic

For nearly a decade I have been working on highlighting the artistic aspects of the 21st-century problem of compulsive hoarding and the resulting clutter. For years, the intimate spaces and interiors of our family home were the focus of my work, and then expanded to include venues for friends, acquaintances and strangers. I am interested in the creative exploration of the relationship between the environment and humans, bearing in mind the observation and exploration of the sociological and psychological phenomena behind them, which I present in my works with a kind of realistic style of representation, often with a documentary approach. I am personally involved in this subject; I grew up in a large family, four of us are brothers and sisters, and I am the eldest, which is a defining experience for me. The role of surrogate mother, and the constant attention to family members, came naturally, and perhaps it is this kind of attitude that still helps me to be sensitive to my surroundings. Our family home was always overcrowded and rather messy. From my childhood, I was confronted with the issue of clutter, my parents' hoarding, chaos, and my family's attitude towards objects. I struggled in various ways to tidy up for nine years and then gave up. In the last ten years, this 'experience' has been completely transformed, and through painting spaces and objects, I am now able to be accepting of not only my parents' and my family's spaces but also the spaces of others. This subject matter is for me – and even for the observer – a kind of therapeutic approach, a visual processing of the problem, of „hurtful spaces”, and ultimately an aestheticization of what is strange to me. I could/do accept this situation by removing it from myself, by „making it useful” so to speak, by presenting a painterly mess in my work. I am present as a kind of observer, where as an artist I interpret a series of compositions of objects and clothes as a kind of „installation”, which give a romantic inspiration to the desire to capture and paint again and again.

The starting points of my „field work” were initially the bourgeois interiors; my grandparents' apartment and the family house and surroundings in Debrecen where I grew up. This type of object-filled medium appears in many Hungarian households, mostly as a result of hoarding and accumulation. In many places, the cluttered, stacked sets of objects fill the space almost like a „horror vacui”. Over time, I have moved beyond the personal narrative, and in recent years the thematic has broadened to include back gardens, courtyards, workshops, storage rooms, garages, and various service spaces. My studio practice and my dissertation are a direct outgrowth of this overcrowded milieu of socialization and life experience.

So the inspiration for my choice of topic stems from an existential and identity interest, which I have explored through self-analysis, expanding my personal history, artistic methods,

and further analyses. I have examined the mentality that leads to the creation of private collections, touched on the subject of museum collecting, and used the examples and analyses highlighted to distinguish between compulsive hoarding and „healthy” collecting.

The topic of my dissertation thus includes: a multifaceted presentation of collecting and hoarding (accumulation, compulsive hoarding), my works based on these, and putting my artworks in a contemporary art context.

The aim of the research topic

The exploration of object collections is also studied in ethnography, anthropology and sociology, which is a processed, categorised, and catalogued scientific work created in libraries and digital databases under the „scientific imperative”. I am concerned with the counterpoint of this, with the accumulation and messy gathering of objects for non-scientific purposes, with the unorganised, bulky set of objects as a mode of preservation, characterised by irretrievability, by confusion. The motivation for my research is not only to see but also to understand this kind of relationship between humans and their environment, this phenomenon of accumulation, hoarding, and collecting. I aim to generate appropriate findings about hoarding as a central theme, to interpret my artistic practice in a broader context, through a combination of social science contexts and artistic parallels. I would like to emphasize a kind of collaboration, complementarity, interoperability and observation of different disciplines by approaching the theme from several angles, linking different disciplines and bridging the gaps between them.

Refutation of my original hypothesis

The part of my idea set up in the first period of the DLA that there is a kind of „Hungarian organising force” in hoarding has not been proven to be true and I have argued this in the chapter „Study trips”. Compulsive hoarding is a transnational problem, independent of borders and cultures, present from the Americas through Europe, the Far East and Australia. Its structure is the same everywhere in the world, and it is present everywhere. However, because the people and their histories are different, this is ultimately what makes them different, and therefore the nature of the objects collected may differ. This is something that can vary from culture to culture, from country to country. Differences between countryside, city and region may also appear, and the social situation can also be read, but the mechanism of ‘stacking’ them is the same. There are various reasons for this, but it is clear that consumer society has a major

influence on its development.

Structure of the dissertation

In the chapter „**Sociological Approach**”, I have tried to define the concept of home, which is the most psychologically privileged place for human beings, but also the most everyday one, since the need for housing is a primary need. Within this space I have tried to describe the relationship of society and the individual to objects, their attachment, accumulation and the phenomenon of collecting. Furthermore, I approached the narrowed issue by comparing the segments of housing culture related to my topic, the characteristics of the petty bourgeoisie, and aspects of habits. I have supplemented all this with my own experiences, which have led me to deal with this topic. By collecting objects, we keep our memories alive, they represent stages in our lives, we use them to prove our existence in a broader sense, and this commitment is part of our everyday life, from which habits and rituals are formed. „We use objects to understand ourselves and our lives.”¹ My parents’ hoarding and its impact on my life were very difficult for me to accept for a long time. My artistic practice, reading the literature and writing the dissertation itself have helped me to understand the reasons and why.

In the chapter „**Psychological Approach**”, I wrote about the development, characteristics and compulsiveness of hoarding, supported by experts, psychologists and other literature. Hoarding is also referred to as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) = maniac, obsessive disorder. I have described its history, its appearance in various international and Hungarian media sources, and the literature on its treatment.

One of the causes of clutter can be accumulation, which has different degrees. For the sake of simplicity, I’ve broken it down into just two broad types:

1. Collecting: a person collects something selectively, for a specific purpose, as a hobby. It is shown to the outside world, it is organised, and it has value, e.g. art collector, collector of a series of objects (records, comics, antiques, etc.). It may seem strange to outsiders, but collecting is not compulsive, it does not hinder everyday life.
2. Hoarding: the person collects everything that „might be good for something else”. No specific purpose, irregular, not shown to the outside world, of no value, e.g. objects that have lost their function or are damaged (clothes that are useless to the hoarder, outdated advertisements,

¹ Zoltán Fejős, Zsófia Frazon (ed.): Our age and our objects - theory and method, (2004), Translation collection, MaDok booklets 2, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, p.30.

leaflets, newspapers, books that he will certainly never read, etc.). His hoarding is compulsive, can be a hindrance in his daily life, and can harm his environment.

There are sometimes only small differences between the two groups. It can be caused by a wide range of factors, such as mental illness, emotional crisis, anxiety, phobias, trauma, bereavement (e.g. loss of a family member, loss of a job, long-term illness), poverty, deprivation, etc.

In this dissertation, I have given some insights into the impact of consumerism on our contemporary world, our culture of anxiety, worry and fear. The accumulation of things, the constant buying and consuming, which has become a kind of 'therapy' for the avoidance and management of emotions, is part of the everyday life of many people. In this way, hoarding has become an unnoticed disease.

In the chapter „**Study trips**” I explained the change in my hypothesis and the reasons for it. I made three major study trips during the DLA period: to settlements in Hajdú-Bihar county (February, March 2019), Transylvania (April 2019) and London (October 2019). I presented them with a photo report, documenting each location and the work I did of them, and also the links related to the research that I found most relevant. I have highlighted and elaborated on the London research. Until about 2018, I worked mostly with messy interiors and in general interiors in my art practice. With these journeys, I set out to step outside and explore the courtyard, garden and various outbuildings outside the walls of the house, but belonging to it. According to my topic, I explored hoarding, the accumulation of objects and the clutter they create. At the end of the chapter, I touched upon the internationality of hoarding, an extension of the theme, which was also shaped by the experiences of my private trips (India, June-July 2019; Egypt, March 2020).

In the chapter „**Contemporary Art Parallels**” I have illustrated that my research topic is connected to contemporary art discourse in several ways. I have introduced it with literature and references that show how consumer society is represented and influences artists' work. I have then selected works that, without claiming to be exhaustive, depict in some way the collecting of objects, the gesture of accumulation and the unconventional, possibly extreme, relationship with them. In the selection criteria, I have mainly taken into account formal associations, and the chaotic representation of accumulation. I have divided the approach to the installation works into four categories according to the artists' attitudes to the representation of hoarding. Typically, I have presented foreign, international artists, but the painting assemblage also includes several Hungarian artists. Through my works and the theme of my thesis, I have

made comparisons with examples of prominent contemporary art.

In the chapter „**Masterpiece**” I gave a general analysis of my works and the five works that are part of the masterpiece, and I also mentioned how my studio practice changed during the doctoral period. The themes of my works and the dissertation are the same, my masterpiece paintings depict the kind of chaos and accumulated belongings that I created based on the documentation I had collected during my study trips. They are like visualisations of what I have described, but not illustrations, as I was already working on this subject before the research period, in my final year of university. They are realistic, documentary oil canvas paintings. They vary in composition and cropping; there are zoomed-in compositions, like a slice of space, and cluttered interiors showing more of the space. They are characterised by a fast, dynamic, expressive painterly language for their way of painting.

Conclusion

During my doctoral studies, research made me realise how diverse the subject of hoarding and collecting is, and therefore my interests point far beyond themselves. I have therefore not compared all the perspectives in this dissertation, but have tried to use only those that are relevant and constructive for the research as a whole.

Hoarding, the compulsive hoarding disorder, is not without its dangers. Amongst other things, anxiety and possessiveness (for various reasons) can become so overwhelming that they can prevent a person from carrying out basic activities of daily living. This is a widespread disease, so it is important to recognise the symptoms and help people who need it in droves.

In addition to the academic approaches, I found that psychology was present in most of my literature reading, whatever discipline I approached the dissertation topic. This was particularly true of readings of a sociological nature, which seemed to confirm that one follows from the other, or one presupposes the other. Even if a book or study focuses only on data and phenomena, it is simply inevitable to talk about the psychological factors that permeate our everyday lives and our way of thinking. In fact, everything is driven by the human brain-heart-mind combination, our thoughts, feelings, and desires determine our actions, all of which are interconnected by the link between our conscious and unconscious minds. The disciplines of sociology and psychology are therefore connected by many strands and are quite close in my

research area.

During the period of my doctoral studies, I developed a new way of working method for myself, through travel, meeting potential hoarders, and documenting and processing the material in the studio. I believe that I will continue to use this method in the future, as my subject can be the starting point for further studies, my research can be „travelled”, so to speak, and adopted to different places, countries and cultures. The comparisons will help me to conclude, so that I can get a larger cross-section for a long-term, even years-long experience, for further work. I consider my creative and research programme in my doctoral studies to be quite productive and successful.

The research and the writing of the dissertation helped me to better understand the phenomenon of hoarding. The sociological and psychological aspects of hoarding have given me a more complex insight into the subject matter, and I can place my experiences in a broader field of interpretation. Through my research, I gained a much better understanding of hoarders, my parents, my family, my kinship, my childhood impulses, and not least of myself and my actions, an experience full of positive surprises.