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Creativity and Fantasy-Developing Exercises[*]

The creative individual, as shown by worldwide research, is not necessarily active, nor always productive.[1] Productivity as a requirement often obstructs and interferes with the flow of creativity. The various psychological researchers agree, however, that training in the arts is the most suitable method of improving creativity.

Until the most recent times education in visual art has placed exclusive emphasis on techniques of copying. This implies that the sole possible mode of artistic advancement is the compulsive copying, according to the established norm, of installed models. This twofold copying, first, of nature, and second, of the visual patterns based on the work of artists of the recent and distant past, leaves little room for the creative imagination. Work in the visual media study groups is further burdened by the preparation for entrance examinations and the accompanying existential angst. Furthermore, as in any group, there enters the spirit of competition, which quite possibly breaks down the most sensitive individuals and turns them away from any creative activity. The spirits crippled by competition in art or any kind of education end up unleashing in a variety of fields the baneful and toxic consequences of their depression and unfulfilled hunger for success.[2] To this day the above-outlined method of educating creative artists is valued by some as a desirable and useful mode of

[1] 1976 Cat.: The first sentence reads: "Creativity is essentially a broader concept than creative activity. It is to be distinguished from the much more common activity, while productivity also covers a different range of meaning."

[2] 1976 Cat.: adds a parenthesis: "(At times, to put it mildly, unpleasant dictators might arise among them").

counter-selection: if, after all of this, some creativity still remains in the individual, and he or she is able to bring it to fruition in spite of all the obstructive requirements, then that person must be a true genius deserving every form of recognition – posthumously. To use a somewhat imprecise analogy: it is as if we were to develop athletes by atrophying their muscles for decades, and celebrate as champions those who are capable of a minimal result even after this treatment. The analogy is inadequate in so far that atrophied creativity is a loss to all of society and not only to a group of sports fans. Another difference is that creativity manifests itself not only in, and chiefly not in, performance, but is a sort of state of readiness that works in silence and without any outward sign; it is able to identify the task in any given situation and offer solutions that are inventive and original.

A pedagogy based on a mechanical step-by-step approach tends to overlook the possibility that someone may fail at a rudimentary assignment while being able to provide a flawless solution to a task of far higher magnitude. It is appalling to speculate on the loss to humankind's potential intellectual achievements when we consider that many have failed at the basic level precisely because they were predestined by their abilities for tasks of a higher order of magnitude than those simpler ones that could not engage their interest. The so-called "absent-minded professor" jokes refer to the lighter side of this.

"Talent will eventually out" is a superstitious commonplace that takes notice only of the exceptional cases, because those are the most obvious. Meanwhile destroyed and vanished intellectual talents, no matter how large in number, fail to be noted because they remain invisible.

A study group in the visual arts should have other tasks than merely offering a third-rate preparation for entrance exams. That education in the visual arts happens to be well suited for developing creativity does not mean that the domain of creative sensibility is accessed solely by the artist. On the contrary, our greatest hope is to see the creative point of view in other areas of life: in various fields, even in those seemingly the most cut and dried, people stepping up who are flexible, able to grasp the essentials, and can overview the task at hand from a meta-level, as it were.[3] For instance, within the sphere of private life, if emotional family conflicts are viewed from a detached perspective, free of conventions, fresh alternatives may surprise the environment and help it transcend an unfortunate, ossified situation.

Within the framework of our study group we have begun elaborating a method fueled by the hope of possibly avoiding the obvious shortcomings of visual and general education. The group's framework, as it happened, offered a multitude of possibilities for all sorts of experiments that are at this time impracticable in the school system.[4]

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[3] 1976 Cat.: "can overview and renew".

[4] 1976 Cat.: "would seem to be impracticable". Followed by: "The circumstances in our society have not yet ripened for allowing the introduction, in our educational system, of a study group

Our activities were not intended as psychological tests; we were not out to ascertain anything.[5] Nor did we consider those participating in our activities as experimental subjects; on the contrary, in shaping our methodology we relied on their creative imaginations, using their ideas and moods to shape the program of prospective activities. We employed the technique of "delayed evaluation" in a manner that, in contrast to spontaneous expressions of appreciation – which inevitably lead to the formation of some kind of value system – we strove to propose other possible viewpoints of evaluation and thereby shake up the authority of monolithic norms. In this manner we hoped to bring to the surface creative abilities of diverse types.

Naturally all this did not proceed without a hitch; there was a frequent turnover of a significant percentage of participants. Some of the dropouts considered the activities to be useless games; others – with little or no drawing ability – were made uneasy by tasks they felt exceeded their aptitudes. In consequence of this the leaders of the activities were more than once swept to the brink of a distressing experience of failure, and only the courageous persistence of some could dispel a feeling of permanent disappointment. At such moments the "leaders" had the impression that those whom they "led" had a better understanding of the essentials of our endeavor than they themselves. But this is precisely what was needed. By the time we gave up the idea of developing "Sunday painters", and also the notion that the study group will turn into some kind of hobby club, a significant portion of the participants refused to relinquish considering visual art as their vocation. Albeit our exercises did not have a direct impact on increasing the probability of passing the college entrance examinations – it would be hard to imagine a college admissions committee that would find the "scribbles and scrawls" produced by our group's creativity exercises as the work of future professionals – some still believed that their experiences here would prove to be of eventual value in their chosen professions.

During the first year the program's *raison d'être* gained increased definition; related efforts emerged and the relevant literature provided reinforcement to the at the outset rather vague thrust of our initiative.

To keep them from being too bewildering, in the beginning we chose exercises that resembled the traditional artist-and-model situation, except that the models were the participants themselves and they were responsible for planning the various poses within certain predetermined guidelines. (Il-

such as we have been experimenting with. Here we must add that this premature initiative has been raised by the study group's organizers in an incubator, as it were, providing all possible intellectual and material support and also protection against the disruptive effects of the incomprehending."

[5] 1976 Cat.: Followed by: "(This task is being accomplished by psychological research institutes the world over. See E. Landau: *A kreativitás pszichológiája* [The Psychology of Creativity]. Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 1974: the chapter on research centers dealing with the topic of creativity, p. 125.)"

78 lustration a.) While the actual models demonstrated the variety of possible static positions by means of string or sticks, etc., the rest of the group sketched them. We made it clear that slavish representation is the lowest gradient of artistic activity. The creation of the poses required constructive conceptualiza-
79 tion. The reconstruction of a model concealed under a shroud (Illustrations b1, b2), or the re-positioning of a situation glimpsed during the illumination of a
80 flash (Illustrations c1, c2) required diverse abilities.

In making drawings of poses or situations that could be interpreted in a variety of ways, the emphasis shifted to multiple readings. We never abandoned the connection to visuality, but we strove more and more toward relieving the individual participant from the onus of creating a product, either by shifting the responsibility to the collective, or else by working under circumstances that precluded the possibility of creating work that demanded evaluation. To prevent cramping we evolved so-called passivity exercises, so that a drawing would be executed by means of a charcoal stick held in
81 another's hand, or following verbal input. (Illustration d1) In our view passivity, the relaxed surrender to impressions, is as much a part of the artistic process as activity. To attain this internal condition we created the modus of "chain-drawing" whereby the participants, sitting in a circle, made drawings with their right hand using the charcoal in their neighbor's left hand while allowing the charcoal in their own left hand to be directed by the neighbor on
81 the left. (Illustration d2)

To demonstrate that competition is only one of the possible means of influencing each other, we explored a diversity of its aspects: employing verbal input as influence, or even instructing the participants to hinder, by whatever means, their neighbors during the act of drawing. (Illustration e)
82 Situations like that produced results that had an extraordinarily dynamic appearance, at times recording the traces of dramatic struggles. We also became convinced of the liberating effects of absurd, insoluble assignments, for instance instructing participants to draw outlines of each other's shadows simultaneously, or that an individual draw the outline of her own shadow.
83 (Illustration f) Of a similar nature was the assignment that everyone draw what their neighbor was drawing, whereby nobody could begin working until some chance-induced copying activity started, after which it grew exponentially.
84 (Illustration g1) We made use of the relaxing and ordering effects of music and
84 dance (Illustrations g2, g3), and we experimented with exploiting the visual
85 qualities of film. (Illustration h)

The essential characteristics of our method gradually crystallized; we needed to come up with instructions that on the one hand posed restrictions, and on the other hand remained to various degrees open, so that the creative capability could manifest itself in a variety of aspects. The role of restriction is to block the path toward traditional solutions as well as toward total anarchy. This method closely resembles certain directions in contemporary music, where instructions of this kind are the equivalent of scores that entrust the

performer with far more than the traditional musical score. For this reason we raised the possibility of contact with Új Zenei Stúdió (Studio for New Music).

Visual artists always envied music for its collective nature, its powerful social role and ability to organize an audience. Although scientific research and testing has not found group activity to be more advantageous with regard to creativity than individual effort, in our experience it was undeniable that collectively executed drawings at times produced an artistic plus that was not to be seen in individual work. The graphic mis-steps of those who had less drawing aptitude turned into integral parts and idiosyncratic values in certain drawings. In the course of exercises where smaller groups or all of the participants were instructed to continue the drawing begun by a neighbor, we noted the extinction of the awkward hierarchy of those who knew how to draw and those who did not, until the final result divulged the common level of the collective, surely at times in a devastating manner. When the evolution of the drawings, as recorded on film, exposed a collective work emerging over a period of time, it was shown to approach the spirit of musical methods.[6]

In the course of these exercises in creativity we came to feel increasingly that the capability we call creativity is not simply a well-defined faculty, but is perhaps better perceived as a combination of those suppressed abilities that are unable to manifest except at certain times when they somehow manage to seep through. We noted that appreciable manifestations are significantly varied in their nature and that they are not necessarily tied to personalities; at times they unexpectedly surface in completely passive individuals. Accordingly we are more justified to speak of *creative states* rather than abilities. When we became aware of this realization we began to seek the conditions that nurture an atmosphere that allowed such states to appear with a greater frequency. Here we encountered significant difficulties. In our experience a so-called pleasant atmosphere does not necessarily promote the appearance of the looked-for phenomena. A generally prevailing pleasant mood is more of a consequence than a cause. Nor is it universal in its consequences, for it does not extend over the entire group; on the contrary, persons who do not happen to flash forth such protuberances of spirit would observe these manifestations in others with a mix of envy and anxiety. Only the individual in whom it occurs can tell for sure that the euphoric state diminishes, and note with disappointment the fleeting nature of such flashes of ability that are often followed by a feeling of dullness below the norm. It was probably due to the inexperience of the leadership that precisely those individuals who excelled in one exercise tended to absent themselves from the next one, in consequence of some hard to fathom reticence. They would, however, return eventually.

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[6] In 1976 Cat.this is followed by the last sentence of the published text: "When we look back at the collective activities, the most promising aspect appears to be that of unrestricted, freely varied togetherness, which may lead the creative imagination to as yet unforeseeable results."

This phenomenon may be interpreted as follows: the beneficial effects of the exercises do not always, in fact hardly ever, manifest during the exercise itself, but possibly much later, in a completely different environment, vis a vis totally different tasks. This explains why the exercises rarely show spectacular results, and often prove disappointing for the casual onlooker.

If we still wish to characterize the state we call creative, we may compare it to a state of hopefulness, or a sudden onset of hopefulness. However, this hopefulness does not refer to anything specific, just as its negative version, anxiety, does not have to relate to anything (or, as Heidegger has shown, it relates precisely to nothing). At times it may be some trivial, one might even say silly, idea that brings about this state – or, to put it more precisely, the idea manifests simultaneously with the state. But these trivial-seeming notions still possess some quality in common that is blissful: namely, somehow *they do not arise from any precedents,* nor do they share any qualities with typical problem-solving situations.

Since we want to develop something that we do not as yet know, but merely suppose, a something the manifestations of which barely seem to have anything in common, our efforts most likely amount to groping in the dark. If we suppose that people possess unknown, suppressed, unused capabilities, the next step is to try to eliminate, or at least impair, the inhibiting elements. In other words, to say we are developing the imaginative faculty means not to realize that in fact we are developing nothing. When we crack open a walled-up treasure chamber we are not adding to the treasure supposedly within; when we see something inside shining through the cracks, we feel all the more inclined to bring that wall down.

The "creativity exercises" held in the years 1975/76 and 1976/77 convinced leaders and participants alike that the obstacles that prevent the full unfolding of a person's capabilities lie first and foremost in one's thinking. Habits and prohibitions ingrained in a person's thought patterns, deposited as evidence, constitute an asphyxiative power that restrains potential, as yet unformed impulses. Prohibitions and conventions as a rule tend to protect the psyche from shocks that may lead to a clash with society, and problems with fitting in. ("Many students refuse to be gifted for reasons of conformity, not wanting to stick out." E. P. Torrance.[7]) But while these restless impulses cannot enter conscious existence without ideational, conceptual support, neither can a satisfactorily creative way of thinking unfold without the liberation of these impulses. We had to recognize that when we encourage a realignment of mental attitudes the participants voice their discontent with the vagueness of impulses, the unclear demands – whereas if we place the emphasis on good feelings and carry out dynamically collective, productive exercises the resulting works reflect the same old tiresome attitudes of their makers. That is, the exercises will leave something to be desired unless they are carried out in a complex manner that is simultaneously concentrated and liberating.

[7] Erika Landau: *A kreativitás pszichológiája* [The Psychology of Creativity]. Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 1974, p. 113.

Since to date we have not succeeded in evolving a method that fulfills these seemingly contradictory requirements, we have decided that we shall opt for the more ascetic approach that aims at mindsets and attitudes. We endeavor to loosen the intellectual blocks that fundamentally stifle the emergence of a comprehensive, creative attitude. For this reason toward the end of last year [1977] at the Víziváros Cellar Club we began the weekly "Fantasy-Developing Exercises" (*FAFEJ* ["Blockhead"]), that is, the ongoing activities aimed purely at thought and mindset.

We imagined that without preconceptions, by ourselves, collectively and as we went along, we would evolve the method as well as its theoretical part, based on the experiences acquired on the way. We would avoid any test-like assignments, and adopt the complexity and holistic view that is indispensable for contemporary thought.

We are now able to report the emergence, in their outlines, of the theory and praxis that provide meaning for activities of this sort.

The fundamental operation that we meant to accomplish in a variety of ways is *the questioning of evidence.* We approached our aim via three types of questions. One way – the most obvious method – was to extrapolate some technique, idea, or practice into the future, and allow the progressive developments to question our present givens. (E.g.: the future of illumination.) Another method was using absurd statements to substantiate false hypotheses (E.g., Why can't humans walk?) The third type of questioning persisted in looking for causal links between non-related phenomena. (E.g., What connection can be found between the earthquake in Romania and the fact that on the same day I browsed through a cookbook for the first time in my life?) The theoretical operations may be refined and elaborated if we are able to imagine, behind certain, say technical propositions an adequate social background, or conversely, if we think of a certain specific social arrangement and imagine the technological level or ideology that suits it.

In answering questions of this sort the most absurd assumptions are permissible as long as they evince some sign of inner logic or organic thought. Naturally it is extremely difficult to invent an answer that does not demonstrate some sort of logic, and without logic it is hard to create sentences that relate. Nor is it easy to speak gobbledygook that "makes sense". For this reason everyone taking part in these activities comes to be aware of the inevitable conceptual cages we are locked into; all of us have certainly come to this realization, an experience that cannot be entirely superfluous. In the course of everyday life it is extremely rare that one comes into such poignant conflict with one's thought mechanisms. If occasionally the above-mentioned experience is accompanied by some novel quality, no matter how transient and elusive, further inquiry is stimulated all the more.

From the answers we may isolate certain ideational operations or strategies that keep recurring. Since these manifest rather distinctly, they immediately raise the condition that they be in some manner transcended; naturally this is

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what proves most difficult. For instance, regarding certain means (which may be an object such as a table, or a name employed as a sign) there arise various degrees of questionability:

1. Is the means employed the sole suitable one for the purpose?
2. Is the means employed suitable at all?
3. Is there some other means more suitable? (The means employed is perhaps more suitable for some other purpose.)
4. Is it a clearly defined need that is filled by the means employed? (Or is it a false need that hides and suppresses some other need?)
5. If the need is real, isn't it harmful and shouldn't it be discouraged?
6. Shouldn't the need itself, as any need, be cast off?
7. Are humans, at their present level of development, at all capable of judging their needs?

Depending upon at which of the above levels one answers the assigned question, one is bound to touch upon certain ways of thought, philosophies, at times religious concepts familiar from history. In any case the participants thereby re-experience many of humankind's intellectual exertions and even if they are unable to surpass them, they gain a certain overview.

When we examine the intellectual exertions employed by the respondents in their efforts to "shed their intellectual skin", the operations may be reduced to a number of basic types:

1. Reversal, or mirroring.
2. Double reversal (a return to the original solution along different viewpoints).
3. Intensification (increase beyond all measure).
4. Reduction, shrinkage.
5. Combination, bringing into relation (with another group of questions).
6. Distancing, alienation, rendering incomprehensible.
7. Total absurdity (usually on a linguistic level).

Most likely the above list does not exhaust all possible strategies and future activities will reveal various, ever newer operations. In designing our questions or question groups our task is to draw out those potential mind strategies that have not occurred till now, without burdening the answers with preconceptions. This task presents no small difficulties for the leaders and constantly points to the necessity of developing a new relationship between leaders and participants.

It may be worthwhile to mention here that, with a few exceptions, the local cultural leadership looked on these exercises with considerable obtuseness, if they looked on at all. This lack of comprehension led to the cessation of the creativity exercises at the Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center at the specific behest of the director there. The Fantasy-Developing Exercises are presently conducted under the sponsorship of T.I.T. [Tudományos Ismeretterjesztő Társulat (Society for Popularization of Scientific Knowledge)].

Translated by John Batki